

The Vision Thing

Ten years and \$20 million later, the Pentagon discovers that psychics are unreliable spies

By DOUGLAS WALLER WASHINGTON

IF IT'S NOT ALREADY A RULE OF THUMB for judging secret Pentagon projects, maybe it should be: If the name is astral, the premise is spacy. First Star Wars. Now Star Gate. That is the real code name (not the postscandal tabloid headline) of a secret program that spent \$20 million in the past 10 years to employ psychics in pursuit of the unknown.

What the Pentagon's ultra-secret Defense Intelligence Agency hoped it might get from the paranormal was a real advantage in the world of military intelligence. What it often got instead were tidbits of the kind offered to them by one psychic in the 1981 kidnapping of an American general, James Dozier, in Italy. Dozier, the psychic told his Pentagon employers, was being held in a stone house with a red roof.

The fact that this description applies to a good portion of the houses in Italy did not prevent the Pentagon from regularly consulting crystal-ball gazers. Until last week, that is, when the CIA (which spent \$750,000 on psychic research from 1972 to 1977) determined that the program was a waste of money and moved to shut it down. Congress had ordered the agency to take over Star Gate last year and conduct a study of its effectiveness. "There's no documented evidence it had any value to the intelligence community," says David Goslin, of the American Institute for Research, which the CIA hired to do the study. So the three full-time psychics still operating on a \$500,000-a-year budget out of Fort Meade, Maryland, will soon close up shop.

At least a few powerful Senators on the Appropriations Committee will miss them. Senators Daniel Inouye and Robert Byrd, intrigued by stories of psychic successes, pushed hard during many years to keep Star Gate going. Tales of the effectiveness of psychics as spies have long been circulating. DIA credited psychics with creating accurate pictures of Soviet submarine construction hidden from

U.S. spy satellites, and a 1993 Pentagon report said psychics had correctly drawn 20 tunnels being built in North Korea near the demilitarized zone. "I'd close my eyes and clear everything from my mind," explains Joe McMoneagle, a Pentagon psychic from 1978 to 1984 who claims to have predicted that Dozier was being held in Padua. "Then I'd try to imagine where the person was and sketch it on a piece of paper."

Sketches were not always on target. To no avail, one set of Pentagon planners consulted psychics to pinpoint where Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was staying before U.S. warplanes attacked Libya in 1986. Another intelligence unit asked psychics to picture where an agent suspected of being a dou-

ble stashed the money he made spying for the other side. (They could not say.) "Sometimes it seems that these people are right on," says Jessica Utts, a statistician at the University of California at Davis who contributed to the CIA study. "But nobody knows when those times come."

Actually, the study came up with an estimate: Star Gate psychics got it right only about 25% of the time. Typically, their reports included "a large amount of irrelevant, often erroneous information," the study said. And when the reports did seem on target, they were "vague and general in nature."

The CIA itself experienced the problem—and not just during the five years it dabbled in parapsychology. Even after the agency abandoned its psychic program in 1977, CIA officers visited psychics on occasion. According to CIA documents that TIME has obtained, two agency officers went to Alexandria, Virginia, in May 1981 and asked a psychic to locate a group of POWs on a map of Laos. She closed her eyes, meditated, then placed her hand on the map near a village called Nhommarath and announced that the men were scattered there in small groups. "They've been brainwashed to forget they are Americans," she said. The CIA men smiled and paid her \$80. A reconnaissance team was already headed to Nhommarath, where satellite photos had shown there might be a prison camp. The agents were just looking for reassurance. No POWs were ever found.

Subtle tricks may have increased the psychics' batting average. The CIA investigators suspected that the psychics may have been subconsciously coaxed to the correct targets by their handlers. Many were former military intelligence officers whose mental pictures of far-off sites may have been informed by experience. The CIA study also found evidence that the handlers sometimes embellished what the psychics saw. "Folks want to believe that the paranormal is for real," says Martin Gardner, one of the founders of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. And at least one Senator—Claiborne Pell, 77, of Rhode Island—will say it for the record: "If the CIA is not interested, that's their business. I am convinced that we should continue the research." Thanks to his kind of faith in the extrasensory, psychics can probably count on making a living even now that the Pentagon contract will soon disappear.



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—PSYCHIC JOE MC MONEAGLE