

THE OLSON FILE A SECRET THAT COULD DESTROY THE CIA: [ND Edition]

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▣ Abstract (summary)

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Although the team did not say so - because it could only be supposition - it seemed as though someone must have struck Olson on the head with a hammer, smashed open the window, probably with the same hammer, and thrown Olson out. With this supposition as a starting-point, Eric continued his investigations. In 1996, he took the results to a New York public prosecutor, Stephen Saracco. Saracco decided that there was sufficient evidence to convene a grand jury hearing. If the jury eventually finds the evidence of a murder compelling, then Saracco has requested that it should hand down indictments for murder and conspiracy to murder.

Trained as a biochemist, he had been employed since 1943 in the Special Operations Division at Fort Detrick, Maryland. His work was top secret, but whatever it involved it seems to have troubled his conscience. Eric Olson says his mother told him she could always tell when experiments at Fort Detrick had gone well because Olson would come home depressed and say only 'all the monkeys died'. He also hinted that experiments were conducted not only on monkeys. After the Second World War, according to his son, Olson told his wife: 'If the Germans had won the war, all of us at Detrick would have been prosecuted for war crimes.' By the Fifties, however, Olson's role was clearer. As well as his work at Fort Detrick, he was associated with a CIA secret research team which was developing aerosol delivery systems for biological weapons that included staphylococcus enterotoxin, Venezuelan equine encephalomyelitis and anthrax, and came to Britain frequently between 1950 and 1953 to work at the British Microbiological Research Establishment at Porton Down in Wiltshire. Olson seems to have concentrated on counter-biological warfare, looking for vaccines and clothing to protect against attacks.

▣ Full Text

Dr Frank Olson's life was a mystery, full of dubious experiments for the CIA and unexplained trips to Porton Down.

His death, in 1953, was stranger still. Was it suicide? A failed exercise in brainwashing? Or murder? And what did he know that made his death so convenient? Next week, a grand jury may finally hear the truth about the Cold War's darkest secret .

In the early hours of November 28, 1953, Armand Pastore, night manager of the Statler Hotel in New York, was startled to hear a crash of breaking glass and then a sickening thump on the pavement outside his hotel. He rushed out to find a middle-aged man lying semi-conscious on the ground.

Pastore looked up to see light shining from a shattered window of a room on the hotel's 13th floor. He knelt down by the man, cradled his head in his arms and leaned closer as the man made an effort to speak. Then the man died. He had obviously jumped out of the window, just another suicide in a city where the plunge from skyscraper to pavement was a shocking but not unusual event.

Suicide was certainly the finding at the inquest: Dr Frank Olson, a 43-year-old US Army scientist, had, for reasons no one could fathom, taken his own life. And that was what the record showed for 22 years.

Then, in 1975, the Rockefeller Commission, set up by President Ford after Watergate to examine the extent of the CIA's illegal domestic operations, revealed that an unnamed army scientist had died after CIA experts, experimenting with mind-bending drugs, had secretly slipped him a dose of LSD. During the ensuing uproar, the scientist was identified as Frank Olson.

The US government moved immediately to show how sorry it was for what had happened. Congress passed a private humanitarian relief bill which authorised a payment of \$750,000 (GBP 460,000) to the widow, Alice Olson, and her three children. Mrs Olson and her eldest son, Eric, were invited to the White House, where President Ford apologised to them. And the then CIA director, William Colby, held a lunch for Mrs Olson and Eric, apologised and gave them the CIA file on the case.

According to the file, Olson suffered a chemically-induced psychotic flashback a week after he had been slipped the LSD. A CIA doctor, Robert Lashbrook, was deputed to look after him until he was normal again.

Lashbrook had been sharing a hotel room with Olson and was asleep in a bed next to him when, he said, he was awoken by the sound of breaking glass and realised that Olson had crashed through the window.

Eric, who is now 54, was never very convinced by this version of events but kept quiet so as not to distress his mother. Then, when she died in 1993, he decided to test the official story of his father's death. Experts told him that in order to achieve the momentum needed to vault over a radiator under the window, burst through the closed blinds and smash through the hotel's heavy glass panes, Olson would have had to struck the window travelling at more than 30km per hour. A trained athlete takes about 50 metres to accelerate to that speed. But the hotel room was only 5.5 metres long.

Next there was Lashbrook's behaviour when Pastore arrived in the room to tell him his colleague was dead on the pavement. Lashbrook went to the telephone, rang a number and simply said: 'Olson's gone.' Then he hung up and retired to the bathroom where, according to Pastore, he sat on the lavatory with his head in his hands.

Eric Olson, a Maryland clinical psychologist, began to spend every spare moment trying to get to the true story of what had happened to his father.

Today he is convinced that he is on the brink of doing so.

But the story is so strange, so reminiscent of the TV series The X-Files, that, despite compelling evidence, it is uncertain that anyone will believe it.

