

BY MARTIN A. LEE

Two decades have passed since the great summer dropout of 1967, when legions of stoned youth flocked to San Francisco for a chance to tread barefoot through the city streets, grow their hair long and partake of a lifestyle revolution that baffled much of the American public. They came in droves, a ragtag army of tattered pilgrims who'd gone AWOL from suburbia. Propelled by a messianic faith in the saving grace of LSD, they rode the crest of Kerouac's bum romance, hoping to recapture the resonance of life that society had conspired to deny.

Perhaps it was inevitable that those who tripped out during the heady days of flower power would often worship acid and reify its catalytic properties. The most ardent enthusiasts looked to LSD as something that could move mountains and melt the icecaps — as if it constituted nothing less than the pharmacological key to world peace. If only President Johnson turned on to the right stuff, many an acidhead effused, surely the war in Vietnam would be over in a matter of days!

Of course, the true believers had no idea the CIA had used LSD as a surreptitious mind-bending agent in cold war cloak-and-dagger operations. Nor could they have known that the largest single source of black market acid during the late 1960s and early 1970s was linked to the CIA. His name was Ronald Stark, and his story is as mind-boggling as the chemical he peddled. From drug labs in Europe, Stark churned out tens of millions of acid trips. An Italian magistrate who investigated his role as an international terrorist and drug trafficker concluded that Stark was "an agent of the American secret services."

Stark first got his hooks into the acid underground in August 1969, when he visited a three hundred acre hippie commune near Idyllwild, California, which served as headquarters of a group of LSD-enthralled motorcycle toughs who called themselves the Brotherhood of Eternal Love. The Brothers and their wives occupied a run-down farmhouse encircled by seven tepees at the arid base of the San Jacinto mountains. From this secluded enclave, they directed a global drug smuggling network that distributed bricks of hashish from Afghanistan, bales of Mexican marijuana, and a brand of all-American acid known as "orange sunshine" that was especially popular among counterculture youth.

But the Brothers hit a snag when law enforcement ran an underground chemist out of business, putting their entire LSD

R A S P U T I N

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**The story of Ronald Stark,
the CIA informant who
turned on the world.**



The main ranch house at Idyllwild was the centre of a 300-acre estate bought by the core of the Brotherhood of Eternal Love

operation — at that time, the world's largest — in jeopardy. With the stash of sunshine quickly dwindling, they were desperate for a new source of acid. It was at this point that Ronald Stark showed up at the ranch in Idyllwild with an offer the Brothers could not refuse.

At first impression, Stark did not inspire much confidence. Five foot eight inches tall, with a bulging waistline, high forehead, and a thick brooding moustache, he could easily come off as a schlepp. But his motley demeanor belied a ruthless and cunning intelligence. Although only in his early thirties, Stark spoke ten languages fluently, including French, German, Italian, Arabic and Chinese. He was, in short, a genius con artist who could talk circles around just about anybody.

After some verbal sparring, Stark proved his sincerity by producing a kilo of pure LSD. This was more acid than any of the Brothers had ever seen in one place. Stark informed them that he had discovered a quick and easy method of making high-quality acid. He played their psyches like piano keys, rapping big raps about turning on the world — not just the West, but the Soviet Union and the Communist countries as well. Stark claimed he had business contacts with the Japanese Mafia who could smuggle drugs into mainland China. He also said he knew a high-placed Tibetan close to the Dalai Lama. Why not offer him

enough LSD to dose all the Chinese troops occupying Tibet? "We were definitely very gullible in believing the stuff he told us," one of the Brothers later acknowledged.

For a group of starry-eyed acid evangelists, Stark's appearance in Idyllwild must have seemed like a godsend. He had already manufactured large quantities of LSD at his laboratory in France, and plenty more would follow. The Brotherhood agreed to distribute the drug, which was dyed orange so as to continue the sunshine legacy.

