

American Whistleblower: The Gene Wheaton Story

Episode 2

NARRATOR:

You are listening to Episode Two of: “American Whistleblower: The Gene Wheaton Story.” Produced by AW Media Group and Dan Storper.

(MUSIC CUE)

GENE WHEATON:

The covert operations subculture and the pyramid system of it is difficult for the average citizen to understand. And I understand it because I saw it, but it’s awfully hard to describe.

NARRATOR:

Gene Wheaton was a security contractor and former military criminal investigator who was deep inside the U.S. government’s Iran-Contra operation during the 1980s.

GENE WHEATON:

I was recruited into Ollie North’s network by that group in the summer of ’85 because they wanted my airplanes for missions for the Contras ... It was in that vein ... that the guys in the National Security Council wanted to, uh, bring me into the inner circle.

NARRATOR:

As Wheaton became more closely involved with the covert intelligence world, he witnessed illegal government activities that prompted him to become a whistle-blower.

GENE WHEATON:

This struck me as being treason and grand larceny on a major scale, stealing from the taxpayers’ money -- and having been a cop all my life, I thought it was kind of wrong.

(NEWS COVERAGE OF MENA, ARKANSAS)

“Congressional investigators in recent months have tried to learn if Mena, Arkansas was an illegal staging area for shipping guns to the U.S.-backed Contra rebels ...”

DANNY SHEEHAN:

He’s one of the people who was ... at the very edge of history ... he’s the one that kind of blew the whistle on Mena, Arkansas ...

GENE WHEATON:

I was on some investigations around Mena, Arkansas concerning events after a drug smuggler, Barry Seal, was assassinated, and some of the covert air operations got on to Mena ...

NARRATOR:

Wheaton eventually partnered with public interest attorney Danny Sheehan, who was exploring Iran-Contra wrongdoing on his own. Together, they brought the program's illegal activities to light.

DANNY SHEEHAN:

So the bottom line is, uh ... we stumbled right on top of it ... that they were smuggling weapons to the Contras in violation of the Bolland Amendment.

Gene Wheaton ... he had allowed twenty of these, of his planes from National Air to be utilized... but he had lost one of his planes coming back from Nicaragua, and he got upset about it, because he was going to file an insurance claim on it, and Oliver North told him not to do it, because it was full of cocaine ...

NARRATOR:

Wheaton's whistleblowing did not end with illegal Iran-Contra operations. For years, he pursued wrongdoing elsewhere in the intelligence community — including drug running, and the murders of military personnel he suspected were done to cover up illegal activities ... and he publicized the details.

(TELEVISION INTERVIEW BY MICHAEL ANDREGG)

“And our guest is mister Gene Wheaton, a retired criminal investigator ...”

NARRATOR:

However, there was one secret he kept confidential for years ... only disclosing it publicly toward the end of his life.

(AUDIO FROM WILLIAM LAW INTERVIEW WITH WHEATON)

“There was a CIA-funded program to assassinate Castro. And they were — according to them — they were the ones that diverted the Castro funds and training for their own agenda to snuff Kennedy. And there was another clique above them that was worried about Kennedy not increasing the program to escalate hostilities in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.”

NARRATOR:

This is the second episode of a three-part series that examines the life of Gene Wheaton — a military criminal investigator who became a key intelligence community whistleblower during the Reagan administration, and beyond.

(MUSIC CUE OUT)

(ARCHIVAL AUDIO OF IRAN-CONTRA HEARINGS)

“Colonel North, did you have any interest — personal interest, I’m talking about now — in any of the monies ...”

NARRATOR:

In episode one, Gene Wheaton discussed his recruitment into the Iran-Contra scandal, in which members of the Reagan-Bush administration sold weapons to Iran — an avowed enemy state.

(ARCHIVAL AUDIO OF IRAN-CONTRA HEARINGS)

“There has been testimony, as I’m sure ...”

NARRATOR:

These weapon sales supported military operations by the Nicaraguan Contras, in direct violation of a law passed by Congress. Wheaton also helped expose other illegal activities by the administration.

(ARCHIVAL AUDIO OF IRAN-CONTRA HEARINGS)

“The first I heard of it was through these hearings ...”