THE TERMS OF the \$750,000 government settlement for Olson's death prevented his family from pursuing the matter in the civil courts. But if Eric Olson could convince the authorities that his father's death was a criminal matter, he might eventually get at the truth. Four years ago he had his first breakthrough when he won a court order to exhume his father's body.

'When he was buried, the coffin had been sealed. They said he had been so badly mutilated in the fall that it wouldn't be right for the family to see him. But when we opened the casket a lifetime later, I knew Daddy at once.

He had been embalmed, and his face was unmarked and untroubled. He hadn't been hurt the way they said he had.'

A new autopsy confirmed Eric Olson's impression and entirely contradicted the findings of the first inquest. Carried out by a team led by James Starrs, Professor of Law and Forensic Science at the National Law Center, George Washington University, it could find no sign of the cuts and abrasions that the first autopsy said had been caused by crashing through the window pane.

On the other hand, there was a haematoma, unrecorded at the first postmortem examination, on the left-hand side of Olson's skull. This had been caused by a heavy blow, Starrs decided, probably from a hammer, before the fall from the window. Starrs and his team concluded that the evidence from their examination was 'rankly and starkly suggestive of homicide'.

Although the team did not say so - because it could only be supposition - it seemed as though someone must have struck Olson on the head with a hammer, smashed open the window, probably with the same hammer, and thrown Olson out. With this supposition as a starting-point, Eric continued his investigations. In 1996, he took the results to a New York public prosecutor, Stephen Saracco. Saracco decided that there was sufficient evidence to convene a grand jury hearing. If the jury eventually finds the evidence of a murder compelling, then Saracco has requested that it should hand down indictments for murder and conspiracy to murder.

Saracco, an ambitious lawyer with no fear about taking on the US establishment, says that the men he wants named in the indictments include some of America's most respected CIA veterans - and, if the grand jury agrees to his request to widen his investigations, former officers of the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS).

Already there are indications that the international intelligence community is running scared. Dr Lashbrook, who now lives in California, has for two years resisted Saracco's attempts to question him about Olson's last hours, the telephone call he made after Olson's death and the work in which he and Olson had been engaged.

Early in July, however, after months of negotiation, it was agreed by all the lawyers involved that Saracco's team should examine Lashbrook at his local Venture County Courthouse this week; and that a video recording of the proceedings should be shown to the grand jury. Saracco has already offered Lashbrook immunity from prosecution in return for his testimony. He was too late, however, to do the same for William Colby, the CIA chief who apologised for Olson's death.

On April 27, 1996, shortly after Saracco first convened the grand jury, Colby, who realised that he would be forced to give evidence, vanished from his country retreat about 40 miles south of Washington. It looked as if he had left in a hurry: the lights and the radio were still on, his computer was still running, and a half-finished glass of wine was on the table. The next day his empty canoe was found swamped on a sand bar. Five days later, divers found a body identified as Colby's. He had apparently been the victim of a boating accident.

If so, it would appear that Maryland waters are particularly unkind to retired members of the CIA. In 1978, CIA officer John Paisley also vanished there, in another boating accident. A week after Paisley's abandoned boat was located, a body with a gunshot wound to the head was found. The condition of the body meant that precise identification was impossible, but the authorities said it was Paisley.

Suppose the grand jury does find that the evidence indicates that Olson was murdered and the perpetrators were other CIA officers. There will still remain a major barrier to an eventual conviction: what was the motive? Why should the CIA have killed one of its own? To find an answer, we have to go back to the Fifties, when the two great ideologies of the 20th Century, communism and capitalism, were locked in a mortal battle, and no act, however shocking, was ruled out in the struggle for victory.

THE NUCLEAR STAND-OFF of the Cold War had sent both sides back to their drawing boards. If it was impossible to employ nuclear weapons without assuring mutual total destruction, what other weapons could the boffins come up with - given virtually unlimited funds and no moral restraints - that would win any future war? Two possibilities attracted attention.

Bacteriological warfare was the first option.

Bacteriological warfare is cheap; it has been described as 'the poor man's nuclear bomb'. A deadly virus sufficient to wipe out every living person in an area of one square mile would cost only \$50 (GBP 30). In the Fifties, both sides in the Cold War set up research establishments to develop biological weapons and methods of protecting against them. Dr Frank Olson worked in this area.

