



Edwin P. Wilson

Edwin P. Wilson, gunrunner and manager of CIA front companies, died on September 10th, aged 84

NOTHING about Edwin P. Wilson was quite as it appeared. If you met him at an airport—en route to Geneva, London, New York, on joking terms with the Concorde stewardesses—he looked like any other globetrotting businessman. In fact, he was a spy. The companies on the card he flashed from his pocket, Consultants International, or World Marine, Inc., or any of five dozen others, sounded plausible. They were all CIA fronts. He was tall, loud, assertive, and a fund of great stories told over late-night Scotch—how he'd spent an evening clubbing with Somoza, how he'd killed Che Guevara. The real stories, though, he didn't tell.

His chief business in the 1970s was shipping arms to Libya, then under Western sanctions. He didn't advertise it. But then again, he claimed later, it wasn't what it seemed. He sold Muammar Qaddafi firearms, some of which were used to murder Libyan dissidents at home and abroad. But that was done to "buddy up" to him, to try to use him like an asset. He offered him plans for making a nuclear bomb, but only to find out how Libya's own bomb-making was going. The plans were bogus anyway. He recruited ex-Green Berets to train Qaddafi's intelligence officers, and to teach them to make bombs disguised as bedside lamps and radios. He earned \$1m a year

from that, but also learned the officers' identities. It was all done with CIA backing. These were patriotic acts.

Most spectacularly—and disastrously for his cover—in 1977 he shipped to Libya 20 tons of C4 plastic explosives. This was almost the whole of America's stockpile, flown out of Houston in a DC-8 charter in barrels marked "oil-drilling mud". Mr Wilson felt no qualms about it. He didn't believe it had been used for terrorism. He had sent it to ingratiate himself and to get intelligence. The CIA, he said, knew all about it. But the CIA denied it.

His connections with the Company had begun in 1955 on the plane home from fighting in Korea, when he was given a name and a number to call by a man who then disappeared. He worked actively for the CIA for 15 years, destabilising European labour unions by using anything—Corsican mobsters, plagues of cockroaches—and setting up his front companies. The work was "a hell of a satisfaction" to him. He left, officially, in 1971, but only for Task Force 157 of the Office of Naval Intelligence, another super-secret outfit. Then, in 1976, he went "freelance". The CIA contacts, and all the front companies, continued—sending arms to Angola and boats to the Congo; bringing intelligence back—right up to the moment when he stood in a federal court,

in 1983, accused among other things of shipping the explosives and sending the guns to Libya without a licence.

The third-highest CIA officer in the land declared then, in a sworn affidavit, that since 1971 the agency had had nothing to do with him. Not directly; not indirectly. Contacts zero. For good measure, Mr Wilson was found guilty of offering \$50,000 per head for the murders of the federal prosecutor, six witnesses and his wife (from whom he wanted his gold ring back, preferably still on her finger). Some jailhouse snitch, wearing a wire, claimed to have taped him. He was sentenced to 52 years in jail, most of it in solitary: thoroughly, royally screwed, as he put it, by "snotty law-school graduates...with too much power and too few scruples."

The CIA's story was that he had gone rogue. Deniability was part of the deal, of course. But it was sheer success that made him, in the end, "a little hot". His front companies were also legitimate businesses, and they made real profits—all the more because his books were hardly audited. Asked once to itemise the cost of a trawler stuffed with surveillance gear, sold to the agency for \$500,000, he quoted \$250,000 for "product" and \$250,000 for "service". Fine and dandy. Kinglike, and worth \$23m, he rollicked over a 2,500-acre estate at Mount Airy in Virginia, lavishing jewels on his girlfriends, entertaining congressmen and generals to picnics and hunting parties. Not bad for a poor farm boy from Idaho. There were "very, very nice" villas, with Pakistani houseboys, in Malta and in Tripoli, where he was forced to lie low for a while in 1980-82, getting too drunk on the disgusting local hooch, before agents cannier than himself tricked him into leaving and repatriated him.

Black, white and herringbone

His revenge for his framing came almost too late. In 2003 his conviction for the explosives-shipment was overturned because, wrote the judge, the government had lied. Far from no contacts with the CIA between 1971 and 1978, there had been at least 80. Several ran intriguingly "parallel" to the illegal acts he had been charged with. The next year he was released, white-haired at 76, fighting fit and pumped up with his own righteousness, to spend the rest of his days trying to clear his name.

He knew that would be a tough sell. For many he would always be a traitor and a terrorist as well as an amoral profiteer. Black couldn't be made white, and he had to be one or the other, even though reality, as he wrote, "is actually really herringbone". Those sounded like the words of a man who felt sorry for himself. No, he said; there was no profit in that. Just for a moment then, you might have taken him for an ordinary businessman. ■