

## James and Elsie Wilcott: CIA Profile in Courage

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In the mid 1970s, the Senate's Church Committee on intelligence and the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) opened the CIA's lid on Lee Harvey Oswald and discovered James Jesus Angleton. They found that Angleton's Special Investigations Group (SIG) in CIA Counterintelligence held a 201 file on Oswald in the three years prior to JFK's assassination. Considering what William Harvey wrote about creating phony 201 files for ZR/RIFLE scapegoats, an obvious first question is: How genuine is Oswald's file (or what little we have been given from it)? In any case, judging from the interview of a key witness about Oswald's file in Angleton's SIG office, its mere presence in that particular location was enough to give the game away.

It was Angleton's staff member, Ann Egerter, who opened Oswald's 201 SIG file on December 9, 1960.[56] Egerter was questioned by the House Select Committee. They knew they could not expect her, as a CIA employee, to answer truthfully, even under oath, the question whether Oswald was a CIA agent. Allen Dulles, Kennedy's fired CIA director, had said in the January 27, 1964, closed-door Warren Commission meeting that no CIA employee, even under oath, should ever say truthfully if Oswald (or anyone else) was in fact a CIA agent.[57] The House Select Committee therefore had to get the answer from Angleton's associate, Ann Egerter—by then retired and somewhat obliging—by indirect questioning.

When Egerter was asked the purpose of Counterintelligence's Special Investigations Group (CI/SIG), she said, "We were charged with the *investigation of Agency personnel who were suspected one way or another.*"[58]

Egerter had thereby already made a crucial admission, whose implications would be drawn out step by step. Her HSCA interviewer then asked Egerter to confirm this specific purpose of SIG: "Please correct me if I am wrong. In light of the example that you have given and the statements that you have made it seems that the *purpose of CI/SIG* was very limited and that limited purpose was being [sic] to *investigate Agency employees who for some reason were under suspicion.*"

Egerter replied, "That is correct." [59]

She was then asked: “When a 201 file is opened does that mean that whoever opens the file has either an intelligence interest in the individual, or, if not an intelligence interest, he thinks that the individual may present a counterintelligence risk?”

EGERTER: “Well, in general, I would say that would be correct.”

INTERVIEWER: “Would there be any other reason for opening up a file?”

EGERTER: “No, I can’t think of one.”[60]

Researcher Lisa Pease concluded from Ann Egerter’s testimony that Oswald’s 201 file in CI/SIG “implies strongly that either Oswald was indeed a member of the CIA or was being used in an operation involving members of the CIA, which for my money is essentially the same thing.”[61] In either case, Oswald was a CIA asset.

Egerter also indicated by her testimony that Oswald was a particular kind of CIA asset, an Agency employee who was suspected of being a security risk. That would have been the reason for opening a 201 file on him specifically in Angleton’s Special Investigations Group of Counterintelligence. Egerter said SIG was known in the Agency as “the office that spied on spies,”[62] and repeatedly identified the spies being spied upon as CIA employees. She again described the work of her SIG office as “investigations of Agency employees where there was an indication of espionage.”[63]

Her interviewer in turn patiently sought reconfirmation of this stated purpose of her office that so strongly implied Oswald was a CIA employee under investigation by the Agency:

INTERVIEWER: “I hope you understand my questions are directed toward trying to find out what the purpose of the CI/SIG Office was and under what circumstances was the opening up of the 201 file [on Oswald]. I am given the impression that the purpose of CI/SIG was very limited, primarily to investigate Agency employees who for one reason or another might be under suspicion of getting espionage against the United States. Is that an accurate statement of the purpose of CI/SIG?”

EGERTER: “Well, it is employees and also penetration, which is the same thing, of the Agency.”[64]

Ann Egerter’s testimony points toward Oswald having been a CIA employee who by December 1960 had come under suspicion by the Agency. He was to be carefully watched. As a security risk, he was also the ideal kind of person for the CIA to offer up three years later as a scapegoat in the assassination of a president who some believed had become a much greater security risk.

Former CIA finance officer Jim Wilcott confirmed the implications of Egerter’s deposition.

In his own HSCA testimony, Wilcott said Oswald served the CIA specifically as a double agent in the Soviet Union who afterwards came under suspicion by the Agency.

Jim Wilcott's straightforward testimony on Oswald was made possible by his and his wife's courageous decision to divorce themselves from the CIA and speak the truth. After nine years working for the CIA as a husband-and-wife team, Jim and Elsie Wilcott resigned from the Agency in 1966. "My wife and I both left the CIA," Wilcott testified before the House Select Committee, "because we became convinced that what CIA was doing couldn't be reconciled to basic principles of democracy or basic principles of humanism."<sup>[65]</sup> In 1968 as participants in the anti-Vietnam War and civil rights movements, Jim and Elsie Wilcott became the first former CIA couple to go public with what they knew, in spite of the risks to themselves. They made the decision in conscience to speak out, they said, in order "to sleep better nights."<sup>[66]</sup> Thus their marriage became a CIA profile in courage.