(SFX: Airplanes taxi on a tarmac)

NARRATOR:

During the mid-1980s, Wheaton had been the Vice President of a cargo airline company, and had solicited government contracts through some of his contacts in the U.S. intelligence community. His company National Air was retained to provide planes for missions to the Contras, through a program coordinated by Marine Corps Colonel Oliver North. But as Wheaton became more deeply involved in the Contra supply operation, he learned of illegal side activities that involved former Air Force General Richard Secord, as well as long-time covert operations personnel such as Felix Rodriguez. Gene Wheaton:

GENE WHEATON:

I thought the contractors . . . Secord and that group were ... I thought they had a legitimate covert contract with the government ... but they were also diverting aircraft into hauling illegal cargo on the side, and I was receiving direct information about their movement.

I was talking myself out of the inner circle at that time because I was telling people in the State Department and the White House and on the Hill and at Marine headquarters that Ollie North and crowd were being duped by this crowd around Secord, because I had factual information that they were siphoning off huge amounts of military weaponry out of U.S. military stockpiles and not only giving it under aid programs to our allies, but were splitting it up and selling it to our enemies as well. To stockpile funds for covert operations that did not have congressional approval.

(MUSIC CUE)

NARRATOR:

Before becoming a whistle-blower, Wheaton tried to use official government channels.

GENE WHEATON:

Well, in May of '86, I personally briefed CIA director Bill Casey. And of course he looked startled. I had no idea at that time that he was one of the masterminds behind all this illegal stuff, but he said he'd look into it and get back to me.

Casey sent a message back to me saying that the agency wasn't involved in any of this stuff, and that the government wasn't involved in this illegal diversion, and, "If you think you can do anything about it, let the chips fall where they may," as a bluff. I'm just a raggedy little old Oklahoma country boy retired chief warrant officer and I guess he figured I couldn't do it.

Uh, but then in I think July — June or July — it must have been June, of '86 I briefed a member of the staff of the Commandant of the Marine Corps, P.X. Kelly. And I know for a fact that the man went in and briefed Kelly on it. And I suggested to him that since Casey had told me that the government wasn't involved, that they move Ollie North to Okinawa or someplace and give him a battalion and a medal to get him out of heat, because I didn't want to embarrass the Marine Corps, and I didn't think at that time — I didn't know one way or another — whether Ollie North was an active participant or just using the most convenient contractors he could find.

NARRATOR:

Investigations by Wheaton revealed that the illegal side of the Contra supply operation was being supported by funds siphoned from other government programs. Wheaton raised these concerns with multiple people in Washington, with no results. When official channels failed to work, Wheaton went to the press.

(MUSIC CUE)

GENE WHEATON:

This struck me as being treason and grand larceny on a major scale, stealing from the taxpayers' money -- and having been a cop all my life, I thought it was kind of wrong. So I got with a couple of Washington, D.C. journalists that I knew ... and one of 'em was a two-time Pulitzer Prize winning-journalist by the name of Newt Royce. I had information — direct knowledge from the Saudi royal family — that kickbacks were being ... from the Saudi AWACS program ... were being used to help fund the Contras to buy weapons from different countries around the world.

And Newt and Mike Acoca wrote the thing up for the wire service for Hearst newspaper chain, and it went out on the wires, and was made a front page headline of the San Francisco Examiner on the 27th of July of 1986. As a result of that article in August of '86, Congressman Dante Fascell — I believe he's from Florida — wrote a letter to then Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger asking him if it was true that foreign money, and kick-back money on programs, was being used instead of legally through the U.S. Treasury to fund foreign covert operations. Uh ... in September of '86 Casper Weinberger replied back on official Secretary of Defense letterhead, that it was not true ... that the U.S. government was not using foreign kick-back funds for any of our own covert operations. And of course that turned out to be totally false and ... and that's how this whole mess got started.