Had the Brothers come down from their LSD reveries long enough to ponder this mysterious newcomer, they might have suspected something was up. Stark's official record leaves ample room for speculation. Born in New York in September 1938 as Ronald Shitsky, at age 24 he was convicted of filing a false application for government service. The FBI tagged him Number 812020E. After violating probation, he landed in federal prison in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. There Shitsky started calling himself Ronald Hadley Clark. By the time he got a job as a researcher at Bellevue mental hospital, Clark had become Stark. His net recorded worth was \$3000 in 1967, but a year later he was a millionaire. Stark claimed a relationship to the Whitneys, one of America's richest clans, and attributed his sudden wealth to the deft handling of a family trust fund.

At various times Stark passed himself off as a medical doctor, a chemist, a gourmet cook, a collector of fine art. His talent as a raconteur was enhanced by a insatiable appetite for intrigue and deception. He was adept at dropping names, dates and places that changed depending upon the situation. Every story Stark told was slightly different as he dashed to and fro, attending to various business scams in at least a dozen countries. He maneuvered on four continents, leaving a trail of ambiguities at every turn. A master of innuendo and disinformation, Stark preferred to keep his range of contacts ignorant of each other's activities. Oftentimes he concealed the fact that he was an American. His European associates were not privy to his affairs in Africa, and those in Asia knew little about his work in the States. The Brothers, for example, had no idea that Stark was running a cocaine ring in the Bay Area.

Stark compartmentalized the different spheres of his life, managing everything on a "need to know" basis. In this respect his modus operandi was not unlike that of an intelligence operative. He often claimed he knew lots of spies, and to some of his friends he even boasted of working for the CIA. It was a tip from the Agency, Stark explained, that prompted him to shut down his lab in Paris in 1971.

A few months later Stark opened up another sophisticated production center in Brussels, which masqueraded for a year and a half as a reputable biomedical research firm. During this period he communicated on a regular basis with American embassy officials in London. He even elicited their assistance while setting up his Belgian drug lab. When it was all over, Stark had made twenty kilos of LSD — enough for 50 million doses! It was by far the largest amount of acid to emanate from a single underground source, and most of it was sold in the United States.

In November 1972 a team of agents from the IRS and the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs visited his drug lab in Belgium, but Stark was nowhere to be found. Within a year a Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security would hold public hearings on the Brotherhood of Eternal Love, charging that the coterie of hippie bandits was behind a great LSD conspiracy. By this time federal agents had broken up the Brotherhood ring, arresting over a hundred people. The kingpins of the acid trade, including Stark, were indicted on drug charges.

The fact that Stark was wanted in the U.S. hardly put a damper on his international escapades. He spent much of his

who served as head of Italian military intelligence during the early 1970s and was later implicated in a series of coup attempts in Italy. According to the Pike Committee, U.S. ambassador Graham Martin gave \$800,000 to Miceli for a propaganda campaign during the 1972 election, despite protests from the CIA station chief that this particular recipient was too closely allied with anti-democratic rightwing elements.

It was quite a juggling act, to be sure, but a judge in Bologna eventually sentenced Stark to 14 years in prison and fined him \$60,000 for drug trafficking. At his appeals trial in 1978 Stark changed identities once again, this time passing himself off as "Khouri Ali," a radical Palestinian. In fluent Arabic he spelled out the details of his autobiography, explaining that he belonged to an international terrorist organization headquartered in Lebanon called "Group 14." Stark's appeal failed, and he was sent back to jail. But Italian police took a renewed interest in his case after they captured Enrique Paghera, another terrorist leader who knew Stark. At the time of his arrest Paghera was holding a hand-drawn map of a PLO camp in Lebanon. The map, Paghera confessed, had come from Ronald Stark, who also provided a coded letter of introduction. The objective, according to Paghera, was to forge a link with a terrorist organization that was planning to attack foreign embassies.

In June 1978 Graziano Gori, a magistrate in Bologna, was assigned to investigate Stark's peculiar ties to the U.S., the Arabs, Italian terrorists, and other mysteries. A few weeks later Gori was killed in a car accident. The Italian government subsequently charged Stark with "armed banditry" for his role in aiding and abetting terrorist activities. But he never stood trial on these charges. True to form, Stark dropped out of sight shortly after he was released from prison in April 1979 on orders from Judge Giorgio Floridia in Bologna. The judge's decision was remarkable: he released Stark because of "an impressive series of scrupulously enumerated proofs" that Stark was actually a CIA agent. "Many circumstances suggest that from 1960 onwards Stark belonged to the American secret services," Floridia concluded.

