



a *spy* like us

What do you do when you find out the girl you roomed with in McElwain is the most famous CIA spy in the U.S.?

By Vicki Glembocki '93, '02 MFA Lib

TILLIE RANICH WAS WAITING TO PICK UP HER LUNCH AT A RESTAURANT in Dayton, Ohio, when she saw the face of one of her best college friends on national television, under a banner that read "Breaking News." Leigh Cassidy was on vacation in Italy when she saw the same face flash on a TV there. Mary Crompton was checking CNN online before heading out the door when she spotted her friend's name in the headlines. Sue Mazza was in her kitchen in Hillsdale, N.J., when her dad shouted out to her from the family room, where he was watching the news: "Hey, your roommate's a spy."

"What are you talking about?" she yelled back.

"Valerie is a spy."

Sue Leech Seiff '85 H&HD was standing in her kitchen, too, months before the media got hold of her friend's photo. But she was hearing the news firsthand, face-to-face with **Valerie Plame Wilson '85 Com**, who had been one of her dearest friends for more than 20 years. They had met on their first day at Penn State in the fall of 1981, when she ventured out of her room in McElwain Hall and stumbled upon this pretty blue-eyed blonde named Valerie from Huntingdon Valley, Pa., just outside Philadelphia. Valerie had been sitting in her dorm room, looking overwhelmed by it all. Now, in her kitchen, in August 2003, Sue thought Valerie had a similar

expression on her face. Distracted. Troubled. Certainly overwhelmed.

It was supposed to be a relaxing weekend. Valerie and her husband, Joe Wilson, a former diplomat, had driven from their home in Washington, D.C., to Pittsburgh so the college pals could catch up. Sue's husband, Peter, and Joe would play golf. Valerie and Sue would take their kids to a Wiggles concert. They all would drink wine. But, as soon as the Wilsons walked in the door, Joe stepped out onto the back patio to continue a call on his cell that seemed rather urgent.

"Is everything OK?" Sue asked Valerie as her 5-year-old twins and Valerie's 3-year-old twins chased each other around the kitchen, yanking at their moms.

"Do you know who Robert Novak is?" Valerie asked. Sue thought for a second. The name sounded familiar. Wasn't he a journalist? Didn't he write a column about politics? "He put my name in an article, and he shouldn't have done that. He said I was a CIA agent."

Oh my God, Sue thought. She didn't know what to say.

"Sue," Valerie said. "I have to tell you something."

The story Valerie told began just the month before, with the opinion piece her husband had written for *The New York Times* in early July. Sue already knew about that. Joe's column had made headlines everywhere, since he suggested in no uncertain terms that the Bush administration had exaggerated the Iraqi threat, telling the American people that Iraq was trying to obtain nuclear material from Africa. Joe, who was a former ambassador to Gabon, had personally been sent by the CIA to Niger the previous year to verify the claim, but found nothing to support it. "[W]e went to war under false pretenses," he wrote. Eight days after his op-ed appeared, Joe woke up his wife in the morning by tossing *The Washington Post* on their bed.

"Well, the SOB did it," Joe said. There, in Robert Novak's column about Joe's op-ed, was this line: "...his wife, Valerie Plame, is an agency operative on weapons of mass destruction." Until that moment, almost no one except Valerie's husband, her parents, and her brother knew the truth—that she was a CIA spy.

Of course, in the nearly four-and-a-half years since Valerie and Sue visited in Pittsburgh, the story has been reported in every newspaper and on every news broadcast in the country. A federal prosecutor was appointed to investigate whether senior administration officials had intentionally leaked Valerie's name to the media, to punish Joe and dissuade others from coming forward. Vice President Dick Cheney's chief of staff, Scooter Libby, was indicted by a federal grand jury and later convicted of obstruction of justice and related charges in conjunction with the case. The Wilsons filed a civil suit against Dick Cheney, Scooter Libby, Bush's deputy chief of staff Karl Rove, and deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage, who the Wilsons say conspired to "discredit, punish, and seek revenge against" the couple.