Jim Wilcott worked in the finance branch of the Tokyo CIA Station from 1960 to 1964. During the same years, Elsie Wilcott was a secretary at the Tokyo station. When President Kennedy was assassinated, the station went on alert. Jim was assigned to twenty-four-hour security duty. He passed the time with agents whose tongues had been loosened by alcohol. They told him the CIA was involved in the assassination.<sup>[67]</sup>

"At first I thought 'These guys are nuts,'" he said, "but then a man I knew and had worked with before showed up to take a disbursement and told me Lee Harvey Oswald was a CIA employee. I didn't believe him until he told me the cryptonym under which Oswald had drawn funds when he returned from Russia to the U.S."<sup>[68]</sup>

The man at the disbursing cage window who revealed the Oswald connection was, Wilcott said, a case officer who supervised agents.<sup>[69]</sup> The case officer said Wilcott himself had issued an advance on funds for the CIA's Oswald project under the cryptonym. "It was a cryptonym," Wilcott told the House Committee, "that I was familiar with. It must have been at least two or three times that I had remembered it, and it did ring a bell."<sup>[70]</sup> In recognizing the cryptonym, Wilcott had to confront his own complicity in the CIA's Oswald counterintelligence project that was the background to the president's assassination.

In a 1978 interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Jim Wilcott said, "It was common knowledge in the Tokyo CIA station that Oswald worked for the agency."

"That's true," Elsie Wilcott said. "Right after the President was killed, people in the Tokyo station were talking openly about Oswald having gone to Russia for the CIA. Everyone was wondering how the agency was going to be able to keep the lid on Oswald. But I guess they did," she said.<sup>[71]</sup>

In an article based on what he learned at the Tokyo Station, Jim Wilcott wrote: “[Oswald] had been trained [by the CIA] at Atsugi Naval Air Station, a plush super secret cover base for Tokyo Station special operations...

“Oswald was recruited from the military for the express purpose of becoming a double agent assignment to the USSR ... More than once, I was told something like ‘so-and-so was working on the Oswald project back in the late ’50s.’

“One of the reasons given for the necessity to do away with Oswald was the difficulty they had with him when he returned. Apparently, he knew the Russians were on to him from the start, and this made him very angry.”[72]

Oswald’s anger, while he was trying to arrange his return to the United States in late 1960, would have been reason enough for James Jesus Angleton to order his Special Investigations Group to keep a security watch on the CIA’s double agent. Thus, Ann Egerter opened his 201 SIG file on December 9, 1960.

Jim and Elsie Wilcott paid a price for speaking out against the CIA. In the early 1970s after Jim became finance analyst for the Utica, California, community renewal program, the Utica mayor was informed by the FBI that the Wilcotts were under surveillance pending a possible federal indictment. The mayor decided not to fire Jim but asked him to sign a resignation form which the mayor would date the day previous to the date that the federal indictment came down.[73] The Wilcotts received threatening phone calls. They had intimidating notes left under their car’s windshield wipers. Their tires were slashed.[74] On October 5, 1986, Elsie Wilcott died of cancer.

In the decade following his HSCA testimony, Jim Wilcott joined Vietnam veteran [Brian Willson](#) and the Nuremberg Actions community outside the Concord Naval Weapons Station in nonviolent resistance to weapons shipments to the CIA-sponsored Contra war in Nicaragua. While sitting on the railroad tracks, Willson was run over by a weapons train, which severed both his legs. Undeterred, Jim Wilcott was arrested for blocking a later train.[75]

In the late 1980s, a reporter for a small Bay Area journal described Jim Wilcott in his faithful vigil by the tracks of the Concord weapons train: “a gentle, unprepossessing person of indeterminate middle age” who had spent nine years as a CIA accountant. “Now disabled by an obscure nerve disorder (whose rapid onset was accompanied by a small circle on his arm), he spent his time in humble supportive activities for Nuremberg Actions. It was his way of replying to what his old friends were fomenting south of the border.”[76] The reporter observed that at the protest site beside the tracks, alongside wooden crosses

inscribed with the names of Central American martyrs, were large blocks of stone with epitaphs to John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy. Jim Wilcott soon joined the witnesses he remembered in his vigil by the tracks, dying of cancer on February 10, 1994.<sup>[77]</sup>

Because Jim and Elsie Wilcott were unswerving witnesses to the truth behind John Kennedy's assassination, we can see through their eyes how the unspeakable became possible. By having unwittingly funded the Oswald double agent project, Jim Wilcott was an example of how CIA people were being used piecemeal in compartmentalized Cold War plots. Like Lee Harvey Oswald, they had no "need to know" anything beyond their assigned tasks. Through the need-to-know restriction in their national security state, the majority of CIA employees were kept ignorant before the fact of the much larger covert designs they helped embroider by their actions. Thus, even the assassination of a president could be funded unconsciously by American taxpayers and carried out unknowingly by government employees, while only a few such as CIA Deputy Director for Plans Richard Helms and Counterintelligence head James Angleton knew the intended result beforehand.