The facts about Ronald Stark raise more questions than they answer. Was he a CIA operative throughout his drug dealing days? Or was the espionage link merely the work of a brilliant confidence trickster who played both ends off the middle to his own advantage? In November 1984 an Italian parliamentary commission issued a lengthy report on domestic terrorism that included a section on "The Case of Ronald Stark." The commission asserted that Stark was an



Was Stark's drug activity tolerated while he passed the CIA information on the youth culture and the radical left?



adventurer who was used by the CIA, but proof of when his espionage exploits began is hard to pin down. If Stark was connected to the CIA during the 1960s, as Judge Floridia suggests, then the entire Brotherhood smuggling operation must be reinterpreted. "It could have been that he was employed by an American intelligence agency that wanted to see more psychedelic drugs on the street," a former Brotherhood member stated. "Then again, he might have tricked the CIA, just like he fooled everyone else."

The use of LSD among young people in the U.S. reached a peak in the late 1960s and early 1970s, not long after the CIA and other intelligence services initiated a series of covert operations designed to disrupt, discredit and neutralize the New Left, which overlapped in significant ways with the counterculture. Was this merely a historical coincidence or did the CIA actually take steps to promote the illicit acid trade through Ronald Stark, the world's biggest

supplier? When did the CIA learn of Stark's role as a drug dealer, and was his activity tolerated while he passed information on the youth culture and the radical left in various countries to the Agency?

The long history of CIA involvement in trafficking heroin from Southeast Asia lends credence to the possibility that U.S. intelligence operatives may have dabbled in black market LSD as well. The CIA had been experimenting with acid as a mind control weapon since the early 1950s. But LSD is not habit-forming like heroin, and its efficacy as an instrument of social control seems rather tenuous in light of the wide range of reactions induced by the hallucinogen.

Although there is no proof that the CIA got involved in promoting street acid as a matter of policy, it's not at all certain that stopping the flow of illicit LSD was a particular priority either. Perhaps the best explanation is that CIA officials were willing to condone Stark's exploits in the drug trade as long as he functioned as an informant.

Stark's name surfaced once again in 1982 when he was arrested in Holland for trafficking hashish, cocaine and heroin. The following year he was deported without fanfare to the U.S., where charges were still pending for his role in the Brotherhood of Eternal Love conspiracy. The entire matter was handled so discreetly that the U.S. press never learned of his return. Stark spent a few months preparing his own legal defense in a San Francisco jail until charges were dropped by the Justice Department, which claimed too many years had passed to prosecute the case. In December 1984 Stark died of a heart attack, leaving others to ponder the ambiguous legacy of the man who pumped millions of hits of acid into the willing arteries of the counterculture.

Ronald Stark thrived in a clandestine netherworld where "facts are wiped out by artifacts," as Norman Mailer wrote of the espionage metaphysic, and "every truth is obliged to live in its denial." Above all, he remains an extraordinary international enigma. "A genius, but a tortured soul" is how one Italian magistrate described him. Even if Stark was never more than a brilliant private operator, his remarkable career illustrates the tangled web of espionage, crime, and extremist politics that are so much a part of the secret history of LSD. □

Martin A. Lee is the editor of Extra! and the co-author of Acid Dreams, both of which are described more fully in this issue.



The many faces of Ronald Stark: the youthful Stark, the disguised Stark in a false British passport and the middle-aged Stark arrested in Italy in 1975

DESCRIPTION - *ALG. N. I. I. M. E. N. I.*

Stark, Ronald

Place of birth: *London*

Date of birth: *1930*

Residence: *London*

Height: *5' 8"*

Weight: *150*

Color of hair: *Dark*

Color of eyes: *Dark*

Color of skin: *Fair*

Other identifying marks: *None*

CHILDREN - ENFANTS

Name Sex Date of birth Date de naissance Age

None



The younger and wife, if any, of Stark

