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CIA divorces: The secrecy when spies split

By Ian Shapira, Published: March 13, 2012

The Fredericksburg woman divorcing her husband laid out all the messy details, including the most secret of them all. Her husband, she wrote in now-sealed court documents, is a covert operations officer for the Central Intelligence Agency. His CIA job, she said, poisoned their five-year-old marriage.

"[He] used me and our daughter . . . to run cover for his undercover operations . . . I never felt safe, never knew who people were or why they were interested in us or why they were photographing us," wrote the woman, who is in her 30s, in December. "As a result of [his] different assignments I never had a good support network of people I could trust or rely on to help out." And, she claimed, her spy-husband had little interest in household chores. "[He] never so much as washed or folded a load of laundry, swept or mopped one floor, or changed one dirty diaper."

The woman's account is a rare window into the deep strains that the agency's ethos of secrecy can exert on operatives' marriages. Divorces involving spies are often just as clandestine as their work. The details are typically buried in documents sealed by the courts. Only a handful of people get read-in, so to speak: divorce lawyers, marriage counselors and sometimes the agency's attorneys.

Unlike the Pentagon, which studies how often [service members split up](#), and knows, for instance, that 29,456 of 798,921 military couples divorced last year, the CIA does not keep official tabs on its employees' divorce rates.

One retired CIA senior paramilitary officer, who served for more than two decades and lives in Virginia, said he was told several years ago that the divorce rate for the agency's operations division was astonishingly high.

The officer, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to protect his family's identity, said he asked the agency's human resources office for the numbers in 2005 because he was managing a Middle East operations group and was worried about the post-Sept. 11 pressures on CIA officers and their families. When he learned how many marriages

Photos:



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Elizabeth Sloan, a marriage counselor, and Michael Kaydouh, a divorce attorney, on February 21, 2012 in McLean, VA.

were imploding, he said, he urged his officers not to take back-to-back unaccompanied tours.

Shortly after [Gen. Michael V. Hayden](#) became the CIA's director in 2006, he and his wife, [Jeanine](#), also heard stories about many marriages falling apart in the clandestine service. They wanted to know the scope of the problem.

"But privacy laws prevented us from getting accurate information," said Hayden, who served as CIA director until early 2009. "The real answer is we don't know what is true about the divorce rate."

While plenty of CIA marriages last for decades, the agency acknowledges that its high-risk jobs "take a toll on relationships," CIA spokesman Preston Golson said.

Through its Family Advisory Board and Employee Assistance Program, the CIA tries to do everything it can to help families, especially when [a loved one is serving in a war zone](#), Golson said. The agency provides counseling and mental health support for employees and their families and offers briefings for spouses and partners on the CIA's mission, benefits and overseas security services.

"The Agency is a tight-knit family, so ensuring that spouses and family members feel connected and well-informed is a priority," Golson said, adding that in any organization, employees who face danger must deal with marital strains.

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"Some of the CIA officers say to their spouses, 'You knew what this was going to be about when I signed up for the job. Why are you complaining now?' " said [Elizabeth Sloan, a McLean marriage counselor](#) who has seen more than 75 couples that included a CIA employee. "It's really dicey with these couples because secrecy is part of the agency spouse's job."

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At first, her future husband said he was with the State Department, the Fredericksburg woman recalled.

(The Post is not naming the wife or the husband and is

leaving out other details about their lives to protect the undercover officer's identity. The husband did not return phone calls seeking comment, but his account of their marital difficulties is contained in court documents.)

The two met in late 2005 on an online dating site. They shared mutual interests — traveling, learning languages, and dogs — and agreed to meet for lunch in Alexandria.

"It's not like I saw him and thought, 'Oh, he's a hunk,'" the woman said. "He was average-looking, which I later learned made him good at his job."

By 2006, her man had come clean about his real profession. He showed her a medal with the CIA's insignia.

"He just said, 'I'm a spy.' I was like, 'Oh, wow. Why didn't you just say so?' " the woman recalled. "Then I had a million questions, but he wouldn't say more."

They got married later that year in a destination wedding. On the flight back, she noticed that he was eyeing the movements of several young foreign-looking men. Her husband wouldn't confirm or deny her suspicions

"He just got very angry and said through gritted teeth, 'I am not going to have you ruin my career.' I was terrified. He was tracking those guys. It was a real turning point," she recalled. "I wondered, was our wedding a cover for an operation?"

Her sense of being used grew more acute two years later when her husband asked her to visit a winery with their newborn daughter.

"I said, 'No, unless you tell me what we're getting into,'" the woman recalled.

He revealed the ulterior motive: A potential informant was meeting that day with a CIA colleague at the winery. But the colleague was not going to show up. The agency wanted to see how the informant would handle a surprising situation, the wife said she was told. The CIA needed her husband to observe the informant's behavior. And the husband needed his wife, with baby in tow, to help him blend in.

