

The CIA Paid Vietnam War Spies by Ordering Them Stuff From Sears

http://qz.com/518165/the-cia-paid-vietnam-war-spies-by-ordering-them-stuff-from-sears/?utm_source=YPL&ref=yfp



In Sep. 1966, Jon Wiant, an American CIA operative, arrived in Hue, Vietnam, to head a bilateral operation with South Vietnamese intelligence. The plan involved running assets in and out of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese “secret zones” along the border with Laos. These assets—a mix of mountain agrarians and indigenous Montagnard (or Degar) people—were the CIA’s “eyes and ears on the ground,” Wiant wrote in an article for a 1994 edition of *Studies in Intelligence*, a journal on intelligence-gathering published internally by the CIA. They were “recruited to report on Viet Cong and North Vietnamese army troops and facilities they

encountered in their travels in the jungles.”

What made these individuals suitable to the task was the relative inconspicuousness with which they could move through such settings. *“Whether as hunters, rattan gatherers, aloe wood collectors, or charcoal makers, they had good reason to travel in the secret zones and the Ho Chi Minh trail complex in the Vietnam/Laos border area,”* Wiant noted.

Given the basic economics of these occupations (functioning in what anthropologists call “non-monetized local economies”), Wiant and his fellow CIA handlers were at a loss as to how to effectively compensate assets traversing dangerous secret zones, or incentivize them into exploring new areas. *“These were essentially barter economies where the piaster, the national currency, was largely incidental to local life,”* Wiant explained. The CIA experimented with compensation in the form of basic commodities—bags of rice, in particular. This was reasonably successful, until district chieftains claimed a third of the payment as a kind of crude tax. *“Attempts to dislodge them were futile,”* Wiant wrote, *“and the principle agents were less than enthusiastic about pushing their agents into new areas when their ‘earnings’ were steadily eroding under these extractions.”* *“These were essentially barter economies where the national currency was largely incidental to local life.”*

Enter Sears, Roebuck, and Company. Later that year, Wiant had received a Sears catalog from his wife, residing in the United States, through the APO (Army Post Office), which circulated mail to American citizens working abroad in military or diplomatic capacities. *“It was sitting on the corner of my desk. I started thumbing through it while we were talking, and it suddenly struck me that this might be the answer to our problems,”* he recalled. *“That evening, I sat down with the catalog and flagged several pages of clothes and other wares that I thought might appeal to the agents. I then created a basic pay scale, indexing items to the length and inherent danger of a mission.”*

The following morning, he equipped CIA field agents with a copy of the catalog along with the recommended pay schedule and scale. *“But I also suggested that, in the best of Sears fashion they should let the principal agent browse the catalog,”* he wrote. Three days later, Wiant received a message from the field. The Sears proposal was a “resounding success,” though many of his recommended products have been supplanted by substitutions from the assets’ own browsing of the catalog. *“Would I please send six boys’ size 10/12 and 14/16 red velvet blazer vests with brass buttons—the [Montagnard] were of small stature. Each would be payment for a 20-day mission. Several boys’ stamped leather cowboy belts were also requested.”*