

Ronald Pelton, spy convicted of selling secrets to Soviets, dies at 80

The former National Security Agency analyst produced one of the most damaging intelligence breaches of the Cold War

By Emily Langer September 16, 2022



Ronald W. Pelton, a National Security Agency analyst who was convicted in 1986 of selling secrets to the Soviets in one of the most damaging intelligence breaches of the Cold War, died Sept. 6 at a nursing home in Frederick, Md. He was 80. The cause was cancer, his daughter Paula Strand said.

Mr. Pelton was an Air Force veteran with training in the Russian language when he joined the NSA in 1965. With over 14 years at the intelligence agency, he developed an expertise in Soviet communications and was granted top-secret clearance.

In 1979, under mounting financial strain in his personal life, Mr. Pelton declared bankruptcy. He resigned soon after fearing professional repercussions at the

agency, where employees who are financially insecure might be seen as targets for recruitment by foreign intelligence services.

Mr. Pelton had only a few hundred dollars in his bank account when, in January 1980, he approached officials at the Soviet embassy in Washington, offering them his knowledge of NSA operations in exchange for payments that would ultimately total \$35,000.

Under subsequent questioning by the FBI, Mr. Pelton described his overture to the Soviets as an impulse, one that he had contemplated for no more than a week or two. He grew a beard so that he could enter the embassy without attracting notice. Before exiting the complex, he shaved the beard and changed into clothes resembling those worn by embassy staff, then boarded an embassy shuttle bus before returning downtown to collect his car.

Over the next five years, Mr. Pelton maintained clandestine contact with Soviet agents, using a public telephone at a Northern Virginia pizza joint for prearranged phone calls and traveling overseas to Vienna for debriefings. His “betrayal,” reporters Bob Woodward and Patrick E. Tyler [wrote in The Washington Post](#) during Mr. Pelton’s trial, “represented one of the gravest American intelligence losses to the Soviet Union.”

“They got more out of me than I wanted to give up,” Mr. Pelton was said to have told FBI agents when he was discovered.

Mr. Pelton’s most significant revelation involved an operation code-named Ivy Bells, in which the United States wiretapped underwater Soviet communication cables in the Sea of Okhotsk. In his book “[Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981-1987](#),” Woodward described the technology as among “the most advanced, sophisticated miniaturized waterproof eavesdropping devices in existence.”

The underwater system produced “one of the greatest intelligence hauls of the Cold War,” historian Timothy Naftali [wrote in the New York Times](#) in 1998, until Mr. Pelton “sold the secret to the Russians in 1980.”

Mr. Pelton’s communications with the Soviets were discovered with assistance of a Soviet defector, former KGB officer Vitaly Yurchenko. Mr. Pelton was arrested in November 1985 and charged with three counts of espionage, one count of conspiracy and one count of the unauthorized disclosure of classified communications information.

At his trial the next year, he admitted that he revealed a clandestine U.S. effort to intercept Soviet communications, but he disputed the degree of harm he had caused. His lawyer argued that the FBI had improperly obtained incriminating statements from him.

Mr. Pelton was convicted on all charges except one count of espionage and was sentenced to three life sentences, plus an additional 10 years. He remained in prison for nearly three decades and was released to a halfway house and then home confinement before his sentence expired in 2015, when he was 74.

“Walking into the Soviet Embassy on Jan. 15, 1980 was the biggest mistake of his life,” he had told agents before his arrest. “When you’re broke and desperate and your family is barely surviving, you do crazy things.”

Ronald William Pelton was born in Benton Harbor, Mich., on Nov. 18, 1941. He was raised by his father, a manager in a Whirlpool electronics department and a TV repairman, and his stepmother, who was a homemaker. Mr. Pelton’s daughter said he knew little about his biological mother.

Mr. Pelton served in the Air Force in the early 1960s as a cryptologic technician, with postings including one in Pakistan. He also studied Russian at Indiana University before joining the NSA, which sent him for a period of years to England.

Mr. Pelton attributed his financial problems in part to the theft of building materials for a home he was building in Howard County, Md. When he filed for bankruptcy, [The Post reported](#), he “said he had only \$6.80 in cash and \$8 in a checking account” and “listed his other assets as four old cars, a motorcycle, a \$10 watch, a bowling ball, five pairs of shoes and a razor.”

After leaving the NSA, Mr. Pelton worked in various jobs, selling cars and boats, offering computer consulting, and attempting investment ventures that failed to relieve his financial strain. Even during that time, he found time to volunteer at a soup kitchen in Washington.

Mr. Pelton and his wife, Judith, had separated before he was arrested for espionage. Their marriage ended in divorce. Survivors include three daughters, Paula Strand of Brunswick, Md., Pamela Wright of Warrior, Ala., and Linda Anastasi of Edgewater, Md.; several siblings and half-siblings; and numerous

grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Mr. Pelton's son, Ronald M. Pelton, died in 2021.


