



### III. HISTORICAL CONTEXT



## Terror in Athens

### Remembering CIA Station Chief Dick Welch

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The Port of Piraeus, a bustling ferry hub a few miles outside Athens, was unusually still, the ticketing offices shuttered and dark, on the evening of Saturday, June 29, 2002. However, at 10:25 p.m., a bomb blast shattered the quiet of the summer night.<sup>1</sup> A short distance away, the would-be bomber's hand had been blown off by a misconfigured explosive, and incendiary fragments ripped into his chest and face. The police later identified the wounded culprit as Savvas Xiros, a middle-aged member of 17 November, also known as 17N, a terrorist organization that had plagued Greece for nearly three decades. His arrest led to the quick roll-up of the terrorist group.<sup>2</sup> Had Xiros succeeded in clandestinely planting his bomb, 17N might still be operational today.

Leftist groups have terrorized Greece for decades, but none had frustrated the Greek authorities like 17N. Also known as the organossi phantasma, the phantom organization, 17N murdered at least 23 prominent Greeks and foreigners, including several Americans.<sup>3</sup> Among the group's best-known victims is its very

1. "Bomb Hurts Bomber in Piraeus Blast," *Ekathimerini*, July 1, 2002. <https://www.ekathimerini.com/6820/article/ekathimerini/news/bomb-hurts-bomber-in-piraeus-blast>.

2. George Kassimeris, "Last Act in a Violent Drama? The Trial of Greece's Revolutionary Organization 17 November," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 1 (January 25, 2007): 137. <https://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.library.georgetown.edu/doi/full/10.1080/095465590953479?scroll=top&needAccess=true>.

3. National Counterterrorism Center, "Greek Domestic Terrorism," *Counterterrorism Guide*, n.d. [https://www.dni.gov/nctc/groups/greek\\_domestic.html](https://www.dni.gov/nctc/groups/greek_domestic.html).

first: Richard "Dick" Skeffington Welch, the Central Intelligence Agency's Chief of Station in Athens in 1975. Welch's assassins evaded capture for nearly three decades. While Xiros and his cronies were prosecuted for many of their crimes and ultimately imprisoned, they were not charged with the murder of Dick Welch, as Greece's statute of limitations had expired.<sup>4</sup>

The recent 45th anniversary this past December 23 of Welch's 1975 death again reminded his dismayed former CIA colleagues that his assassin and 17N have received far more attention than the American patriot they murdered. They describe Welch as an exceptional public servant who gave 24 years of service to the CIA and made the ultimate sacrifice to his beloved country. They are also angry that another former colleague, CIA officer and turncoat Philip Agee, whom they believe has Welch's blood on his hands, was eulogized and given prominent obituaries in the U.S. and international media. Neither the *New York Times* nor the *Washington Post* has ever published a proper obituary for Welch, and his friends believe it is time for the story behind this fallen hero to be told.



In photos, Dick Welch appears more of a strait-laced Ivy League lecturer than a seasoned spy.



Welch in early 1970s

He was bald, bespectacled, with an intense, intelligent gaze. Welch was the product of a topsy-turvy childhood. Born in 1929 in Hartford, Connecticut<sup>5</sup> to a wealthy stockbroker, he was sent to elementary school in a chauffeured car until the day his father, Patrick, suddenly lost his fortune due to the 1929 stock crash and

the ensuing depression. However, Patrick, landed on his feet; he went on to write novels before joining the Army where he would work his way through the ranks

4. Mark Landler, "Greek Court Convicts 15 in 27-Year-Old Terror Group," *New York Times* (December 9, 2003). <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/09/world/greek-court-convicts-15-in-27-year-old-terror-group.html>.