Throughout it all, Valerie Plame herself has been silent. She's had no choice: When she joined the CIA, she signed a confidentiality agreement prohibiting her from speaking to the media or publishing any work without the Agency's approval. In 2006 she signed a book deal with Simon & Schuster. When she sent the manuscript to the CIA to

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review, the Agency insisted on extensive redactions because of national security concerns, though much of the information, like the specific details of Valerie's dates of service, had already been widely reported. Valerie and the publisher sued the Agency, but a federal district court upheld the Agency's position. Simon & Schuster decided to publish the book anyway, which is why, when *Fair Game: My Life as a Spy, My Betrayal by the White House*, hit bookstores this past October, there were thick gray lines in place of words, sentences, sometimes entire pages. (The book hit No. 6 on *The New York Times* best-seller list a month later.) When Valerie has been interviewed about her book—whether for this article, or on *60 Minutes* or *NBC's Today*—she's been unable to discuss her work with

the CIA prior to January 2002. Ask her why she decided to apply to the CIA during her senior year at Penn State in 1985, and she'll say, "I can't discuss that."

For Sue Seiff, the information she was hearing in her kitchen that late-summer evening in 2003 was news enough. Valerie was not who Sue thought she was—this friend she'd worked with on dude ranches outside Yellowstone Park one summer during college. The friend she'd roomed with her senior year in that red brick Victorian on the corner of College and Atherton. The one she considered, along with their other girlfriends from Penn State—people like **Tillie Wong Ranich '84 Bus**, **Leigh Hendrix Cassidy '85 Bus**, **Mary Bucha Crompton '85 Sci**, and **Sue Ernst Mazza '85 Bus**—to be her sister. The friend she had seen at least once every year since graduation, when "the sisters" got together—there was Hilton Head in 1987, Jackson Hole in 1992, and Valerie's house in D.C. in 2000, when everyone posed for a photo on the foyer steps, Valerie front and center, smiling, with her 7-month-old twins in her lap. So Valerie *wasn't* an energy consultant for Brewster-Jennings & Associates, as it read on the business card Valerie had given her years before? She *wasn't* stamping visas in the State Department when she and Sue lived together in D.C., right after they graduated from Penn State? What *was* she doing that first year after college while Sue and all her friends were so self-absorbed with the excitement of their own lives, finally out in the real world, doing real things? Valerie was learning to be a spy? And not just any spy—Valerie was training to eventually become a NOC, the cream of the spy crop, an officer with non-official cover, meaning that if she were found out and arrested in another country while doing her CIA work, the U.S. government would not be able to help her—or even acknowledge that she worked for them—leaving her entirely on her own.



On that Saturday night in 2003, as Valerie and Sue sat at the Wiggles concert at Mellon Arena in Pittsburgh, the kids singing along to "Big Red Car," Sue couldn't help staring at her friend. She didn't feel angry. Or deceived. Or even surprised. *Valerie is a spy*, Sue thought. *This makes sense.*

CENSORED: Plame (above, at a New York City book signing) submitted a draft of her book to the CIA, which insisted on heavy "redactions" of potential sensitive information. The publisher decided to print the book with the redacted material blacked out.

Valerie Plame didn't know what to do. It was 1985, the spring semester of her senior year at Penn State, and all of her friends were getting job offers. One in computer science. One in engineering. Another was flying to interviews all over the country. And then there was Valerie, a

liberal arts major with an advertising degree, a semester abroad in Germany, some experience selling ads for the *Collegian*, a bunch of Pi Beta Phi sweatshirts in her dresser, and no clue.

“How about being a buyer for a department store,” her mother, Diane, remembers suggesting.

“Nooooo,” Valerie said.

“How about getting your master’s?”

“In what?”

“In *anything!*”

If *anything*, Valerie was going to go into the Peace Corps. Or maybe work on Capitol Hill. Her dad had served in World War II as an Air Force colonel, and her brother was a wounded Vietnam Marine Corps vet. She knew the military wasn’t her thing, but she wanted to do something that would scratch the itch she’d had all her life to do some kind of public service, something meaningful.