(MUSIC END)

NARRATOR:

At the same time, others on the outside were beginning to discover problems with the Contra supply operation. In the course of investigating another matter, the public interest Christic Institute had uncovered evidence of U.S. military weapons being provided to the Contras in Nicaragua — contrary to a law passed by Congress that banned direct military support for the group. Danny Sheehan is an attorney, and was one of the founders of the Christic Institute:

(MUSIC CUE)

DANNY SHEEHAN:

So the bottom line is, uh ... we stumbled right on top of it ... that they were smuggling weapons to the Contras in violation of the Bolland Amendment. We came back to our office in Washington DC and said, “This is ... this is like impeachable activity on the part of the administration.” And so we initiated a major investigation of that. We started working around to find out who was involved in this whole operation, etcetera, and that’s how I met Gene Wheaton.

Paul Hoven introduced me to him ... Paul was a friend of mine. He was an old copter-jock from Vietnam. And he reached out and contacted me when he knew that I was looking around, trying to figure out who was doing the smuggling of weapons to the Contras, and all that. And he had ended up meeting Gene Wheaton. And Gene Wheaton started complaining to Hoven — that he was, he was the head of a thing called “National Air” ... it was, uh ... they had like twenty of these European planes that were like mini-C-130s, which you could flop the back door while it was still in flight, and kick some stuff out — cargo — out. He had lost one of his planes coming back from Nicaragua, and he got upset about it, because he was going to file an insurance claim on it, and Oliver North told him not to do it because it was full of cocaine ... And so he got all kinds of ... PO’d over that ... and sort of launched this kind of internal investigation to figure out what was going on.

(ARCHIVAL AUDIO OF Ronald Reagan press conference)

“Eighteen months ago, as I said last Thursday, this administration ...”

DANNY SHEEHAN:

I, of course, wanted them to stop doing “the things” that they were doing, which I thought were completely unconstitutional and illegal. North had a much different interpretation ... of the National Security Act of 1947, that authorized them to undertake “additional assignments” from the President — from time to time. The agency viewed that as a whole “carte blanche” for doing any covert operation they wanted to do, to overthrow any government, and to kill anybody they wanted to. You know, like as if they were in a war all the time. I thought that was a real bad idea. I also thought it was completely unconstitutional for them to be running in complete, contrary fashion, to a specific order from Congress.

And so I ran right straight into it. There we were, you know, kind of nose-to-nose, with a fundamentally, profoundly unconstitutional analysis of the authority of the executive branch, specifically the covert operations directorate of the agency. They had gotten into

this kind of self-fulfilling vision of their authority. And I disagreed with it, fundamentally.

(SFX: Street sounds)

NARRATOR:

Danny Sheehan related that Wheaton, in seeking to expose elements of the Iran-Contra operation, was being aided by his good friend and associate Carl Jenkins. Jenkins had been a long-time CIA covert operator who had trained anti-Castro Cubans for the Bay of Pigs, and had been involved in similar activities in Laos, Vietnam, and elsewhere. Jenkins was familiar with many of the principals involved in the Contra operation — including Ted Shackley, who had served in many agency roles — including as associate deputy director of operations during George HW Bush's tenure as CIA director. Shackley had previously run the CIA's anti-Castro station in Miami, and had coordinated the Phoenix Program during the Vietnam War, which tortured and killed tens of thousands of Vietnamese — both military and civilian. Danny Sheehan:

DANNY SHEEHAN:

When finally, Gene started talking with me, uh, more casually ... and, and got more comfortable with sharing information with me, you know ... he acknowledged that the way he got involved in this was ... there was a guy in Washington, that was a very high-up guy that was involved in covert operations, and that he is the guy that asked Gene to make his airplanes available for this operation, and he kept talking about this guy. Uh, and that he was very close to him, and that he knew all the people that were working in the operation and all that, and so he'd made ... he'd made ... numerous references to him, but never told me who he was.

Uh, so it was probably April ... or March, April, or so, of '86, by the time I met Carl ... And he brought me out to the safe-house. And, uh, we went to the safe-house, and went in and met him.

(SFX: Walking up sidewalk; knocking on door and entering)

DANNY SHEEHAN:

He was clearly in alliance with Gene, about trying to, somehow, do something about Shackley. That Shackley was off the reservation. Shackley was not only causing trouble, uh, but he was running it dangerously. That he was going to get caught. That, that this was going to come unraveled ... Plus, he was upset at Shackley, in a certain sense, for having been so careless, that somehow I'd found out about all this. And not just through

Gene, but I was onto ‘em already. And he thought, he said, “This shouldn’t be handled like this.”