5. "Remembering CIA's Heroes: Richard S. Welch," Central Intelligence Agency, June 29, 2011. <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/2011-featured-story-archive/heroes-richard-s-welch.html>.

in World War II and Korea, and ultimately become a Pentagon spokesman.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these early disruptions, Welch found a respite in his love of classics and antiquity, which he studied in high school. He secured a spot at Harvard College, and proved to be a gifted linguist. Colleagues would later say that he spoke Greek more elegantly than most Greek nationals. Upon earning his bachelor's degree in 1951, Welch was recruited by the CIA, along with five percent of his graduating class at Harvard.<sup>7</sup> This was not long after the days of the CIA's predecessor, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), popularly known as "Oh So Social" and whose workforce was drawn primarily from the Ivy League and society's upper echelons. The country's top universities were fertile hunting ground for Agency recruiters, and newly-minted Harvard men were a natural choice for the next generation of spies.

The early days of the Cold War would have been a particularly exciting time for a young CIA officer and Welch spent his first tour of duty in Greece, which proved an ideal place to cut his operational teeth. The country had joined NATO in 1952, and under the Truman Doctrine, the U.S. set out to counter the *Kommunistikó Kómma Elládas*, the Greek Communist Party.<sup>8</sup> The U.S. Government had a heavy hand in local politics; few candidates would run for election without first discussing it with the Americans.<sup>9</sup>

Welch took to his work with gusto, and he had little time or patience for other things.<sup>10</sup> Though his career came first, Welch and his wife, Patricia, welcomed three young children—Tim, Nick, and Molly—during their seven years in Athens. Welch's love for Greece grew and he came to consider it his adopted home. But all tours must end, and in 1960, Welch headed back to Washington to spend a year at CIA Headquarters before transferring to Europe.<sup>11</sup> Arriving with his young family in tow, Welch was unaware that one of his new colleagues in Europe would alter the course of his life.

In 1962, Ron Estes, a second-tour case officer, also landed in Europe. He and Welch clicked immediately, developing a deep friendship. Between work and chess games every Sunday, they spent most of their waking hours together. In many ways, the two

6. Interview with Ron and Luba Estes.

7. Written memoir of Ron Estes, via e-mail, August 30, 2019.

8. U.S. Department of State, "The Truman Doctrine, 1947," Office of the Historian, n.d. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/truman-doctrine>.

9. Interview with Ron and Luba Estes.

10. Interview with Tim Welch, November 6, 2019.

11. Ibid.

young case officers were perfect opposites. Welch was erudite, straight-and-narrow, aloof, and formal, and not the sort to work the room at a cocktail party like most case officers. He once confided in Estes that he envied his friend's ease in connecting with all sorts of people. In spite of that, Welch and Estes worked well together, and both had highly successful tours.<sup>12</sup>

Riding high on their success, Welch and Estes made a vow: one day, the two of them would lead Athens Station together.<sup>13</sup> But before they could do that, there still was work to be done, and they would have to part ways. Welch transferred to the Agency's Western Hemisphere Division in 1965. Latin America was a Cold War "hot spot," which meant that CIA officers were not allowed to bring dependents to their postings.<sup>14</sup>

As Welch went off to serve, his wife Patricia moved with his children to the Lake District in north-west England. The separation put a strain on his marriage, which ultimately ended in divorce in 1969. Still, Welch remained close to his children. His oldest son, Tim, recalls that while his father was strict, he was loving, and they were never estranged. Although Tim regretted his father's long absences, he idolized his adventurous spirit.<sup>15</sup>

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Dick Welch passport photo circa 1970

Welch steadily rose through the CIA's ranks. He served as Chief of Station in Guyana, where he earned an Intelligence Star for voluntary acts of courage.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, Estes had continued in the Near East Division. Welch arrived in Athens as Chief of Station in the autumn of 1975, with Estes at his side, first as Chief of Operations and then as Deputy Chief of Station.<sup>17</sup>

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The 1970s were marked by domestic upheaval in Greece, as well as a cooling of U.S.-Greek relations, and Welch would inherit an unstable political situa-

12. Interview with Ron and Luba Estes.

13. Ibid.

14. Interview with Tim Welch.

15. Ibid.

16. Ralph Mariani, via e-mail, November 30, 2019.

17. Ron Estes memoir.

tion. In 1967, a military junta led by Georgios Papadopolous had come to power. The junta worked closely with the U.S., as had other Greek Governments before it, but used harsh and unpopular repressive measures.<sup>18</sup> Public opinion began to shift against the U.S., whom many Greeks viewed as the regime's enabler.<sup>19</sup>