“I was ready to go far beyond Penn State,” Valerie says. “I just didn’t know what.”

Valerie’s mom noticed an ad in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*—the CIA was hiring. She knew that Valerie would be in Florida for spring break during the interviews, but she cut out the ad anyway and mailed it to her daughter at school. When the spring break trip got canceled, Valerie told her mom, “I might as well take the exam.” Valerie heard back from the CIA almost immediately. She qualified to work in any department—science and technology, administration, intelligence—and just had to choose which. Applicants are told that, aside from immediate family members, they can’t tell anyone they were applying for a job in the CIA. Valerie picked operations—the most selective branch of the Agency, responsible for collecting human intelligence (i.e. being, recruiting, and/or catching spies). She told her parents. And no one else.

Soon after, as Valerie describes in her book, *Fair Game*, she drove from State College to Washington for her first, official, in-person interview. The older woman in pearls sitting across from her asked all the usual questions: Strengths? Weaknesses? Why do you want to work for the CIA? And then, out of nowhere, she posed a zinger: “Imagine you are meeting an agent in a foreign hotel room and there is suddenly a loud banging at the door. You hear

‘Police, let us in!’ What do you do?” *Other than espionage*, Valerie quickly reasoned, *there is only one good reason for an unrelated man and woman to be in a hotel room together.*

“I would take off my blouse, tell the agent to do the same, and jump into bed before telling the police to come in.” The woman smiled.

This could be fun, Valerie thought.

But the CIA still wasn’t a done deal. There’d be more interviews, psychological exams, medical



At the CIA’s paramilitary training camp, Plame learned how to fire an AK-47 and how to tolerate being pepper-sprayed in the eyes.

exams, a security background check, and a polygraph—most taking place in or around Langley, Va.—before Valerie would know, for sure, whether or not she was “in.” So, when her college roommate Sue Seiff accepted a job at a computer firm in D.C., Valerie jumped on it.

“I’ll move there, too!” she said. “We’ll live together!”

After graduation, the two lugged their clothes and their Degas print and their crazy furry couch into an apartment in the Glover Park neighborhood of northwest D.C. While Sue worked 70-hour weeks, traveling most of the time, Valerie landed a job at Woodward & Lothrop department store, where she bided her time until August when word came from the CIA—she’d been accepted into the Career Trainee program. She told Sue, and everyone else, that she’d gotten a job at the State Department. “She made it sound as uninteresting as possible,” Sue says. “We hardly ever talked about it.”

Valerie felt intimidated when she walked into the government classroom in a Virginia suburb for CIA 101—the first part of the year-long training program to become a case officer. Most of her 50 or so classmates were men many with military buzz cuts. Most had gone to Ivy League schools or had advanced degrees or had traveled all over the world. And everyone, it seemed, was older than she.

“All seemed much more sophisticated, smarter,

better traveled, and wittier than I was,” she writes.

Larry Johnson thought she looked young, too. But he was 30—one of the oldest in the class—and married, certainly not looking to strike up a relationship with a fellow trainee who happened to be an attractive 22-year-old and who he figured, at first glance, was probably a “ditz blonde.” But “Val P.,” as she was known to her classmates from this day on, was anything but ditz. In fact, as Larry got to know her at class parties on the weekends and going out to see the just-released *Spies Like Us* starring Chevy Chase, he realized the most remarkable thing about Val P. was how unremarkable she was. She was driven, yes. And professional. And savvy. And social enough for assignments in the field, where she’d have to stroll through events in other countries, identify potential foreign “agents” who she might be able to recruit to spy for the U.S., and strike up conversations with them. But she was also private, almost to the point of being cautious.

“She didn’t do things that would draw attention to herself,” Johnson remembers. And that was good. That was the very quality the CIA wanted in a spy.

Valerie also wasn’t calling attention to herself in her “other” life, at her apartment in Glover Park where, every morning at 7 a.m., Sue would find her at the kitchen table, completely dressed and styled and as put together as she always was in college,

eating her Grape-Nuts, reading the *Post*.