## REFERENCES

56. The CIA document that opened Oswald's 201 SIG file on December 9, 1960, signed by Ann Egerter, is on page 463 of Newman's *Oswald and the CIA*. [\[↔\]](#)
57. *President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy: Report of Proceedings Held at Washington, D.C. Monday, January 27, 1964*; published by Harold Weisberg as *Whitewash IV: Top Secret JFK Assassination Transcript* (Frederick, Md.: 1974), [p. 62](#); [p. 153 of transcript](#). [\[↔\]](#)
58. HSCA Deposition of Ann Elizabeth Goldsborough Egerter, p. 8. Cited by Lisa Pease, "James Angleton," in *Assassinations*, p. 146 (emphasis added). [\[↔\]](#)
59. Egerter, HSCA Deposition, p. 9 (emphasis added). [\[↔\]](#)
60. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10. [\[↔\]](#)
61. Pease, *Assassinations*, p. 147. [\[↔\]](#)
62. Preliminary HSCA Interview of Ann Egerter by Dan Hardway and Betsy Wolf, March 31, 1978, p. 3. JFK Record Number 180-10142-10298. [\[↔\]](#)
63. Egerter HSCA Deposition, May 17, 1978, p. 20. JFK Record Number 180-10131-10333. [\[↔\]](#)
64. *Ibid.*, p. 21. Egerter's HSCA interviewer, Michael Goldsmith, also asked her about the suggestive letters "AG" (meaning "AGENT"?) printed in an identification box on the December 9, 1960, form by which Egerter had opened Oswald's 201 file:  
GOLDSMITH: "What does the term 'AG' stand for?"  
EGERTER: "I have forgotten."

GOLDSMITH: "Is that your handwriting?"

EGERTER: "I don't think so. I forget."

GOLDSMITH: "Would that have stood for agent?"

EGERTER: "No. I forget what 'AG' meant." Ibid., pp. 58-59.

Lacking an independent authority to interpret the CIA form, Goldsmith accepted Egerter's inability to remember what "AG" meant or if she had written those letters on the form, and moved on to other questions. [↔]

65. [James B. Wilcott's Testimony before the House Select Committee on Assassinations](#), March 22, 1978, p. 48. JFK Record Number 180-10116-10096. [↔]
66. Warren Hinckle, "[Couple Talks about Oswald and the CIA](#)," *San Francisco Chronicle* (September 12, 1978). [↔]
67. Bob Loomis, "Ex-CIA Couple Tell of Disillusion," *Oakland Tribune* (September 18, 1978), p. B14. Also Hinckle, "[Couple Talks about Oswald](#)." [↔]
68. Loomis, "Ex-CIA Couple." [↔]
69. [Wilcott HSCA Testimony](#), p. 11. The House Select Committee evaluated Jim Wilcott's testimony by interviewing "several present and former CIA employees selected on the basis of the position each had held during the years 1954-64," including "a broad spectrum of areas" at the Tokyo Station. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the consequences of saying otherwise, the CIA employees all denied having any knowledge of Oswald's having been a CIA agent. Accordingly, "the committee concluded that Wilcott's allegation was not worthy of belief" (*HSCA Report*, March 29, 1979, pp. 199-200). Jim Wilcott's HSCA testimony was then sealed and became inaccessible to the public. It was finally released in 1998 under the JFK Records Act, passed by Congress as a result of the public pressure generated by Oliver Stone's film *JFK*. [↔]
70. [Wilcott HSCA Testimony](#), p. 47. [↔]
71. Hinckle, "[Couple Talks about Oswald](#)." [↔]
72. Jim Wilcott, "The Assassination of John F. Kennedy: A C.I.A. Insider's View," *Stray Magazine* (February 1989), p. 38. [↔]
73. [Wilcott HSCA Testimony](#), p. 35. [↔]
74. Ibid., pp. 35-37. [↔]
75. Author's interview of Jim and Elsie Wilcott's friend and neighbor. Bill Callison, August 31, 1997. [↔]
76. Gracia Fay Ellwood, "A Concord Vigil," *Reformed Journal* (February 2, 1989). [↔]
77. Callison interview. [↔]