On November 17, 1973, a protest at Athens Polytechnic turned bloody. Students barricaded themselves inside the campus and demanded the ouster of the junta as well as the end of American intervention in Greek affairs. Athens police, supported by the Greek Army, broke through the gates of the university with tanks; four were killed and hundreds injured in street fights.<sup>20</sup>

Just over one week later, Dimitrios Ioannides, head of the Greek Military Police and a classic strong man, overthrew Papadopolous. Not long after Ioannides took power, rumors about his regional ambitions began to circulate. He allegedly wished to overthrow Cypriot President Makarios and replace him with a Greek nationalist. This would violate the 1960 Treaty of Guarantee between Greece, Turkey, and the United Kingdom, which affirmed Cyprus' independence.<sup>21</sup>

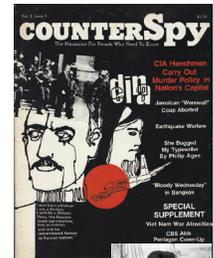
In July 1974, Ioannides instructed Greek officers in the Cypriot National Guard to overthrow Makarios. Predictably, the Turks swooped in just days later, and quashed the coup. The loss stung badly, and Ioannides needed to save face after his embarrassing miscalculation. He began promoting a self-serving narrative within the Greek military: that the U.S. had encouraged the coup, then hung him out to dry when the Turks invaded. Anti-Americanism took root in the Greek intelligence services and was amplified in the media, including in the coverage of the anti-U.S. protests at Athens Polytechnic. Greek citizens took their discontent to the streets, burning American cars and ransacking the first floor of the U.S. Embassy.<sup>22</sup>

Ioannides' junta collapsed on July 23—three days after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus—and Greece

transitioned to a democracy in the latter half of 1974. When Welch arrived, the relationship between the U.S. and Greece's new democratic government was rocky and continued to deteriorate. Greek authorities had also turned hostile. This was a stark contrast from the Athens that Welch had known during his previous tour of duty.<sup>23</sup>

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Meanwhile, back home in the U.S., the CIA was facing unprecedented scrutiny as well. President Ford's Rockefeller Commission issued a report in June 1975, before Welch's arrival in Greece, claiming that the CIA had violated the rights of U.S. citizens by collecting intelligence on domestic dissidents, sparking an anti-Agency atmosphere on Capitol Hill and beyond.<sup>24</sup> During this same period, former CIA officer Philip Agee volunteered his services to Cuba and published the names of hundreds of former colleagues, including Welch, in *CounterSpy*, a virulently anti-U.S. publication that Agee had co-founded. Agee had known of Welch as they were both case officers in Latin America during the same period.



Philip Agee (1977)

During the weeks between the end of his tour in Latin America and his departure for Athens, Welch visited with his son, Tim, who was in his early twenties and had enlisted in the Marines after college. Welch attended Tim's commissioning from Quantico in May 1975 and pinned the bars on his son.



Welch back in Washington in the early 1970s

At the same ceremony, the Harvard-educated Welch also pinned the bars on the class valedictorian, a Yale graduate, and Welch observed dryly that it was the best thing he'd ever done for a Yalie. Father and son then went together to New York City, attending a series of dinner parties where Tim saw his father in action, socializing and sparring

18. David Binder, "U.S. Said to Order CIA to Curtail Role in Greece," *New York Times* (August 2, 1974). <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/08/02/archives/us-said-to-order-cia-to-curtail-role-in-greece-u-s-reported-to.html>.

19. Louis Klarevas, "Were the Eagle and the Phoenix Birds of a Feather? The United States and the Greek Coup of 1967," London School of Economics Hellenic Observatory Discussion Paper No. 15 (February 2004), pages 1-2 and 26. <http://www.lse.ac.uk/Hellenic-Observatory/Assets/Documents/Publications/Past-Discussion-Papers/DiscussionPaper15.pdf>.

20. "Troops in Athens Move on Campus to Quell Protest," *New York Times*, November 17, 1973. <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/11/17/archives/troops-in-athens-move-on-campus-to-quell-protest-use-tank-to.html>.