“She didn’t talk about her work,” Sue says today. Not even when they were out together in town, where people walked around with their government security badges hanging out as status symbols and asked the first question Washingtonians always ask when they meet someone: What do you do? “People loved to say, ‘I can’t talk about my work. It’s very secure,’” Sue remembers. Valerie never even mentioned her “cover story”—that she worked at the State Department—to people she met. But Valerie had never been the type to brag. In fact, she rarely allowed the spotlight to rest on her for very long. Even in college, she had always been more of the spotlihter—rallying the troops to buy Leigh a teddy bear she had pointed to in a store window on College Avenue, bringing a heart-shaped cookie to her college sweetheart, **Mark Mintzer ’86 H&HD**, when he was dancing in THON, taking care of Mark in her dorm room for a whole week while he was sick with strep throat.

That part of Valerie—the selfless part, the caring part—had a hard time processing the story a guest speaker told during CIA 101. The speaker described her first tour as a case officer, in Moscow, when she was detected by the Soviets passing information to a double agent. The speaker was thrown out of the country. The Soviet agent she was working with? He was executed.

“We all sat in stunned silence as we digested the huge responsibilities and the consequences of making a mistake,” Valerie writes.

CLOSE TIES: At Penn State, Plame (back row, middle) formed lasting bonds with friends, including (front row, from left) Sheri Clark and Mary Bucha Crompton and (back row) Sue Ernst Mazza, Tillie Wong Ranich, Leigh Hendrix Cassidy, and Sue Leech Seiff. In 1998, she married diplomat Joe Wilson (left), who served under Presidents George H.W. Bush and Clinton.



FROM LEFT: MANDEL NGAN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF SIMON & SCHUSTER



After CIA 101, Valerie got a break. Kind of. She was assigned to her first of three “interims,” which were basically internships in different offices of the Agency where students did fascinating work like walking files from one end of the CIA headquarters building to the other end of the CIA headquarters building. But Valerie knew that the next part of training would make up for it. She told her friends she had to go away for three months of training—putting into practice one of the most essential lessons of CIA 101, “living her cover.” No one blinked an eye. So many were going through various kinds of training of their own, too caught up in their new jobs to ask a lot of questions about Valerie’s situation—which was fortunate for her. So she headed south to Camp Peary near Williamsburg, Va., to the CIA’s paramilitary training camp—The Farm.

There, Valerie exchanged her pearls and heels for fatigues and combat boots, her cute apartment in Glover Park for a Quonset hut in the pine woods, and her 7:00 a.m. *Washington Post* for a 5:00 a.m. three-mile run, in the dark and in formation. She learned to fire an AK-47 and was the best in her class. She learned to navigate her way out of the middle of the woods, alone, with nothing but a contour map and a compass. She learned how to make a bomb out of the explosive C-4 and Clorox. She learned how to tolerate being pepper-sprayed in the eyes. She learned how to drive blindfolded and to maneuver boats at high speed. She learned how to crash cars into solid walls without killing herself. She learned how to fight in hand-to-hand combat, and then how to tend to the wounds she incurred. She learned how to parachute out of airplanes.

One Monday morning, she and her classmates woke up to flashlights in their faces. Her “captors” shoved her out the door, then forced her to crawl on the ground, kicking her along the way. After marching single-file through the woods with pillowcases on their heads and occasional rifle-butts on their legs, trainees had their arms tied behind their backs. They waited in a room they’d never been in before, to be interrogated by a man they’d never seen before: “What is your name?” “Why are you

THE DAMAGE DONE: Lewis “Scooter” Libby, Vice President Cheney’s former chief of staff, was convicted last March of obstruction of justice in connection with the leaking of Plame’s CIA identity to the media. A week later, Plame broke a four-year silence in order to testify before Congress about the leak and its consequences.

here?” *Stick to your cover story*, they thought to themselves. Classmates were pitted against each other. *Don’t rat anyone out*. And, thus, Valerie learned how to be a POW.

