

History: US Spy Activities in Western and Northern China

The First CIA Agent Killed in Operation

By [Shane Quinn](#)

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Region: [Asia](#), [USA](#)

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*The first CIA agent killed in action was the 37-year-old **Douglas S. Mackiernan**, a former code-breaker for the United States Army Air Forces, who during World War II was promoted to Major, serving as an Air Force meteorologist in the city of Nanjing, eastern China. Mackiernan lost his life during late April 1950 on the Tibetan frontier, within the internationally recognised boundaries of China, when he was mistakenly shot dead by border guards from Tibet.*

Mackiernan's death was a forerunner to the difficulties that Washington and the CIA would experience against their Chinese adversary over the elapsing 70 years, following Beijing's 1949 communist revolution - with China's "loss" comprising the most severe blow to strike US power in the post-1945 age.

News of Mackiernan's killing took [about a month](#) to reach the American authorities present in the capital of India, New Delhi, which had been his ultimate destination (1). It was an unfortunate end for Mackiernan who, over the preceding seven months, had traversed over some of the most challenging, remote and idyllic landscapes on earth; so as to shake off Beijing's closely pursuing forces.



From September 1949, Mackiernan had turned southwards - from where he was based in Xinjiang, north-western China - towards the nearby and little known Taklamakan Desert, a picturesque but inhospitable terrain almost the size of Germany, which is ringed by rugged mountains to the south and west, while the Gobi Desert stretches out in vast expanses to the east.

The name “Taklamakan” translates roughly in English to, “Once you get in, you’ll never get out”. Local Uyghur people with a knowledge of the Taklamakan Desert are loathed to cross it, such is its forbidding reputation. Temperatures there can range from boiling hot to freezing cold in minutes, while it contains almost no water.

Mackiernan nonetheless forged ahead, and on his trek he had for company another American, Frank Bessac, a 27-year-old CIA contractor who, in later life, can be seen in photographs with the Dalai Lama in New York. Bessac, also an anthropologist, had just fled westwards from northern China to elude communist forces, and he was formerly an agent for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the CIA’s predecessor organisation.

Mackiernan and Bessac were further assisted in their journey by three anti-communist White Russians. The group set out to conquer the Taklamakan by horseback, and thereafter with the aid of that famous desert specialist, the camel.

Image on the left (below) from intotibet.info



Mao Zedong’s government was aware of Mackiernan’s activities in north-western China, and by January 1950 he was publicly classified by the Chinese media as an American spy.

Staying in touch with his paymasters in Washington, Mackiernan recorded the group’s progress in this desert region, along with the location of notable landmarks, radioing his findings to the American capital. Right up to today, the US Department of State and CIA have refused to release the radio transcripts of Mackiernan’s observations.

After weeks of hardship, and with winter closing in, on 18 November 1949 Mackiernan’s group had finally crossed 1,000 miles of terrain, much of it including the Taklamakan. They were now facing into the foothills of the Kunlun Mountains, one of the longest chain of peaks in Asia, and which forms the northern edge of the Tibetan Plateau.

The Kunlun Mountains, whose highest peak Kongur Tagh is over 7,500 metres tall, are located about 500 miles northwards of the Himalayas. Following an 18-day trek in steady ascent of the Kunlun Mountains – in which Mackiernan’s party travelled another almost 300 miles – they were forced to abandon their ambitions to cross these peaks by 1949, and instead were compelled to settle down for the winter on the north-eastern fringe of the Tibetan Plateau, in Timurlik, Qinghai.

It was here that Mackiernan’s group made the acquaintance of nomadic Kazakhs, including [their chief Hussein Taiji](#), who provided adequate accommodation for them (2). Mackiernan et al recommenced their journey southwards in late March 1950, again choosing a route in which it is likely that no Westerner had ever taken before.

They successfully crossed the Kunlun Mountains, before reaching the Changtang area of the Tibetan Plateau – a stretch of land located in northern and western Tibet with a minimum altitude of 4,300 metres above sea level, but rising as high as 5,800 metres up. The Changtang is impossible to cross in winter, but just about manageable in more favourable seasons.

Mackiernan’s party reached their first Tibetan outpost on 29 April 1950. It was here that

disaster struck the group as Mackiernan and two White Russian companions were shot dead by Tibetan border guards, who mistook them for bandits or raiding communists.



The Dalai Lama, whose links to the CIA were first forged around this time, had issued a safe conduct for Mackiernan and company; but this was delayed by the Harry Truman administration, and the Tibetan border police were therefore unaware of the Americans' arrival.

Bessac was unharmed, as minutes before he had been sent by Mackiernan to talk to Tibetans camped close by. With no choice before them, Bessac and one remaining White Russian, Vasili Zvansov, continued their mammoth journey before finally reaching the Tibetan capital Lhasa, in the early summer of 1950, a fortnight before the start of the Korean War in June of that year.

Meanwhile, Mackiernan's name quickly entered obscurity, and his position as an American spy was not recognised by the CIA until 56 years after his death, in 2006 (3). Yet the New York Times had reported on 29 July 1950 that a US State Department "vice consul" named Douglas Mackiernan was recently killed "on his way out of Communist China" (4).

The New York Times, as is their habit, omitted the vital details by failing to either discover or mention that Mackiernan's supposed role, as a State Department official, was a ruse designed to obscure his employment as a CIA operative - through which he was based in Urumqi, northern Xinjiang. Mackiernan's true assignment was that of being America's "first atomic spy", a reality not disclosed to the public until over half a century later, in 2002.

The CIA themselves did not acknowledge, until autumn 2008, Mackiernan's mission in tracking Soviet atomic activity, when CIA director Michael Hayden admitted as such in a speech during a visit to Los Angeles, California (5).