21. Interview with Ron and Luba Estes.

22. Interview with Ron and Luba Estes.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Interview with Tim Welch.

intellectually with the country's best and brightest. He was "the smartest guy on the planet," Tim thought.<sup>25</sup>

Welch arrived in Athens with his new wife, Kika, whom he had met while serving in Latin America, and his father, Patrick. It was customary for U.S. diplomats to reside in the tony Athens neighborhood of Paleo Psychiko, and among local residents, it was common knowledge that U.S. diplomats lived in particular villas. While this may alarm readers today, it had never posed a problem before, as Greece had been an exceptionally safe and friendly posting for American expatriates.<sup>26</sup>

With the political tides shifting and the security climate for Americans becoming less benign, Welch understood that it would be best to select a new residence. Welch and Kika toured many properties, but none was as grand as the villas in Paleo Psychiko. Kika, as the Chief of Station's wife, would be expected to entertain, and she objected to downsizing. Welch, wanting to humor his new wife, discussed the matter with Estes. After talking it over, the Chief and his Deputy agreed that political assassinations were simply not a part of Greek culture, and that it would be safe to occupy a residence where U.S. diplomats had lived in the past. Welch also had a welcome visit

from his other children, Molly and Nick. It was a special time for Molly and Nick, during which they spent a great deal of time with their father and developed even more appreciation for him and his dedication to his country. During this time, Molly also became very close to Estes' fiancée Luba and they continued to



Dick, with daughter Molly, in Greece 1975

correspond for years. The beginning of Welch's tour passed uneventfully, and he thoroughly enjoyed being back in Athens.<sup>27</sup>

Autumn's arrival, however, heralded a more ominous political climate. A local English-language newspaper published the names, home addresses, and phone numbers of several Athens-based U.S. diplomats, as well as Welch and Estes, exposing them as American



L to R: Ron Estes and Dick Welch circa September 1975, Glyfada Beach, Athens. [Photo: Luba Estes]

spies. Estes recalled that he and Welch began receiving threatening calls each night following the exposé.

Estes also remains certain that the KYP, Greece's civilian intelligence agency, had leaked the names. While the calls were a disturbing new feature of life in Athens, Welch, Estes, and the other Station officers were not intimidated. Life went on. Welch continued to immerse himself in his work and was rewarded with a promotion to GS-17, the equivalent of Major General.<sup>28</sup>

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## Tuesday December 23, 1975 The day before Christmas Eve

The evening began as had so many others for Dick and Kika, who as prominent members of Athens' diplomatic community had frequent social obligations. This night they were headed out to a reception at the American Ambassador's residence. When they returned home after the function and approached the front gate, the Welch residence was quiet, and nothing appeared out of the ordinary. They had given their cook the night off and Welch's father Patrick was asleep upstairs.<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile, Estes' soon-to-be wife, Luba, had invited him to dine at her apartment, about two blocks from Welch's house. They had just finished their meal when Welch's driver, Vangeli, burst into the apartment in a panic, clamoring for Estes. Vangeli and Estes had a hurried exchange in Greek, and Estes grabbed his blazer and flew out the door. Luba, who spoke no Greek, begged Vangeli to tell her what had happened. All he could muster was "Mr. Welch, gun! Mr. Welch, gun!"<sup>30</sup>

Estes and Vangeli bolted out the door and headed over to Welch's house. Estes was unsure of what he would find. He knew from Vangeli that his friend had been shot, but as he raced up the street and toward the

25. Ibid.

26. Interview with Ron and Luba Estes.

27. Letter from Luba Estes to Molly Welch Ball (sent via e-mail), September 17, 2003.

28. Ron Estes memoir.

29. Interview with Ron and Luba Estes.

30. Letter from Luba Estes to Molly Welch Ball.

gate, he spotted Dick's lifeless body on the ground. Estes had been a Marine in Korea and had witnessed enough death to know what it looked like. Welch had been hit in the chest and the buttocks; he and the pavement beneath him were covered in blood. Kika, in shock, was leaning over him.<sup>31</sup> Steam rose steadily from Welch's face, indicating to Estes that his friend was gone.<sup>32</sup>