Trained as a biochemist, he had been employed since 1943 in the Special Operations Division at Fort Detrick, Maryland. His work was top secret, but whatever it involved it seems to have troubled his conscience. Eric Olson says his mother told him she could always tell when experiments at Fort Detrick had gone well because Olson would come home depressed and say only 'all the monkeys died'. He also hinted that experiments were conducted not only on monkeys. After the Second World War, according to his son, Olson told his wife: 'If the Germans had won the war, all of us at Detrick would have been prosecuted for war crimes.' By the Fifties, however, Olson's role was clearer. As well as his work at Fort Detrick, he was associated with a CIA secret research team which was developing aerosol delivery systems for biological weapons that included staphylococcus enterotoxin, Venezuelan equine encephalomyelitis and anthrax, and came to Britain frequently between 1950 and 1953 to work at the British Microbiological Research Establishment at Porton Down in Wiltshire. Olson seems to have concentrated on counter-biological warfare, looking for vaccines and clothing to protect against attacks.

Deadly effective though it may be, biological warfare has drawbacks. There is always the risk that it may get out of control and attack not only the enemy but those who decided to employ it in the first place. Like nuclear warfare, biological warfare could wipe out civilisation as we know it. So Olson and some of his colleagues became intrigued by another type of weapon, one which attacked not the body, but the mind.

Those scientists in the Western intelligence community who supported the idea of developing brainwashing programmes had two gurus - Dr Douglas Ewen Cameron, a Glasgow-born psychiatrist, and Dr Sidney 'The Gimp' Gottlieb, the CIA's expert on brainwashing. Cameron received his post-graduate diploma in psychiatric medicine at the University of London before joining Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore, in 1926. He became convinced that the mentally ill posed a grave threat to Anglo-American civilisation and should be forcibly sterilised.

During the Second World War, he was on the Military Mobilization Committee of the American Psychiatric Association and was appalled to learn that of the 15 million men inducted into the US armed forces, two million had to be rejected on neuropsychiatric grounds, a proportion far higher than in any other nation. He set about finding remedies including electro-shock (60,000 electroconvulsive therapies in a single year), lobotomies and other forms of psycho-surgery, sensory deprivation and mind-altering drugs - all used on patients who had little or no say in their treatment. Conscientious objectors, many of them Quakers, were defined by Cameron as mentally ill and sometimes forced to accept 'treatment'.

When the end of the war revealed that the Nazis had been carrying out similar experiments - 23 German doctors were convicted at Nuremberg - the Western intelligence community became very interested in Cameron's work.

This interest grew to an obsession after the Stalin show trials, in which the accused made robotic confessions which had apparently been artificially induced. Subsequent denunciations of the American way of life by American POWs held in Chinese camps during the Korean War further convinced the CIA that the communists were already well advanced in mind control techniques.

In intelligence circles there were rumours of a Soviet plot to place brainwashed zombies in the White House and other citadels of Western power.

The American response was a secret CIA project called MK-ULTRA. Its director, Dr Gottlieb, sought help from his Scottish hero, Cameron, and set him up with cover organisations to distance the CIA from some of the more abhorrent aspects of MK-ULTRA's work. So Cameron founded the Society for the Investigation of Human Ecology, ran a proprietary company called Psychological Assessment Associates, and contributed papers to learned journals on 'Psychic Driving', 'The Restructuring of the Personality' and 'Suggestion and Extra-Sensory Perception'.

The short-term goals of MK-ULTRA were to counter any communist plot to insert brainwashed assassins into the West. However, according to authors Gerald Colby and Charlotte Dennett, biographers of Nelson Rockefeller - one-time chairman

of a committee overseeing the MK-ULTRA operation - the scientists also wanted to find drugs or techniques by which `a man could be surreptitiously drugged through the medium of an alcoholic cocktail at a social party and the subject induced to perform the act of attempted assassination of an official in a government in which he was well-established socially and politically'.

A far-fetched idea, perhaps; but interestingly, not one whose currency was limited to the CIA. A few years later, the surreptitious administration of a mind-altering drug in a drink at a party was suggested as a possible solution to a strange double death in Sydney, Australia. On the morning of January 1, 1963, Dr Gilbert Bogle, and his lover, Mrs Margaret Chandler, were found dead on a river bank after a riotous party given by staff of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation. Bogle, a brilliant scientist, had told friends that he was about to go to the US to work on scientific research of great military importance. The deaths were never solved, but Sydney detectives became convinced that Bogle and his colleagues had been experimenting with LSD and the effect it produced on their thought processes - the invitation to the New Year's Eve party required each guest to bring a painting done under the influence of the drug - and that either by accident or by design someone had slipped the couple what turned out to be an overdose.

Repeated requests to the FBI under the Freedom of Information Act asking for details of the work that Bogle would have been doing in the US have met with refusal on the grounds of national security. But the speculation is irresistible that it might have involved experiments in mind control similar to those that Olson had worked on.

THE LONG-TERM aim of these experiments with mind-altering drugs is thought by those who have studied the MK-ULTRA programme to have been to ensure the dominance of Anglo-American civilisation in what eugenicists call the `war of all against all - the key to evolutionary success'. Brainwashing would be used not only to defeat the enemy but to ensure the compliance and loyalty of one's own population.