The family of three found seats on a bench at the winery, the wife said. She fed the baby while they kept an eye on their target: The man in the dark suit waited 15 minutes before he made several frantic phone calls, the wife

recalled. Eventually, he left.

“So many things were crossing my mind. Is he a double agent? Does he have his own surveillance? [My husband] didn’t tell me anything,” the woman said. “They should pay people like me for being involved. Otherwise, they should hire professional actors or provide training.”

Some former CIA operatives say the agency has long relied on families to provide cover or help lure in sources.

[Robert Baer](#), a former CIA case officer and now a writer who lives in California, said that he relied on his first wife, a State Department secretary, and their three children to cozy up to informants.

“When you bond with ‘developmentals,’ you want to show yourself as a guy with family, who’s responsible. You want the kids to play with their kids, and you want the wife to join the local parent-teacher association,” said Baer, who last year co-wrote a book about his past and current marriages, [“The Company We Keep.”](#) with his second wife, Dayna Baer, a former agency operative. “I think spouses wonder, ‘Am I here as a prop for you to do a job?’ I am sure my wife felt that way. It had to be something that ate away at her.” They divorced in the late 1990s, he said, after 13 years of marriage.

The former paramilitary operations officer from Virginia said it is critical to keep spouses in the loop. His own marriage survived the agency’s inherent stresses, he said, because he frequently told his wife what he was up to.

“I didn’t go home and give her classified cables, but I told her what I was doing,” said the former officer, who worked for the CIA from 1982 to 2005 and now lives in Virginia. “You can’t be a CIA officer and hide your entire life from your spouse. Sometimes, the agency brought my wife in on stuff. They taught her how to shoot rockets and throw grenades.”

His wife, once the nursing director of a psychiatric hospital for teenagers, was pretty deft at the spy game herself.

“If I was at a party, working on some guy, a ‘developmental,’ like an Arab target, I always made sure to step away so my wife could talk to him alone,” said the former officer. “She’d talk to the wife, too. We’d compare notes. She was often better at it than I was.”

Once, he said, the CIA needed to evacuate one of its spies

in the Middle East because the asset's cover was on the verge of being blown. "My wife was part of our 'exfiltration' team. We had to hide the asset and get him out. And she was able to go with him and his wife, and their kids, because she knew them. She was a stabilizing force."

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By 2009, the Fredericksburg woman's marriage was unraveling. One night she and her husband got into such a vicious fight that the police were summoned to the house.

The CIA operative told police that his wife woke up in the middle of the night, complained about his drinking and "came at him" with a glass baby bottle in a "threatening manner," according to the police charging documents.

The wife told police that her husband had finished off nearly half a box of wine and that after she tossed the rest, he threw her down on the couch, the charging documents showed.

"I felt that [the husband] was the primary aggressor," the officer wrote, adding the following sentence, which has since been redacted: "[The wife] did want it noted that [her husband] works undercover operations for the CIA, and that he has used his line of work to intimidate her in the past as well as tonight."

The husband was charged with assault and battery and intimidation of a witness, according to police documents. But the wife said she told prosecutors she did not want to press charges, and they dropped the case. She feared a conviction would get him fired.

Their problems grew worse during a posting in the Middle East when, according to the husband's court documents, he thought that his wife had "compromised" his assignment "to the detriment of his career."

He "had done nothing but try to alleviate [his wife's] anxiety and paranoia," which had destroyed their marriage, his court documents stated. Her bouts with anxiety prevented her from fulfilling the social duties of a CIA wife: She "often refused to leave the parties' house to attend church, work functions, or other family outings." She also hit him twice, his court documents alleged, and once threatened him by saying, "You know what I can do with a knife."

(The Fredericksburg woman denied ever making threats

involving a knife.)

By 2011, the couple was tussling in court, first over child custody and then over the divorce.

So far, a judge has ordered the husband, who earns close to \$100,000 a year, to pay about \$2,000 every month in alimony, along with about \$640 a month in child support, court documents said. He gets to see his daughter three weekends a month.

In early February, after The Post had obtained the court documents, a judge ordered the case sealed. In those documents, the husband declined to answer some of his wife's discovery questions, citing the "National Security Privilege" and the "Military and State Secrets Privilege."

The CIA would not address the specifics of this divorce. The agency gets involved in family court cases only to protect the identity of an undercover officer, said Golson, the agency spokesman. "However, this can be done without impeding the work of the court or benefiting one side over the other," he said.

A custody and visitation trial is set for later this year. In hindsight, the woman said she wished she had known about the CIA's Family Advisory Board or Employee Assistance Program.

"Nobody ever told me about that," she said. "I needed real guidance about what the potential risks were with the life because there was no way to gauge that. And we needed a safe place to talk where he didn't have to fear for his job."

Recently, she hosted a birthday party for their daughter, and her estranged husband attended. They didn't speak much, but he took a lot of photos, she said.

"As soon as he got home, he immediately e-mailed me all the pictures he took," the wife said. "I appreciated that. He didn't have to do that."

Not one, she said, contained a picture of the three of them.

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