A policeman who heard Vangeli's shouts for help, arrived minutes later and called an ambulance. It never came. Estes and Vangeli laid Welch's body in the backseat of Welch's own car, and the policeman, in his cruiser, led them to the hospital with sirens blaring. Estes asked Kika to ride in the police car. If Estes had been wrong and Welch was alive, he wanted to spare Kika the agony of watching her husband suffer as he died.<sup>33</sup>

There was no time for sentimentality. Estes questioned Vangeli while they drove, fearing that details would be forgotten if he waited. Vangeli explained that he had followed his usual routine: instead of driving through the outer gates of the residence, Vangeli would stop in front of the gates and help Kika out of the passenger side seat while Welch got out on the driver's side. Vangeli would then open the gates and the Welches would walk through. Vangeli would then pull the car around to the garage.<sup>34</sup>

But that night, an unknown car drove up behind the trio as they alighted from Welch's car, boxing them in. Three men got out, one to cover each passenger. One of the men, who had exited from the passenger side of the unknown vehicle, shouted in Greek, "put your hands up!" then shot Welch three times with a .45 caliber pistol. One shot ripped through Welch's coat, but the other two shots found their mark. The first ruptured Welch's aorta, killing him instantly, and the other pierced his buttocks. The assailants scrambled back into their car and fled. Vangeli, knowing there would be no one awake to let him into the house, decided to run for help. He found Estes after spotting his car in front of Luba's house, which was directly across from the nearby police station.<sup>35</sup>

Estes thought quickly about what he had just heard. Whoever the assassins were, they had known the details of Welch's routine, down to which side of the car he sat on and at what point he would exit the car. They knew he was out for the night and had lain

in wait for his return. Estes was convinced that they had been surveilling his colleague.<sup>36</sup>

Once at the hospital, Welch was examined and pronounced dead. Journalists, who routinely monitored police radio networks, were already waiting at the hospital, having heard that an American diplomat had died, but not knowing who or how. When they learned that it was Welch and that he had, in fact, been assassinated, the lobby quickly filled with more journalists clamoring for details of this sensational story. Estes could not stay, however. He had work to do and started by ordering all Station officers to report to work immediately. He then steeled himself to deliver the terrible news.<sup>37</sup>

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Once in the Station, Estes gathered the staff around him and told them what had happened. Two officers were in tears, and one officer headed toward the back room where weapons were stored and announced, "I'm going to kill the KGB Rezident." Seeing this, Estes shouted, "Stop him!" Several officers stepped in and after a brief scuffle had subdued the officer. Having restored order, Estes then sat down and dictated for hours to his secretary, Sheryl, cable after cable to Washington. "She typed 120 words a minute, and never made a mistake," Estes recalls. "Every time I walked into her office, next to mine, she was hammering away on the keyboard, tears running down her cheeks." The night was a blur of incoming cables and incessantly ringing phones. President Ford had to be notified, Headquarters wanted information, and the Greek security services needed depositions. Before the sun rose, the case officers were already out on the streets meeting sources and seeking out leads.<sup>38</sup>

After a sleepless night, Estes then had to face the most difficult task of all: informing Welch's father of the loss of his beloved son. It was 7:00 am and before heading to the Welch residence, he called Luba and asked her to rouse Patrick, who had slumbered through the chaos, and put him on a couch in the sunroom and cover him with a blanket. When Estes arrived, he sat down next to him.

"Patrick, we had a shooting last night."

"Was Dick involved?" Patrick asked.

"Yes."

"Is he dead?"

"Yes, he is."

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31. Letter from Luba Estes to Molly Welch Ball.

32. Ron Estes memoir.

33. Interview with Ron and Luba Estes.

34. Ibid.

35. Ron Estes memoir.

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36. Interview with Ron and Luba Estes.