Carl was trying limit the damage, uh, that was going to happen when it got revealed. Uh, and Gene was pressing to do more damage than probably Carl was willing to do, and they both suspected I was willing to do a lot more damage than either one of them wanted to do. But ... Shackley was who I was after. (Laughs). He, he knew that. And they were after Shackley. They wanted Shackley reigned in.

(MUSIC CUE)

NARRATOR:

Sheehan also noted that, over time, Wheaton confided to him that Jenkins was upset with Shackley over his involvement in drug smuggling during the Vietnam War, as well as with Shackley’s role in the bombing of a Saigon cafe. The bombing targeted a suspected Vietnamese spy, but ended up killing more than twenty U.S. soldiers who happened to be in the cafe.

DANNY SHEEHAN:

He was upset about the fact that, that Shackley had been involved in the ... the opium smuggling operations with Vang Pao ... uh ... ‘cause he knew that. Because he had actually been instructed (laughs) by Shackley on more than one occasion to carry suitcases of cash from Vietnam, Saigon, over to Australia to the Nugan-Hand Bank. And to deposit it into the Nugan-Hand Bank. And he just felt dirty — he didn’t like that. Now Carl never told me that, but Gene told me that.

NARRATOR:

Sheehan and Wheaton proceeded to work in tandem, with Sheehan working to build a civil case against the Iran-Contra principals, and Wheaton pursuing leads as an investigator. Danny Sheehan:

DANNY SHEEHAN:

It was more important that he was an investigator. That was his, his most important role ... our chief investigator, Bill Taylor ... what he did, is he licensed Gene ... under his professional investigative license ... And so Gene was actually working as an investigator for us, in our case. Not for pay. He absolutely refused to ever be paid for anything ... but we would cover expenses ...

NARRATOR:

Through their investigation, Sheehan and Wheaton uncovered multiple details of the illegal Contra operation, including the bases and aircraft that were being used to smuggle weapons and other contraband — including cocaine — as well as the key personnel involved. Some of these principals had long associations with the CIA, dating back to the Bay of Pigs operation to overthrow the Cuban government. Sheehan eventually compiled his findings into a civil complaint, which provided an overview of what was later termed the “Iran-Contra” affair. Former CIA analyst David MacMichael:

(MUSIC OUT)

DAVID MACMICHAEL:

First of all, you had a situation where any support for Iran, was counter to the law, O.K. And Reagan had indulged in it, all right? Second was, there was a very large popular movement in this country which opposed the aid to the Contras. And these people were outraged that the Congress, you know, that had blocked the use of funds to buy arms for the Contras, had been bypassed in this way. Lies had been told and so forth ... But the information was amazing that came out.

(SFX: Office sounds)

NARRATOR:

Danny Sheehan:

DANNY SHEEHAN:

We filed this case — the actual complaint — on the 26th, I think, of May, of 1986, on a Friday afternoon, in Miami. I come back into my office Monday morning — and, like, nine o’clock, I get a telephone call. Directly from Judge James Lawrence King. He says, “This is Judge James Lawrence King, I’m the chief federal judge of the United States District Court in the Southern District of Florida. I have your complaint in my hand right now. And I’ve decided to take this case myself.” Complete violation of the rules. You have to put it into the wheel and pick a judge at random. But he said, “In light of the sensitivity of this case, I am going to take this case myself, and I just wanted to let you know that I am placing this case under seal. Uh, and unless you are in my courtroom today, in person, by two o’clock, I’m going to enter a summary judgement against this complaint.” And so I ... I ... fortunately, I had a suit in the closet at the office ... so I jump into the suit, and I go get a cab, and ... I go down to National Airport ...