Mackiernan had been dispatched to north-western China in order to detect the USSR's first atomic bomb test, which was formulated in response to the American A-bomb attacks on Japan four years previously, perhaps the defining moment in human history.

Xinjiang, the province where Mackiernan was headquartered, shares a direct border with Kazakhstan to the west. The Soviets erected their atomic testing site in Semipalatinsk, north-eastern Kazakhstan, about 600 miles from where Mackiernan was situated in Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital.

On 29 August 1949, Mackiernan gathered unmistakable evidence of the Russians' successful atomic bomb blast. Due to intelligence amassed in his covert missions, Mackiernan was actually anticipating Stalin's development of atomic weapons for some time. The Kremlin

was entirely unaware that their nuclear program was being tracked by an American secret agent.

There is a distinct possibility that the Truman administration was informed by Mackiernan of the likelihood of Soviet nuclear testing [months prior](#) to August 1949 (6). Indeed, it seems somewhat unlikely that the US government was taken by complete surprise with Russian acquisition of atomic bombs at this time, and the White House might well have been briefed of the probability in the earlier part of 1949.

Certainly by August of this year, Mackiernan contacted Washington and informed them that [he was monitoring](#) Moscow's atomic project (7). He consisted of the only foreign agent to have operated in unearthing Soviet nuclear activities. Well into this century, almost all of Mackiernan's messages to the US Department of State have remained classified or disappeared altogether.

It may not be surprising that Mackiernan's operations have been so closely guarded by Washington, such was the high importance and covert nature of it. One CIA employee said earlier this century that there are still "considerable national security interests" attached to Mackiernan's discoveries.

From 1945 to 1949 the Americans developed sophisticated, state-of-the-art equipment, in which the sole purpose was to gauge the status of Stalin's atomic project. It was this technology which enabled Mackiernan to conclusively detect the Kremlin's nuclear explosion near the city of Semipalatinsk, Kazakhstan.

For Mackiernan, his discovery of the Soviet atomic test – also confirmed over ensuing days by America's Air Force – could not come quickly enough. By the following month, September 1949, most of Xinjiang was under communist control and he made haste in his departure.

Mackiernan's presence as a foreign agent in Xinjiang was a flagrant violation of Chinese sovereignty, and an early example of the interference of US special services within China.

The activities of American spies on Chinese soil can be traced to as early as the latter half of 1942, when the CIA's precursor – the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) – sent two of its agents to Tibet. The OSS operatives' names were Brooke Dolan and Ilya Tolstoy, aged 34 and 39 respectively, and as they arrived into the Tibetan capital Lhasa, they were treated as honoured guests accompanied by the performance of a brass band in the streets.

Ilya Tolstoy, both a US Army colonel and an American spy, was the grandson of Russian writer Leo Tolstoy, considered one of the greatest novelists of all time. Tolstoy, who emigrated to America from Russia in 1924, was known as president Franklin D. Roosevelt's "envoy in Tibet".

On the morning of 20 December 1942, Tolstoy and Dolan were invited to meet the current Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, who was then seven years old (he is today 84). It was the Dalai Lama's first encounter with American agents, and nor was it to be his last.

There were also CIA agents undertaking secret missions in other Chinese provinces, such as Inner Mongolia, a large region of northern China. The above-mentioned Frank Bessac, by 1947 a CIA operative, was from the years 1948 to 1949 working under the auspices of another CIA officer, Raymond Meitz, both of whom were active in Inner Mongolia.

By the summer of 1949, Meitz had already taught radio communication to seven young Mongols, who effectively became CIA-trained agents operating within official Chinese territory. Following China's revolution a few weeks later, these Mongol agents were earmarked to conduct radio contact with the Americans, and provide them with intelligence information on communist activity inside Inner Mongolia.

Much of this is confirmed by Sechin Jagchid, a Mongol native that later moved to the US and who had [first-hand knowledge](#) of American spy operations regarding Inner Mongolia (8). Until 1949, Jagchid was one of the closest associates of the anti-communist Mongol Prince De, a descendant of despotic ruler Genghis Khan. Prince De was being groomed by the Americans, and in communication with CIA agents like Meitz operating in Inner Mongolia.

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Shane Quinn obtained an honors journalism degree. He is interested in writing primarily on foreign affairs, having been inspired by authors like Noam Chomsky. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

Notes

1 Thomas Laird, Into Tibet, The CIA's First Atomic Spy and His Secret Expedition to Lhasa (Grove Press; First Trade Paper edition, 13 Mar. 2003) p. 239

2 Laird, Into Tibet, The CIA's First Atomic Spy and His Secret Expedition to Lhasa, p. 148

3 Historical Document, "Remembering CIA's heroes: Douglas S. Mackiernan", 29 April 2010, <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/2010-featured-story-archive/douglas-s.-mackiernan.html>

4 "U.S. Consul, fleeing China, Slain by Tibetan on Watch for Bandits; SLAIN IN TIBET", New York Times, 30 July 1950, <https://www.nytimes.com/1950/07/30/archives/us-consul-fleeing-china-slain-by-tibetan-on-watch-for-bandits-slain.html>

5 Historical Document, "Director's Remarks at the Los Angeles World Affairs Council", 16 September 2008, <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/speeches-testimony/speeches-testimony-archive-2008/directors-remarks-at-lawac.html>

6 Laird, Into Tibet, The CIA's First Atomic Spy and His Secret Expedition to Lhasa, p. 89.

7 Bertil Lintner, Great Game East: India, China and the Struggle for Asia's Most Volatile Frontier (Yale University Press, 28 May 2015) p. 33

8 David H. Price, Cold War Anthropology: The CIA, the Pentagon, and the Growth of Dual Use Anthropology (Duke University Press, 28 Mar. 2016)

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