37. Ron Estes memoir.

38. Ron Estes memoir.

Patrick's stoicism began to crack, his eyes tearing. Once he had taken in the news, he had one question for Estes:

"Ron, can you have Dick buried in Arlington?" This would have been impossible under normal circumstances, as Welch had never served in the military. Patrick, however, was a veteran and hoped his final resting place would be close to his son, when his time came.

"Don't know, but I'll sure as hell find out," Estes promised without hesitation.

Patrick then summoned the housekeeper to bring two double scotches on the rocks, despite the early hour. He and Patrick drank in silence. Estes was due at a police deposition at 9:00 am and reflecting on the situation many years later, he observed, "I needed that drink the way I needed double pneumonia. But it was probably the most important drink I had in my life."<sup>39</sup>

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Once back at the office, Estes cabled Washington about an Arlington burial for Welch. The reply came back from CIA Director Bill Colby: President Ford had approved the request immediately.

At the time of his father's murder, Tim Welch had been on his way to Athens for the holidays. Now a Marine second lieutenant, Tim had been traveling via standby military transport, hopping on any space available flight that was traveling in the general direction of Athens. Though he did not make it to Greece in time to see his father alive, he would accompany him to his final resting place.

In the early morning hours of December 30, a military plane arrived at the U.S. airbase in Athens to bring Welch's body to Arlington Cemetery. A somber group bid him farewell. Patrick arrived in a wheelchair, upright and dignified, and Tim stood at Patrick's side in his Marine "Winter Alpha" green uniform. An honor guard carried the casket and Tim boarded behind them, holding a salute.<sup>40</sup>

Seeing the casket, Estes finally felt the weight of his loss. For days, he had been a pillar of strength, not dwelling on his own grief but leading and shoring up his Station colleagues, giving depositions, writing cable after cable, sharing the heartbreaking news. Unable to sleep since the shooting, the grief and exhaustion became unbearable, and the mournful scene at the airport was too much for him. He collapsed with a groan. The chief of Greek intelligence

39. Ibid.

40. Ron Estes memoir.

broke his fall, and Estes quickly regained his composure and apologized.<sup>41</sup>

Welch's daughter Molly, his first wife, Patricia, and CIA Director William Colby met the plane and entourage upon arrival in the U.S.<sup>42</sup> The level of ceremony for the funeral and burial at Arlington Cemetery was unprecedented for a serving CIA officer. In addition to family and colleagues, President Ford and then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger also attended the funeral for Welch, the highest-ranking CIA officer to be killed in the line of duty at the time of his death.<sup>43</sup>



Estes was not the only one for whom the load became too much to bear. Patrick died four months later, in April 1976, and was laid to rest in Arlington, one row behind his son.<sup>44</sup>

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In the aftermath of the shooting, there was much confusion and speculation about who was responsible. Was it one of Greece's many radical leftist terror cells? Or was it something more sinister such as a Soviet provocation, perhaps? Conspiracy theories ran rampant and several Greek newspapers published stories claiming that Welch was a double agent and that the CIA had executed one of its own.

The Greek authorities claimed to follow up on the few leads. The getaway car, a stolen vehicle, had been ditched a few blocks from the scene, and the police lifted the driver's fingerprints from the steering wheel.<sup>45</sup> However, the Greek investigations led nowhere.

Impatient for answers, the Station did its own investigating. As it happened, a former fighter for

41. Letter from Luba Estes to Molly Welch Ball.

42. Eugene L. Meyer, "Slain CIA Agent Receives Unusual Honor," *Washington Post*, December 31, 1975.

43. Estes memoir.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

EOKA, the Greek Cypriot nationalist militia, had been in Athens with a .45 on the night of the assassination, and had returned to Cyprus the next morning. Estes had known another EOKA fighter and they remained close. Perhaps, Estes thought, his old friend could locate the suspect. Estes dispatched one of his case officers to meet with the EOKA fighter, who proved helpful. In a dangerous operation, the case officer made contact with the suspect, who protested his innocence and agreed to a polygraph to prove it. He passed. The Station ultimately concluded that his ill-timed presence in Athens was a mere coincidence.<sup>46</sup>

