



Reflections on Ames

By Joe Wippl

M. Cordell Hart's essay [CIRA Summer 2015 Quarterly] on meeting up with his Career Trainee (CT) classmate, Aldrich 'Rick' Ames, dredged up memories of my participation for one year as a Directorate of Operations (DO) representative on the Ames Damage Assessment Team a bit over twenty years ago. Most of the debriefings of Ames occurred in the Washington D.C. area, but one also took place at the Allenwood Federal penitentiary. The visit to Allenwood had an unintended effect on me. Every semester and to every class at Boston University, I warn my students never, ever go to jail. I suggest to them that they can most easily avoid the humiliation of prison by obeying the law.

I had met Ames once briefly at an overseas posting in 1991. In addition to debriefing Ames, I participated with other team members in debriefing (I would guess) a hundred or so of Ames' friends and colleagues. The reaction of the CIA workforce, specifically the DO, to Ames' treachery was as interesting as the Ames case itself.

The membership of the Damage Assessment Team came from all over the agency and intelligence community. A few Assessment Team members had worked on the Walker and Pollard cases on previous damage assessment cases. They disliked vociferously those two traitors because they felt the two were deranged, and were some sort of low-life mental cases. This was not the case with Ames. While he had an arrogant air about him, he was affable, showed a sense of humor, and answered the Assessment Team's questions on his espionage as accurately as could be expected. Taking the death penalty off the table not only resulted in a detailed itinerary of his espionage over nine years, but also gave the FBI/CIA periodic access to him over the years to clarify other counterintelligence issues to which he may have had access.

Many espionage cases have similarities, as for instance, alcohol abuse or fiscal irresponsibility, but each one has some differences. A difference with Ames is he had many friends in the DO. How they all reacted was fascinating. Many felt a personal betrayal that I believe they may feel deeply to the present day. Because we are the good guys, this cannot happen to us. Well, we are the good guys, but it can happen to us, it has happened to us, and it will happen to us in the future. Paul Redmond's dictum that a penetration is statistical and will happen again clearly is true. Congress, where patriotism and reason do not always work together, is especially vulnerable to the idea that a spy in our midst should not happen and cannot happen simply because we are American and that equals good. Those in the espionage business, and by extension its oversight, must accept betrayal will happen, even with the best counterintelligence possible, because we are engaged in espionage, that is, in secrets for which there is a price someone (the Soviets/Russians) will pay. As embarrassing as it is, there is no effective espionage without the pitfall of betrayal. Ames' reward for betrayal was first the money, and now for the remainder of his existence the abyss will continue looking at him.

At Allenwood, Ames apparently has mastered some languages. This surprised me, as he took lengthy Agency courses in Russian and Italian but never reached anything close to fluency. The reason was he was not interested. Ames tended to do well in things he wanted to do, handling duties in the 1970s for instance, and ignore other requirements when he was disinterested in them. That Ames felt different from the rest of the class was not a surprise. Ames believed he was smarter than anyone else. A reason for his alienation from the DO was the lack of recognition of his talent. As smart as he was, his operational skills were limited.

Finally, I have to comment on his "shame and embarrassment" for what he did against his country. I certainly believe he feels "shame and embarrassment" for getting caught and for spending the rest of his life in prison but definitely not for what he did. Ames does not feel the way normal human beings feel; he feels only for himself. He has and will never have remorse for the agents who were executed or jailed.

As a young man, Ames considered acting as a profession. He decided against the acting profession and instead made his life what it became and obviously still is: an act.