Valerie could have told her mom about all this—Diane knew she was training to be a spy—but she didn’t. When Valerie graduated from high school, her mother, Diane, had given her a note that read, “Nothing you could do in your future life could make me more proud than knowing you had the courage in fifth grade to audition in front of all those adults for a part in the high school’s production of *Sound of Music*.” Valerie had rehearsed and rehearsed, singing “Daisy,” the song the family had sung on their cross-country road trips. Diane watched as her little girl stood up on that stage, all by herself, and belted out to the back row, “But you’ll look sweet, upon the seat of a bicycle built for two.” Valerie got the part. Her mother had always told her she could do whatever



she wanted, that she could try anything. But her mother was also a worrier, and Valerie knew she didn’t need to know her little von Trapp family singer was learning to take a rifle-butt in the thigh.

“I’m thankful I didn’t know,” Diane says today.

After Valerie left Sue Seiff’s Pittsburgh home that weekend in 2003, the news exploded. Sue spent hours on Google. She set up her system to alert her any time Valerie’s name appeared in the media or on a blog or on a Web site, then forwarded the links to all the Penn State “sisters,” just to make sure everyone was on top of things. For the Penn State crew, the e-mails brought one “ah-ha” moment after another:

So *that’s* why Valerie moved to Athens for three years. (She was on her first field assignment.)

So *that’s* why she moved to London to study international politics and monetary policy. (She was developing her cover.)

So *that’s* why she moved to Brussels to learn French, and then came back so abruptly. (The CIA thought her name might have been on the list of American spies that CIA-agent-turned-traitor Aldrich Ames gave to the Soviets.)

So *that’s* why Joe and Valerie settled in D.C. (So she could work for the Agency’s Counterproliferation Division, “making sure bad guys don’t have weapons of mass destruction,” Valerie says.)

“The more I heard,” Leigh Cassidy says, “all I kept thinking was, ‘Cool!’” Especially since, through all this, Valerie was still Valerie. She still e-mailed pork chop recipes to Leigh. She still called her from Nordstrom’s to discuss what she was planning to buy. (“She didn’t tell me she was looking for something to wear to *testify in front of Congress*,” Leigh says.) And she still flew out to join the “sisters” in their annual getaway in Santa Fe, where Valerie would end up moving four years later, after she formally resigned from the CIA in January 2006 and started writing her book. With all the news, so much of it negative, the girls didn’t think Valerie would make the reunion.

But this was a special trip. They were all celebrat-

ing their 40th birthdays. And Valerie needed to get away from it all, though Sue half-expected paparazzi to be waiting outside their hotel. Valerie, just like always, didn’t talk about herself much at all, too busy rooting through gift shops for the perfect salad bowl to take home as a souvenir, talking all weekend with her best girlfriends about what they always talked about—old boyfriends and kids and the great new skin-care product someone found. They had never talked much about work. And they didn’t now, even though everyone wanted to bombard her with questions, dying to know the details about the life they never knew Valerie had. “I was just so glad she hadn’t spent the past 20 years stamping visas,” Sue says now. “Not that there’s anything wrong with stamping visas, but I knew Valerie always wanted to have a special life. And now I know she did. One day we’re going to sit down and fill in the gaps.”

Until then, Sue would watch with the rest of the

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world as the details would unfold over the next four years. She believed, truly, that nothing had changed. That the “sisters” were still just the “sisters,” that this trip was just a trip with her friends, that Valerie was the same old Val who used to eat soup with her when they found time to eat dinner together in that little apartment in Glover Park. But, at the end of the night in Sante Fe, when they all returned to their rooms, Sue crawled into bed and flipped on the TV. *Saturday Night Live* was on. Not two seconds into watching the show, she heard it—a reference to the ex-spy Valerie Plame.

Sue had only one thing to say: “This is freaking surreal.”

Vicki Glembocki, former senior editor of *The Penn Stater*, is a contributing editor for *Philadelphia Magazine*. Her book, *The Second Nine Months: One Woman Tells the Real Truth About Having a Baby—Finally*, will be published by Da Capo Press in February.