

CIA Official John Hart, 81, Dies

By Graeme Zielinski

June 1, 2002

John Limond Hart, 81, the Central Intelligence Agency's station chief in Vietnam from 1966 to 1968 who called the agency's treatment of a top KGB defector an "abomination" in a sensational report in 1978 for which he came out of retirement, died May 27 at the Ingleside at Rock Creek assisted living community in Washington.

He had Alzheimer's disease.

Over the years, Mr. Hart had served as head of CIA operations in Korea during the Korean War and later as chief of a Cuban task force. He was head of the CIA's European division from 1968 to 1971, when he was asked by then-CIA chief Richard Helms to review the case of Yuri Ivanovich Nosenko.

Nosenko contacted the CIA in Geneva in 1962, looking to trade secrets to replace Soviet money he spent on a drinking spree. He defected in early 1964, and just months after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, he said he could prove a link between suspected killer Lee Harvey Oswald and the KGB.

As that link was debated furiously, CIA counterintelligence chief James Jesus Angleton and others suspected that Nosenko had been planted by the Soviets to provide disinformation. He subsequently was held for three years while agents examined his claims.

Eventually, he was released and given a new identity and a well-paid consulting job in the Washington area, but not before his handling poisoned relations within the Soviet division of the CIA.

At a 1978 hearing of the House committee on assassinations, Mr. Hart testified that the Nosenko treatment was "counterproductive and created a lot of misinformation" at a critical time for the agency. Mr. Hart declined to characterize the potential of a link between Oswald and the Soviet intelligence agency. Angleton disputed many of Mr. Hart's conclusions.

Mr. Hart's expertise in the Nosenko case stemmed from his larger interest in the psychology of Soviet defectors. He was author of a top-secret report from the early 1970s that sought to delineate the motivations of clandestine turncoats.

Mr. Hart retired from the CIA in 1973.

Mr. Hart was born in Minneapolis and raised partly in Washington before moving with his family to Albania and what today is Iraq, where his father was serving as a diplomat.

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Mr. Hart, a graduate of the University of Chicago, received a master's degree in psychology from George Washington University. He served as an Army intelligence and reconnaissance officer in Europe during World War II and received the Bronze Star.

He began his career with the CIA's Directorate of Plans, now its Operations Directorate, in 1948 in Italy. He later served in Korea, as station chief in Thailand and in Morocco before he was billeted to Vietnam at a time of massive U.S. troop buildup there. He was the senior intelligence adviser to U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker and Army Gen. William C. Westmoreland, who commanded American military forces in Vietnam.

Mr. Hart, who helicoptered from village to village to check on "my lads," as he called his agents, headed an independent and aggressive intelligence team that was known to give analyses more skeptical and unvarnished than those provided by military brass.

Ward Just, a Washington Post reporter in Vietnam during that period, recalled how Army units had reported that the North Vietnamese army had been leaving small arms on the battlefield. In some quarters, it was taken as a sign that the communists were demoralized. Mr. Hart took it to mean that the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail, which supplied insurgents, was up and running at a disturbing level.

In the early 1970s, with economic intelligence emerging as an important field, Mr. Hart was detailed to the Treasury Department, where he oversaw the modernization of its Office of National Security Affairs.

His CIA decorations included two awards of the Distinguished Intelligence Medal.

He had lived off and on in Washington since the late 1960s.

He wrote a book about defectors, scheduled to be released by the U.S. Naval Institute Press.

His first wife, Joan Ross Hart, died in 1970 after 13 years of marriage.

Survivors include his wife of 31 years, Katherine Colvin Hart of Washington; two daughters from his first marriage, Elizabeth Hamilton of Northbrook, Ill., and Catherine Michaels of Poolesville; a sister; and seven grandchildren.