Where did Olson fit into all this? A Harley Street psychiatrist, Dr William Sargant, now dead, was sent by the British government in the early Fifties to evaluate MK-ULTRA. On his return he told a friend, the author and former BBC television producer Gordon Thomas, that what Cameron and Gottlieb were up to was as bad as anything going on in the Soviet gulags.

Thomas, whose books include a 1988 study of the CIA's forays into mind-control, *Journey into Madness: Medical Torture and the Mind Controllers*, says: `Sargant told me that he had urged the British government to distance this country from it. He said it was blacker than black.'

According to Thomas, Sargant told him that Olson had come to Britain from 1950 to 1953 to work on attachment at Porton Down and had also made frequent visits to `an intelligence facility' in Sussex. This is confirmed by entries in the special passport that Olson used.

The stamps on the passport, which declare that the bearer was on `official business for the Department of the Army', indicate a pattern of travel that took Olson between various British military airfields, France, occupied Germany, Scandinavia and the US between May 1950 and August 1953.

Prosecuting attorney Saracco believes that something happened on one of these trips that holds the key to Olson's death.

Since the matter is still before a grand jury, Saracco cannot talk about it, but Thomas has his own idea of what that `something' was: `The CIA was using German SS prisoners and Norwegian quislings {collaborators} taken from jails and detention centres as guinea pigs to test Cameron's theories about mind control. The agency preferred to conduct such clinical trials outside the US because sometimes they were terminal - the human guinea pig ended up dead. Olson was accustomed to seeing lethal experiments on animals, but when human beings were used in this way it was too much for him. I believe that he wanted out.'

Eric Olson finds this hypothesis convincing. `After the exhumation of my father's body in 1994 we found a cryptic document in his personnel file at Fort Detrick. It referred to `a possible breach of security after a trip to Paris and Norway' in the summer of 1953. At the time we had no idea what that might have referred to, but now, knowing my father's temperament better, I can imagine his reaction if he saw experiments being conducted on human beings.'

Mike Miniccino, an American businessman and historical researcher who has spent 25 years studying the MK-ULTRA programme and developing a database on its activities, says that if Olson did then express his reservations about MK-ULTRA and its work, he would have done so to Sargant, who had evaluated MK-ULTRA's work and who had been a close colleague of Olson's.

And although - as we already know - Sargant wanted the British government to distance itself from the CIA's work with MK-ULTRA, Miniccino says that he was nevertheless committed to the principle of mind control and had become the link between the British Secret Intelligence Service and MK-ULTRA.

Miniccino adds: `So if Frank Olson expressed serious doubts about the MK-ULTRA project to Sargant, then he signed his own death warrant.'

What Miniccino is implying, and what Saracco wants to prove, is that the MK-ULTRA mind control project - with its clinical trials on unsuspecting human beings - was such a sensitive issue with the Western intelligence community that it would go to any lengths to prevent an insider like Olson from blowing the whistle.

Is this, then, what happened? Did Olson tell the British psychiatrist/SIS agent Sargant that he wanted out of the mind control project, and that his conscience might compel him to reveal publicly what the intelligence services had been doing? Did Sargant then pass this on to SIS, who told the CIA? Was a decision then taken to ensure that Olson never talked by destroying his memory with drugs and, when this failed, by murdering him and making it look like a suicide?

Apart from the evidence set out earlier, there is another compelling fact that supports this theory. Until Mrs Olson died in 1993, a regular visitor at her house was Olson's former boss in Special Operations, Vincent Ruwet.

He would spend many daytime hours with Mrs Olson. The two would drink together at her house (Mrs Olson became an alcoholic) and discuss the problems she had faced bringing up three fatherless children. Everyone considered him to be a sympathetic family friend. But newly discovered documents reveal that Ruwet had been assigned by the CIA to keep track of the wife. If Olson was a threat because of what he knew, and knowledge could be passed on, then the CIA would have to spy on all those who had been close to him in case he had told them the truth about MK-ULTRA.

THE CIA HAS always maintained as a matter of historical record that it has never murdered an American citizen on American soil. If, as a result of Eric Olson's persistence in trying to uncover what happened to his father, and prosecutor Saracco's investigating skills, this is shown to be a lie, it could be the beginning of the end for the agency.

Eric Olson says: `The Cold War is over and there are now ongoing national debates about the future of the CIA and about un-ethical medical testing on humans. My father's case covers both. The use of hallucinogens, hypnosis, electroshock and other procedures in an attempt to control the way people behave was the CIA's equivalent of the Manhattan {atom bomb} project.

'MK-ULTRA was secret, shocking and incredibly dangerous. They couldn't afford to take the risk of letting my father continue to be involved or, considering all he knew, allowing him to quit. So he was terminated instead. My father's murder crossed the line in the sand which the US government has always publicly respected. The guilty ones will not be allowed to get away with it.'

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