(SFX: Airline sounds)

DANNY SHEEHAN:

... and I fly down to Florida, and I ... you know ... we get to the airport, and I race in a cab over to the courthouse. I run upstairs to his chambers, and he's not in chambers, he's out in the courtroom. He's out, fully robed, sitting in the courtroom. And he's got twenty-nine lawyers sitting there. Monday afternoon. Like about 1:30 or so. From filing it Friday at four-thirty in the afternoon. And here they are, twenty-nine lawyers. They're all there.

(MUSIC CUE)

DANNY SHEEHAN:

And he said, "I'm glad to see you could make it Mister Sheehan." He said, you know, "We're up on the record here ... I'd like to just introduce you to the lawyers that are going to be representing the people you've named in your suit." He said, "Now here, representing Mister Adolfo Colero, whom you allege in your complaint to be the head of these FDN Contras, is going to be Mister Anthony Lapham. Uh, and he'll be acting as chief counsel for them." I said to myself, "Anthony Lapham ... Anthony Lapham. Oh yeah, Anthony Lapham was general counsel for the CIA under George Bush, when he was the director of the CIA."

And then he said, "Okay, now representing Mister Josphe Martin, Jr., who's the head of the Tami-Ami Gun Shop, who you allege in your complaint to be providing the false end-user certificates for these weapons you say are being flown out of the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood Airport down to Illepongo ... is Mister ..." Jones, or whatever his name was. And he said, "And you may recognize his name as well, since he was the head of the criminal division of the United States Justice Department here in Miami until last Friday at 5:00, at which point he retired. And he's decided he's going to go into private practice ..."

(MUSIC CONTINUES)

NARRATOR:

As the Christic Institute case proceeded, Sheehan brought Gene Wheaton forward to testify on the record. Since Wheaton had been conducting a detailed investigation of the Contra operation, Sheehan sought to depose him as a witness in the case.

DANNY SHEEHAN:

He viewed himself not as just an investigator, but he viewed himself as an intelligence specialist. So he was doing kind of a deep analysis of, of what was behind the scenes ... of what was going on, of who was in charge. What did the structure look like? What was

the wire diagram of the different people that were involved? And all this, etcetera ... that's the role that he played. And it was in that context that he became a witness. He tied together a lot of the information that we had had.

(MUSIC CUE OUT)

DANNY SHEEHAN:

Wheaton was in possession of first-hand, eye-witness, face-to-face meetings and evidence of the people that were actually involved in doing what we accused them of doing. That they were illegally shipping weapons — with full knowledge that it was in violation of the Bolland Amendment — to the Contras ... and that they were smuggling cocaine back into the United States ... He knew all about it from having direct conversations with people that were involved in it. Uh, so it's direct, court-admissible evidence. He would have been a primary, if not the primary witness, but we had pilots that we ... were going to subpoena, we had a whole list of all of the witnesses we were going to be presenting in court. I mean, it would have been devastating to them. You know? 'Cause we had them locked down ... we had tail numbers on the airplanes, we had the shipping invoice numbers, we had copies of invoices of the ... we had the serial numbers on weapons ... I mean, we had everything against these people. And, and he is the one who could tie it all together. He's the one who could deliver the narrative and explain what the dates were, and when the meetings were, and who the people are that he talked to, uh, etcetera. So he was a pivotal person, uh, and the thing is, that it could be established through documented evidence, and corroborating eye-witness evidence of other people that what he was saying is true.

(SFX: Street sounds)

NARRATOR:

Wheaton's videotaped deposition was conducted in Washington DC in 1988. In the deposition transcript, numerous references are made to a "security situation" that had required the deposition to be moved to a federal courthouse, instead of its original location. The move was made at the request of Wheaton, after he received a threatening phone call before the deposition. Denise Wheaton is one of Gene's daughters, and was staying in Washington DC with him at the time he was scheduled to testify.

DENISE WHEATON:

So we were staying with a friend of the family of my Dad's ... someone called and threatened him ... because they didn't want him testifying. So I don't know who found a safe house for us to go stay in ... so we went and stayed in a safe house. Where? It was in the country somewhere ... My dad and I aren't very good with safe house stuff. So

while we were staying in the safe house, my dad puts his CIA hat on, and we go to Tyson's Corner area, and go to a well-known CIA bar hang-out, and we sat in there and had a drink. (Laughs) You're not very good at staying in a safe house ... you're supposed to be staying away from all that stuff.