The operation that took Welch's life was exceptionally well-planned and executed. When the little known group 17N claimed responsibility, few took



the claim seriously. It was not until Christmas Eve 1976, almost a year to the day after Welch's assassination, that 17N would be widely accepted as

the responsible party. This was largely due to a communiqué published by the left-wing Paris newspaper *Libération*, in which 17N gave a detailed account of the planning and execution of the Welch operation. The communiqué explained that the group's name was a reference to the violent uprising at Athens Polytechnic that took place on November 17, 1973 and that they professed a radically leftist and anti-American ideology. Atypical of most terrorist groups, they had carried out a complex attack on a high-profile target without first conducting rudimentary operations and slowly escalating. Observers wondered how they had become so proficient so fast?

In a cruel twist, a case officer had mentioned the group to Estes months before Welch's murder. But with no evidence of their capacity to carry out any sort of attack, Estes chose not to pursue the lead. Many radical elements in Greece had demonstrated a taste and talent for violence, and it was necessary to prioritize the Station's resources.<sup>47</sup> 17N, however, proved to be more lethal than Estes could have imagined. After Welch, 17N went on to murder 22 others, including three Americans: Navy Captain George Tsantes, Navy Captain William Nordeen, and Air Force Sergeant Ronald Stewart.<sup>48</sup>

The group always took credit for their operations, and decades passed without a significant break in the case. The explosion on the Piraeus dock in 2002 was that lucky break. After Xiros' arrest, he quickly divulged his comrades' identities. Fifteen members of 17N were put on trial and convicted in 2003, with Welch's children in attendance. The 20-year statute of limitations had expired, however, and no one was charged with Welch's murder.

Welch's colleagues do take some solace from the fact that Alexandros Giatopoulos, 17N's ringleader and the man who most likely pulled the trigger, is currently serving 17 life sentences for orchestrating other attacks. Other members, including 17N hitman Xiros and Dimitris Koufodinas, are serving multiple life sentences as well. However, the terrorists are now eligible to seek early release under certain provisions, which allow offenders with health problems to serve out their sentences under house arrest.<sup>49</sup> Xiros has applied unsuccessfully, but the possibility remains that he or his comrades could one day be released.

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Several questions remain. First, could Welch's death have been prevented if he had lived in a different residence, rather than the villa where U.S. diplomats had resided for decades? This is a fair question; living in a known diplomatic residence is inherently insecure. However, if it is true that Greek intelligence authorities leaked his name and address, it likely would not have mattered. KYP would have known where Welch lived even if he had a different residence, and they could have exposed that address just as easily.

Could forgoing a chauffeur have made a difference? Certainly, Welch would have had more control over his vehicle and actions if he had been driving. Some also consider it more difficult as a passenger to spot surveillance, as the rearview and side mirrors are harder to see from the back seat. However, some would say the opposite: a passenger with a driver has twice the number of eyes to spot anything suspicious. It is likely, however, that 17N operatives surveilled Welch's car many times, knew his pattern, and how he and his wife typically exited the vehicle just outside the front gate of their villa. Hostile surveillance would also have been difficult to discern. It was a wealthy neighborhood and there were often cars parked on the street with men in them. The Chinese Ambassador

46. Interview with Ron and Luba Estes.

47. *Ibid.*

48. Yonah Alexander and Dennis A. Pluchinsky, *Europe's Red Terrorists: The Fighting Communist Organizations* (New York: Frank Cass, 1992), pages 91-93.

49. Ioanna Mandrou, "Terrorists Can Seek Early Release Under Contentious New Penal Code," *Kathimerini*, July 2, 2019. <https://www.kathimerini.com/242091/article/ekathimerini/news/terrorists-can-seek-early-release-under-contentious-new-penal-code>.

lived on Welch's street and the Bulgarian Embassy was two doors away, and Estes and Welch both thought it normal that the Greek Security Police and KYP surveillance cars would frequent the neighborhood.

Why were no suspects arrested after the attack? It is difficult for Welch's colleagues to believe that the Greek authorities were unable to identify any suspects. Relations between the two countries had soured even before this incident, but grew worse. Some Greek reticence about sharing information with the CIA may have also occurred because the criminal investigation was being handled by the FBI rather than the CIA.