[In a tribute](#) to her father after his death, Pamela Wright recalled that he had disappeared from her life when she was 19 and returned after serving his sentence when she was nearly 50. "He was quieter," she wrote. "More mellow. With many regrets."

He had been raised Protestant but converted to Catholicism in prison and used his talents as a musician to play the piano during Mass. He had been drawn to the faith, his daughter Paula relayed [in a eulogy](#), when a priest assured him that he could unburden him in the total privacy of confession.

After he was released from prison, he developed difficulties walking as he aged.

"I went down to the local Walgreens and bought him the perfect cane, for the perfect height, for an imperfect father who was struggling to walk even before he fell," [Paula Strand recalled](#). "For a dad who was desperately holding on to his independence to live in his apartment as long as he could. For a dad who was ashamed to tell anyone who he really was. We kept that secret. I told him, 'You use this when you walk. It will help you.' "

Wikipedia – Ronald Pelton

Ronald Pelton	
	
Born	November 18, 1941 Benton Harbor, Michigan, U.S.
Died	September 6, 2022 (aged 80) Frederick, Maryland,

Ronald William Pelton (November 18, 1941 – September 6, 2022) was a [National Security Agency](#) (NSA) [intelligence analyst](#) who was convicted in 1986

of [spying](#) for and selling secrets to the [Soviet Union](#). One such top secret operation he compromised was [Operation Ivy Bells](#).

Pelton was born in [Benton Harbor, Michigan](#), and graduated in 1960 in the upper 25 percent of his high school class.^[1]

Prior to his employment by the NSA, Pelton served in the [United States Air Force](#). He was taught the [Russian language](#) by the Air Force and served for a time in the early 1960s in [Peshawar](#), Pakistan, as a voice intercept processing specialist. After that 15-month tour, he was transferred to National Security Agency, where he continued as a civilian employee upon discharge.

Pelton filed for [personal bankruptcy](#) in 1979 and resigned from his \$24,500-a-year job (\$91,500 today) with the NSA A Group. From 1980 to 1984 he held several jobs, none within the intelligence community.^[2] In 1984, Pelton faced financial difficulties due to increasing homeowners' taxes and a mounting series of necessary repairs on his private residence.^[3]

Pelton contacted the Soviet Embassy in [Washington, D.C.](#), on January 14, 1980, and arranged for a meeting at the embassy. The [FBI](#) had surveillance on the embassy and had tapped the phone. Therefore, it anticipated the arrival of the caller but was unable to observe him in time to determine his identity. He was debriefed by [KGB](#) officer [Vitaly Yurchenko](#) and disclosed [Operation Ivy Bells](#), an NSA and [United States Navy](#) program to surreptitiously wiretap [undersea communication cables](#) to monitor Soviet military communications and track Soviet submarines.^[4]

On trips to [Vienna](#) in 1980 and 1983, Pelton stayed at the residence of the Soviet Ambassador to Austria and underwent debriefing sessions that sometimes lasted eight hours a day with KGB officer Anatoly Slavnov. Even though Pelton had left the NSA, he may have continued to be valuable to the Soviets as an intelligence consultant, helping them interpret data obtained from other sources. Pelton had no classified documents to offer but relied on his memory to provide information.^[5] He was paid about \$37,000 by the Soviets.^{[2][6]}

In 1985, [Vitaly Yurchenko](#) defected to the United States and, among other things, recalled that he had met with a former NSA analyst in 1980 and described him as red-haired. The FBI scoured NSA personnel files until it had a pool of red-haired male analysts. They were thus able to identify Pelton's voice and began surveillance on him in October 1985. Despite bugging his car and his home, they were unable to find any incriminating evidence against Pelton.

Therefore, the FBI decided to confront Pelton directly, playing the tape of his conversation with the Soviet embassy. Eventually Pelton revealed that he had

provided answers to questions from the Soviets in return for \$35,000. Pelton was tried and convicted of espionage in 1986 and sentenced to three concurrent [life sentences](#) plus ten years. He was also fined \$100.

Pelton was federal inmate number 22914-037, incarcerated at the [Federal Correctional Institution, Allenwood](#), a medium-security facility in [Pennsylvania](#). Because the federal government still had parole at the time, he had the opportunity for release. Pelton was released from prison on November 24, 2015. ^{[5][7][8]}

Pelton died in [Frederick, Maryland](#), on September 6, 2022, at the age of 80.

Wikipedia – Operation Ivy Bells

Operation Ivy Bells was a joint [United States Navy](#), [Central Intelligence Agency](#) (CIA), and [National Security Agency](#) (NSA) mission whose objective was to place [wire taps](#) on [Soviet underwater communication lines](#) during the [Cold War](#).



