

Jack Downing, C.I.A. Chief in Cold War Capitals, Dies at 80

He was the agency's only official to have served as station head in both Moscow and Beijing. Then he was drawn out of retirement in 1997 to save its espionage operations.



By Sam Roberts

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Jack Downing, the only American spymaster to run agents in both of the hottest Cold War capitals, Moscow and Beijing, and who was drawn out of retirement to help rescue the hidebound Central Intelligence Agency from a management crisis and plummeting morale, died on Sunday in Portland, Ore. He was 80.

The cause was colon cancer, his son, John G. Downing, said.

After serving in the C.I.A. for nearly three decades, Mr. Downing was asked in 1997 by George J. Tenet, the agency's fourth director in five years, to become chief of the Directorate of Operations, the agency's clandestine espionage arm.

His mission was to repair the damage inflicted by double agents like Aldrich H. Ames, who had exposed a network of American contacts in the Soviet Union, and by management upheavals and budget cuts that had depleted the ranks of case officers and discouraged them from taking risks in the field.

During his two-year stint in the post, with the title of deputy director for operations, Mr. Downing accelerated recruitment, improved training in spycraft and foreign languages, and reopened stations in Africa and elsewhere to monitor terrorism. He also forged an alliance with Representative Porter J. Goss, the Florida Republican who, as chairman of the House Select Committee on Intelligence, had reopened the financing spigot to pay for espionage operations abroad. (Mr. Goss later became the C.I.A. director under President George W. Bush.)

When Mr. Downing retired a second time in 1999, he was among the last generation of C.I.A. field officers who had devoted their careers to fighting, and winning, the Cold War.

"Jack is revered as a legendary leader and trailblazer," said David Marlowe, the current deputy director for operations. He described him as "a role model at C.I.A. in practicing the art of espionage in the most challenging foreign environments."

As a valued retiree who loyally returns to save his beloved company (if not his boss), Mr. Downing evoked John le Carré's George Smiley, if not in temperament. A former Marine who had served two combat tours in Vietnam, Mr. Downing was a self-disciplined, hard-working Renaissance man who read Chinese poetry and was bereft of driving ambition, colleagues said.

Rolf Mowatt-Larssen, who worked with Mr. Downing in Moscow and then rose through the ranks of the agency and the Department of Energy, recalled in a phone interview: "He was the only person I ever saw who was intensely disappointed to get a major promotion. He loved the spycraft."

But another former colleague, Bill Lofgren, stressed that labeling Mr. Downing a spy would be superficial. "He wasn't a spy; he was a person who recruited spies — he was a case officer," Mr. Lofgren said. "If he did any lurking, he was lurking to protect the lives and identities of his agents."

Jack Gregory Downing was born on Oct. 21, 1940, in Honolulu and raised by his mother, Benita (Harding) Downing, a couture buyer for Neiman Marcus. His father, John, was a Navy officer who was killed at sea in the Pacific in the early days of World War II, when Jack was a year old. After his father's death, his mother moved with Jack and his sister to his maternal grandparents' home in Texas, where he grew up.

He attended the Hill School in Pottstown, Penn., as a boarder and then Harvard, where he focused on Chinese language and history and Asian studies, graduating in 1962. He served four years in the Marines as an infantry lieutenant in a rifle company in Vietnam. He was discharged on a Friday in 1967 and sworn in as a C.I.A. officer the following Monday.

He went on to head the agency's East Asia Division, serve as a special assistant to Adm. Stansfield Turner when he was C.I.A. director during the Carter administration, and take over as station chief in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

In the early 1980s, Mr. Downing and Tony Mendez, the agency's master of disguises, devised a graduate course for spies to enable them to circulate undetected in foreign capitals.

Mr. Downing, having learned Russian, was Moscow station chief from 1986 to 1989, where he fended off K.G.B. plots to plant Russian double agents. He was put in charge after most of the Russians working for the agency had been betrayed to the K.G.B. by Mr. Ames, a C.I.A. officer in Washington. Some of the agents were executed. Mr. Ames was convicted of espionage in 1994 and is serving a life sentence in prison.

In Moscow, Mr. Downing had to cope with an elaborate K.G.B. ruse to deflect the agency's attention from Mr. Ames and Robert Hanssen, an F.B.I. agent who was also feeding the Soviets information. The Soviets dangled a high-level triple agent who gave the C.I.A. bogus information presented as Kremlin secrets; they also diverted the investigation into moles in Washington by suggesting that the K.G.B. had infiltrated the C.I.A.'s encrypted communications.

Between stints at the agency, Mr. Downing was vice president of an information systems and consulting firm.

In addition to his son, John, he is survived by his wife, Suzanne (Leisenring) Downing; his daughter, Wendy Rogers Downing; his sister, Roberta Lee Jurek; and four grandchildren.

Mr. Downing, with the former C.I.A. director Richard Helms, was instrumental in creating the C.I.A. Officers Memorial Foundation, which helps pay for the education of children of agents killed in the line of duty. He received the agency's highest award, the Distinguished Intelligence Medal.

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When he retired in 1999, Mr. Downing won kudos from Representative Goss for restoring the sense of mission and strength of the Directorate of Operations after it had been “sapped by careerism, corridor politics and lack of leadership,” in Mr. Goss’s words.

He added, “Under Jack, Directorate of Operations officers have found ways to penetrate terrorist cells, to get inside the cabinet rooms of rogue states, and to detect and disrupt the movement of narcotics.”

During Mr. Downing’s two-year tenure, resignations dropped by more than half. He also revived a reserve corps for retirees and reintroduced parachute training for all operations officers.

“Ordinary people are not inclined to jump out of an airplane,” he told The Washington Post in 1999, “and we are not looking for ordinary people.”

Alain Delaqueriere contributed research.