(SFX: Street sounds)

NARRATOR:

During Wheaton's deposition, other details emerged about threatening activity, including that an unknown man had appeared on the balcony of a Washington DC apartment where Wheaton and his wife were staying. Wheaton's son Gary recalls other unusual activity from that same time.

(MUSIC CUE IN)

GARY WHEATON:

Well I can remember issues that we had. He did speak of threats at different times, but the specific one I know of is that two gentlemen were parked outside of my sister's house. He discovered that because he's just good at spotting things.

(SFX: Street sounds)

GARY WHEATON:

He went down there, and uh, approached the vehicle. Knocked on the windows. Confronted them. And, uh, spoke to these gentlemen and asked them what they were there for. Not brandishing, but obviously his sidearm was exposed out of a holster on his hip.

That's part of congressional testimony. He made them leave, and they never showed up after that. He was definitely not intimidated, at all, as far as I could tell my entire life, by anyone. For any reason. If he had to, he would meet a problem head-on. He had, of course, through investigative means, when he was doing official business, he had other ways of doing things like that. But there wasn't anybody that would tell him not to do something, or to stand down. That's the reason that they have so much animosity against people like that because they cannot be controlled.

(MUSIC CUE OUT)

(SFX: Courtroom sounds)

NARRATOR:

Wheaton's deposition lasted for three days, and the transcript ran to over 1000 pages. Many of those pages are filled with comments from lawyers for the Iran-Contra defendants, who attempted to order Wheaton to stop testifying multiple times. Danny Sheehan:

DANNY SHEEHAN:

Well, it's clear that ... some of the lawyers that were representing the other side, like Tom Spencer, uh, and Tom Green ... they were kind of taking it personally. You know, that their job was to stop this information from coming out. Not to act just like lawyers, and just file their objections and bring it to the judge and stuff ... so they were interrupting ... trying to stop him from testifying, and challenging ... you know, in complete violation of the normal rules of a deposition ... I was taking it personally, too. I mean, I don't suggest I wasn't ... I guess we got into few exchanges, you know, where I was suggesting to them that this was inappropriate.

NARRATOR:

Judge King eventually forced Sheehan to reveal all of his sources, which exposed the identify of covert operator Carl Jenkins, who had first connected Gene Wheaton to the Contra operation. Sheehan related that Jenkins knew many Iran-Contra principals first-hand — such as former Bay of Pigs commando Chi Chi Quintero — and had described their activities to both himself and Wheaton in a series of meetings. Once Judge King insisted that Jenkins be deposed, his cooperation ended. Danny Sheehan:

DANNY SHEEHAN:

The last guy I ever coughed up ... was Carl ... and Judge King insisted that we take his deposition. Uh, and that I ... I knew that was going to cross the Rubicon (laughs). And when I noticed him for a deposition, he got a CIA lawyer to come with him. And he just kept saying over and over and over again, "I have no firsthand, personal information ... I have no firsthand, personal information." And he just kept saying that over and over and over again. Uh, so anything that he got from Chi Chi, that he had conveyed to us, all about their operations ... and I had this big, long list of particular questions and things that I know that he had told us. And he said, "I have no firsthand, personal information." Just kept saying that over and over. And I knew that was it.

NARRATOR:

In February of 1989, Judge King dismissed the Christic Institute's civil case, and imposed nearly one million dollars worth of sanctions on the organization, effectively bankrupting it.

(MUSIC CUE)

(ARCHIVAL AUDIO: IRAN-CONTRA HEARINGS)

“What I've also testified is that there were four purposes ...”

NARRATOR:

While the Christic's civil suit had ended, it had brought the Iran-Contra operation forward into public view. The exposure led to extensive congressional hearings, and criminal charges were later filed against many of the same individuals who had been named in the Christic civil lawsuit. Danny Sheehan:

DANNY SHEEHAN:

We had 'em. There wasn't — wasn't any doubt about it. We had 'em. We had, we had the pilots that were flying the stuff. We had, you know, sworn depositions from them. We had the code names for their landing. We had the maps, you know, with all the — the bearings on it, for Hull's ranch. I mean we had 'em dead to rights. There wasn't any doubt about it. You know, and it all came unfolded ... well, mostly. Except that nobody wanted to do anything about it.