Background: During the Cold War, the [United States](#) wanted to learn more about Soviet [submarine](#) and missile technology, specifically [ICBM](#) test and [nuclear first strike](#) capability.

In the early 1970s the U.S. government learned of the existence of an undersea communications cable in the [Sea of Okhotsk](#), which connected the major Soviet Pacific Fleet naval base at [Petropavlovsk](#) on the [Kamchatka Peninsula](#) to the Soviet [Pacific Fleet](#)'s mainland headquarters at [Vladivostok](#).^{[2]:172} At the time, the Sea of Okhotsk was claimed by the [Soviet Union](#) as [territorial waters](#), and was

strictly off limits to foreign vessels, and the Soviet Navy had installed a network of sound detection devices along the seabed to detect intruders. The area also saw numerous surface and subsurface naval exercises.

Installation: Despite these obstacles, the potential for an intelligence coup was considered too great to ignore, and in October 1971, the United States sent the purpose-modified submarine [USS Halibut](#) deep into the [Sea of Okhotsk](#). Funds for the project were diverted secretly from the [deep-submergence rescue vehicle](#) (DSRV) program, and the modified submarines were shown with fake DSRV simulators attached to them. These were early [diver lockouts](#). US Navy Divers working from *Halibut* found the cable in 400 feet (120 m) of water and installed a 20-foot (6.1 m) long device, which wrapped around the cable without piercing its casing and recorded all communications made over it. The large recording device was designed to detach if the cable was raised for repair.

The tapping of the Soviet naval cable was so secret that most sailors involved did not have the [security clearance](#) needed to know about it. A cover story was thus created to disguise the actual mission: it was claimed that the spy submarines were sent to the Soviet naval range in the Sea of Okhotsk to recover the Soviet [SS-N-12 Sandbox](#) supersonic anti-ship missile (AShM) debris so that countermeasures could be developed.

Although created as a cover story, this mission was actually carried out with great success: U.S. Navy divers recovered all [\[citation needed\]](#) of the SS-N-12 debris, with the largest debris no larger than six inches (150 mm), and a total of more than two million pieces. The debris was taken to the U.S. and reconstructed at the U.S. Naval Research Laboratory. Based on these pieces, at least one sample was [reverse engineered](#). It was discovered that the SS-N-12 AShM was guided by radar only, and the infrared guidance previously suspected did not exist.

Use: Each month, divers retrieved the recordings and installed a new set of tapes. The recordings were then delivered to the NSA for processing and dissemination to other U.S. intelligence agencies. The first tapes recorded revealed that the Soviets were so sure of the cable's security that the majority of the conversations made over it were unencrypted. The eavesdropping on the traffic between senior Soviet officers provided invaluable information on naval operations at [Petropavlovsk](#), the [Pacific Fleet's](#) primary nuclear submarine base, home to [Yankee](#) and [Delta](#) class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines.

Eventually, more taps were installed on Soviet lines in other parts of the world, with more advanced instruments built by [AT&T's Bell Laboratories](#) that were [radioisotope thermoelectric generator](#)-powered and could store a year's worth of data.^{[2]:189} Other submarines were used for this role,

including [USS Parche \(SSN-683\)](#), [USS Richard B. Russell \(SSN-687\)](#), and [USS Seawolf \(SSN-575\)](#). *Seawolf* was almost lost during one of these missions—she was stranded on the bottom after a storm and almost had to use her self-destruct charges to scuttle the ship with her crew.

Compromise: This operation was compromised by [Ronald Pelton](#), a 44-year-old veteran of the NSA, who was fluent in Russian. At the time, Pelton was \$65,000 (\$214,000 today) in debt, and had filed for [personal bankruptcy](#) just three months before he resigned. With only a few hundred dollars in the bank, Pelton walked into the Soviet embassy in [Washington, D.C.](#) in January 1980, and offered to sell what he knew to the [KGB](#) for money.

No documents were passed from Pelton to the Soviets, as he had an extremely good memory: he reportedly received \$35,000 from the KGB for the intelligence he provided from 1980 to 1983, and for the intelligence on the Operation Ivy Bells, the KGB gave him \$5,000. The Soviets did not immediately take any action on this information; however, in 1981, surveillance satellites showed Soviet warships, including a salvage vessel, anchored over the site of the tap in the Sea of Okhotsk. The [USS Parche \(SSN-683\)](#) was dispatched to recover the device, but the American divers were unable to find it and it was concluded that the Soviets had taken it. In July 1985, [Vitaly Yurchenko](#), a KGB colonel who was Pelton's initial contact in Washington, D.C., defected to the United States and provided the information that eventually led to Pelton's arrest.^[1]

As of 1999, the recording device captured by the Soviets was on public display at the [Great Patriotic War museum](#) in [Moscow](#).

Also see:

[Espionage Act of 1917 - Wikipedia](#)

[Room 641A - Wikipedia](#) Fiber Optic Tapping