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Daring Secret Mission Reaps Soviet Gold

Betrayal in Berlin: The True Story of the Cold War's Most Audacious Espionage Operation. Steve Vogel. Custom House. 530 pages. \$36.99

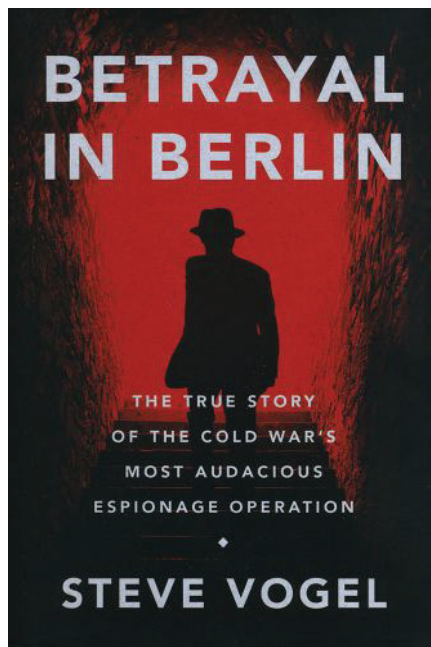
By Rick Maze
Editor in Chief

Presented as a true-life spy story recounting the damage done by notorious British traitor George Blake, a new book by historian and former *Washington Post* reporter Steve Vogel provides new details about Operation Gold, a Cold War mission undertaken by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Army Signal Corps to tunnel from the American sector of divided Berlin into the Soviet sector to tap communications lines.

Betrayal in Berlin: The True Story of the Cold War's Most Audacious Espionage Operation recounts that Operation Gold was a success as the U.S. and Britain received mountains of intelligence over an 11-month, 11-day period thanks to the ingenuity of American and British engineers who dug by hand a more than 1,400-foot tunnel that ended up exactly under a cable junction.

Undertaken as a secret mission by the U.S. Army, the rub in the story is the tunnel and monitoring of phone lines weren't a secret to Soviet intelligence. They knew about it before the first shovel of sandy soil was removed, but they kept quiet—not even telling senior Soviet officers whose calls were clandestinely transcribed for American and British intelligence agencies—because they wanted to protect Blake, their well-placed spy whose job in the British Secret Intelligence Service, known as MI6, made him valuable. Blake was one of the few people aware of the tunnel plans, and the KGB feared he'd come under immediate suspicion if efforts were made to interfere with the bold initiative.

Vogel's story benefits from interviews with Blake, now a 96-year-old KGB pensioner living in Moscow, but for an Army



audience, it also benefits from Vogel talking with retired U.S. Army Col. Keith Comstock, one of the Corps of Engineers officers who oversaw the digging of the tunnel (he was a captain at the time), and reading the papers of former Army Capt. Robert Williamson, another engineer who promised an interview but died before it could be scheduled.

The Army digging unit formed beginning in May 1954, known as the 8598th Engineer Support Team, consisted of three officers and 15 enlisted soldiers picked in part because they already had secret security clearances in a bid to avoid any delays or extra attention. They later re-formed as the 9539th Technical Service Unit, part of the Signal Corps, to deceive their true purpose.

The digging of what ended up being the more than 1,400-foot tunnel began on Sept. 2, 1954, from inside a warehouse built in a farmer's field. They hit water after a few feet, an unexpected development that delayed work for a month while they came up with new plans to create a 6-foot-diameter tunnel 16 feet below the surface that would end at a critical junction box

where phone lines would be tapped. The tunnel was dug mostly using the Army entrenching tool because it was suitable for working in small spaces.

Working eight-hour shifts, with officers often digging alongside the enlisted members, the team reached the border to the Soviet Zone in November. They reached the critical spot to tap the communications line by the end of February, and British soldiers stepped in to dig up to the cable lines and tap them. On May 11, 1955, they tapped the first of three cables, each carrying 98 telephone or telegraph circuits. Signal Corps soldiers began the process of recording communications and sending them off for translation. They were designated the 22nd Army Security Agency Detachment, 7222nd Defense Unit.

Much of the information was gossip, but there were also details about equipment shortages, budget problems and Soviet politics.

The tapping continued for 11 months and 11 days, ending when Soviet officials determined their spy, Blake, wouldn't be uncovered and after heavy flooding caused shorts in the communications lines, giving them an excuse to go looking for the communications leak. On April 22, 1956, the



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George Blake in the 1950s.

tunnel was “discovered,” with U.S. Army soldiers told to retreat to American-held territory but take no actions that might start a war.

Discovery of the tunnel created an international incident, with American soldiers sworn to secrecy. Soviet authorities tried to give the U.S. a black eye for engaging

in espionage. But this didn’t work exactly as planned, as news reports described in wonder the expertise shown in the construction of the tunnel and praised the daring U.S. effort. On May 3, 1956, the tunnel was opened to visitors. Some sections of the tunnel remain on display in the Allied Museum in Berlin.

Vogel writes that the officers, including Comstock and Williamson, received Legion of Merit medals and the enlisted engineer soldiers who dug the tunnel received Army Commendation Medals while also being sworn to secrecy. The end of the Cold War led to the declassification of the tunnel project. 