NARRATOR:

Former CIA analyst David MacMichael:

DANNY MACMICHAEL:

And of course even those who did get convicted ... those who had been prosecuted and convicted, and those who were still facing prosecution, received 11th hour pardons from the then President Bush before he left office, and so Iran-Contra went into history.

But this was, as they say, a major scandal ... to my way of thinking probably the greatest constitutional scandal of American history. It was ... for reasons which I understand, but do not appreciate or condone, the Congress ... you know ... wished to sweep it under the rug as much as possible, but that's another story in itself. But it was — it's part of this story in the sense that a great many, a vast majority, in my opinion, of people in the government structure in Washington ... are wedded to the national security system and wish to protect it.

(ARCHIVAL AUDIO: IRAN-CONTRA HEARING)

“I’d like to turn now to exhibit one hundred and sixty four ...”

NARRATOR:

The Iran-Contra congressional hearings, and the criminal trials that followed, did not cover some of the most explosive allegations that had been made in the Christic Institute lawsuit. Gene Wheaton:

GENE WHEATON:

Well the Iran-Contra affair – the portion that was made public – was selling weapons to the Khomeini regime in Iran, that was designated as a terrorist state, and using the funds to support the Contras fighting in Nicaragua, down in Honduras and that area. But, in fact, the Iran-Contra real thing was huge, and much bigger than that.

(SFX: Combat sounds)

GENE WHEATON:

These covert operators were selling weapons to both sides to keep a business going. People don’t understand that the weapons business — and mercenary operations — is big business. Bigger than General Motors. And what we do is we furnish weapons to the government, and get the House and Senate Intelligence Committees to secretly approve it. But at the same time, the covert operators, when the weapons get down there, they break ‘em down into lots, and give the government less than they were supposed to have. And they sell the excess to the mercenaries and the revolutionaries, who use laundered drug money to pay for it.

(MUSIC CUE)

NARRATOR:

Drug running in support of Contra fundraising was raised in the Christic Institute complaint, but was not a focus of the Iran-Contra congressional investigation. Details about Contra-related drug trafficking would eventually emerge a decade later, in the 1996 San Jose Mercury News series authored by Gary Webb. Wheaton’s personal papers show extensive correspondence with Webb. The story of Webb’s investigation later became the basis of the film, “Kill the Messenger,” featuring Jeremy Renner.

Wheaton also investigated activity in Mena, Arkansas, that related to CIA-sponsored cocaine smuggling by pilots including Barry Seal. This later became a national story through Daniel Hopsicker’s book, “Barry and the Boys,” and was popularized through the Tom Cruise film, “American Made.” Danny Sheehan:

DANNY SHEEHAN:

He did the Mena, Arkansas investigation for us. I got this letter ... from this guy out in Mena, Arkansas. This guy, Terry Reed. And he'd gotten arrested for insurance fraud on his airplane ... I said, "Why don't you look into this?" So I xeroxed a copy of the letter, and gave it to him. I said, "Why don't you go to this Mena, Arkansas place?"

So he ... he goes down to Mena, Arkansas, and he's driving along, out by the tarmacs where all the planes are, and he's checking them all out. And then he's finding that they're putting these big fuel bladders onto these planes. So that they can fly this extra distance. He starts bumping around. And of course, he's an airplane guy, and an OSI guy, and so he ends up pushin' around and finding out that ... that uh, Barry Seal is operating out of there. You know? That whole operation is going down there. And so he ends up teaming up with some guy, uh, from the IRS.

NARRATOR:

At the time, Bill Clinton was the governor of Arkansas, and Wheaton approached his staff about his findings in Mena. Danny Sheehan:

DANNY SHEEHAN:

Gene and the IRS guy go to meet with Bill Clinton and his attorney general. Uh, and lay out what's going on in Mena, Arkansas. But it doesn't appear that Bill Clinton ever did anything, other than take the information as power.