The question of possible Greek obstruction is more complex. In Greece, all government positions, down to the level of the local police, were political to some degree. It was common practice for senior police officers to resign if their party was voted out of power, and they generally took their case files with them, making it difficult for their successors to continue with investigations. On the other hand, Estes and others believe it likely that someone affiliated with Greek intelligence had leaked Station officers' names and addresses to the press. While there is no hard evidence of obstruction, there is considerable suspicion that the Greeks were less than rigorous in pursuing this investigation.<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps the most compelling question is whether 17N received help in designing and carrying out this attack? They were a relatively new terrorist organization with little prior experience or operational track record. How could they so quickly have learned to plan, execute, and get away with such a high-profile attack?

Some have suggested that the East German Stasi trained 17N, but no evidence of this has been uncovered. Moreover, espionage during the Cold War had certain norms, one of which was that an adversary's intelligence officers were untouchable. There was an unspoken rule that attacks of this sort were to be avoided, and the killing of a CIA Station Chief by one of our Cold War adversaries would have been provocative in the extreme. Certainly, any evidence of collusion, if it ever existed, would also have likely been destroyed.

There is also the matter of Philip Agee's role in exposing Welch's name and CIA affiliation, and the degree to which Agee's activities contributed to Welch's death remains an open question. Agee's defenders would claim that Welch's identity had already been published elsewhere in Europe before it appeared in Agee's magazine *CounterSpy*. KGB defector Oleg Kalugin has also written that Agee was working

at the behest of the Cubans and later the Soviets as well. Per Kalugin, Agee initially volunteered his services to the KGB in Mexico City, but was rejected by the Soviets as a provocation. In the early 1970s, Agee then approached the Cubans whose Dirección General de Inteligencia (DGI) recognized his value and enlisted his services as an agent.<sup>51</sup> It seems likely that Agee's exposures of CIA officers would have been at the behest of the Cubans, and possibly the Soviets as well. The Stasi was also involved with Cuban intelligence, and they also would likely have encouraged Agee's publication of CIA names, including that of Welch.

While finding definitive answers to these questions is unlikely, Welch's friends and colleagues care most about preserving and honoring his memory. In late 2003, Molly and Patrick Welch and a group of current and former U.S. Embassy officers, including then Ambassador Thomas Miller, held a tree-planting ceremony at Welch's former residence in the Psychiko district of Athens.

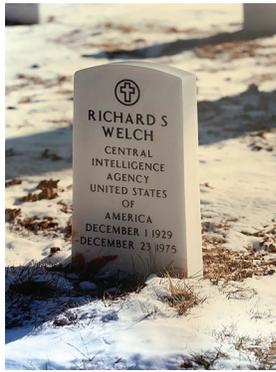


A tree planting ceremony at the Psychiko residence during the 2003 trials. L to R: [unidentified], Molly Welch Ball, Doug Smith, [unidentified], [unidentified], Eric Pounds COS in back with blue shirt, [unidentified], Amb. Tom Miller, Tim Welch, and Nick Welch.

Again, in January 2019, a small group of Athens Embassy officers also placed flowers and said a prayer together at the front gate of Welch's Athens residence, near the site of his murder. To this day, the U.S. Embassy in Athens closely follows court motions involving convicted 17N members and lobbies the Greek Government to prevent their release. Estes and others hope they will never see the light of day. While very few serving CIA officers ever knew Welch, they are nonetheless moved by his sacrifice and are fighting to keep his memory alive. These officers are comforted in

51. Oleg Kalugin, *The First Directorate: My 32 Years in Intelligence and Espionage Against the West* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994), pages 85 and 192.

50. Interview with Mark Sparkman, October 16, 2019.



the knowledge that he died an honorable death, doing what he loved in a place that he loved, rendering a service to his country that can never be repaid.

Extra: AP News video archive 7 January 1976: “CIA Agent Welch Funeral” at <https://youtu.be/CkFdQkU1xek>.

AP News video archive of 21 July 2015: “Three members of November 17 appear in court” at: <https://youtu.be/LZwZrk6yFSY>.

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