And Gene comes back ... later ... and he was pissed-off, because Bill Clinton, within days of that meeting, flies to California ... and meets with this guy Robert Oppenop ... and decides he's going to run for the presidency. In '92. Uh, so we went straight to the governor, to try to get the governor to do something about this. But he didn't.

(MUSIC CUE OUT)

NARRATOR:

After the Iran-Contra years, Wheaton continued to pursue leads involving military and intelligence community wrong-doing — including the suspicious deaths of witnesses and would-be whistleblowers. He also spoke with investigative journalist Danny Casolaro who was trying to expose a covert network he referred to as "the Octopus." Gene Wheaton:

GENE WHEATON:

I had been investigating the murders of several U.S. military officers and CIA officers, and some of these CIA people and military people in the Pentagon wanted me to continue, but they were political “hot potatoes” that they couldn’t touch without jeopardizing their careers. So they’d sort of say, ‘Let’s you and him go fight” ... they’d tell me to go do something, and I was retired and kind of a hard-headed Okie cop and I’d go out and look at some of this stuff, and different ones would drop pieces of information that collated with the information that the others were dropping to me, to the point where I found ... I had the ... several tentacles of the same octopus that I was looking at. I used to refer to this as my “pet octopus” as a matter of fact because I kept stumbling on so many of these different tentacles. In fact, I was the one who tried to describe that to Danny Casolaro, and that’s ... I presume that’s where he got the word ... he was researching a book when he got ... killed, or died or whatever it was.

NARRATOR:

Wheaton spent the late 1980s and early 1990s pursuing several inter-related investigations, including diversions of military cargo aircraft into unsanctioned covert activities, and the 1985 airline explosion that killed 256 U.S. military personnel and crew members in Gander, Newfoundland. Wheaton disputed claims by military investigators that the plane crashed due to icing on the wings, since he had interviewed several eye witnesses who claimed that the plane exploded in mid-air shortly after take-off. He spent years trying to track down the cause of the crash, as an outside investigator for the families of several deceased soldiers. Denise Wheaton:

DENISE WHEATON:

I thought it was interesting that so many people would find him. The word just spread. People would just contact my dad ... my dad didn’t have to do anything ... he didn’t have to do anything to find an investigation ... people would just find him, and they would say, “Would you help me?” Cause no one else would.”

NARRATOR:

Wheaton’s inquiries led to two days of congressional hearings on the Gander crash. During this time, he was in contact with congressional staff, as well as members of the media. Television producer Matt Ehling interviewed Wheaton six times, and has reviewed Wheaton’s collection of personal papers:

MATT EHLING:

If you look at Wheaton’s correspondence, you’ll see that he sent and received, really, thousands of letters and faxes to lawmakers. And the same was true with members of the media — everyone from Walter Pincus of the Washington Post, to writers for local,

alternative newspapers. Wheaton was one of those rare people from inside the intelligence community who was willing to speak openly, and name names, and highlight wrongdoing.

(MUSIC CUE)

NARRATOR:

Denise Wheaton:

DENISE WHEATON:

He thought it was too important to just sit on — I have to do this, it's my civic duty as an American citizen, I think, is how he looked at it. I know it's happening, so I have to do something about it.

NARRATOR:

Among all of the issues Wheaton examined, there was one topic that he kept quiet about for years — only mentioning it in select, private conversations. Attorney Dan Sheehan says that he had one such conversation, as he and Wheaton left a CIA safe house after meeting with covert operator Carl Jenkins. Danny Sheehan:

DANNY SHEEHAN:

When we came out the door ... and we just came down off the steps ... and they closed the door, and Carl went away, and he turned to me. We were still on the sidewalk ... and he said to me, "He's not worried so much about the Shackley thing," he said. "About this operation," he said, "It's the Kennedy Assassination," he said.

NARRATOR:

In the final episode of American whistleblower, Gene Wheaton discusses the one secret he held close until near the end of this life: the involvement of his former associates in the assassination of President Kennedy.

(MUSIC CUE OUT)

NARRATOR:

You are listening to episode two of "American Whistleblower: The Gene Wheaton Story." Produced by AW Media Group and Dan Storper.

END