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BBC accused of putting MI5 agents' lives at risk



By Daniel Foggo and David Bamber

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The BBC has been accused of endangering the lives of former Special Branch and MI5 agents by revealing their identities in a television series about the security services.

There is anger at the highest levels of MI5 and Special Branch over the BBC2 True Spies documentaries, which the corporation claims are the most in-depth exposes of covert operations in Britain.

Senior officers are infuriated with the BBC for revealing the identities of sources who helped in investigations of subversive groups. Detectives within Special Branch also fear that the series will damage their ability to foster future contacts.

A senior officer within the Metropolitan Police has asked lawyers whether the retired Special Branch officers who participated could be prosecuted under the Official Secrets Act. It is also understood that MPs on the House of Commons intelligence and security committee are concerned.

The unprecedented row has been exacerbated because the three-part series - the final instalment of which will be broadcast tonight - was backed by the Association of Chief Police Officers (Acpo) and the Metropolitan Police.

As a result, retired Special Branch officers were encouraged to talk about previously secret operations in a way which apparently breaches the Official Secrets Act.

A Scotland Yard spokesman said last night: "We assisted the BBC with its research on the subject, which is closely linked with the operational history of Special Branch. A number of ex-officers approached the Met asking for advice as to whether they should contribute, which we gave them. It is incumbent on them not to do anything that could compromise operational security. However, ex-officers are private individuals and the final decision as to whether to give interviews is up to them."

It is understood that Ben Gunn, the former Chief Constable of Cambridgeshire, gave support to the project in his capacity as chairman of the security committee of Acpo. He gave a letter to Peter Taylor, the BBC journalist who wrote and presented the series, which Mr Taylor was able to show former detectives and informants. In it, Mr Gunn praised Mr Taylor's journalistic integrity and the True Spies project.

Special Branch officers are furious that support was given to Mr Taylor. One senior detective said: "There was an almighty cock-up. Once it became clear former informants were going to be identified, there was anger at the highest levels."

Evidence has also emerged that the danger to those mentioned in the programme is not imaginary. One agent, who reported from inside the National Front in the 1970s and 1980s and whose information helped to jail a gang of neo-Nazi gunrunners, found his identity and contact details revealed to a BBC camera crew by a former Special Branch officer who was co-operating with the filming.

After the BBC broadcast footage of the agent last week talking in his own voice, the National Front contacted the anti-fascist magazine Searchlight to boast that they recognised him.

The man, who was described in the programme as "Steve", had only his mouth shown, but his voice and a distinctive scar on his lips gave his identity away to NF members who have long wondered who had been the mole in their organisation.

"Steve" said last night: "The BBC contacted me out of the blue and said that my name and details had been given to them by my Special Branch handler back then. I was shocked, but they assured me that they had official permission, so I spoke to them. I got the impression MI5 was setting out its stall in some way.

"When the BBC used my voice I was even more surprised. Now I feel very vulnerable indeed, to say the least. I was so recognisable that my brother called me after watching the programme to say 'that was you'."

Gerry Gable, the publisher of Searchlight and a former television producer, said: "We were contacted this week by a member of the National Front who told us he knew who 'Steve' was, having recognised him from his voice and distinctive mouth. It is incredible that the BBC did not do more to protect his identity when you consider how sensitive the matter is.

"The series producer Sam Collyns told me repeatedly that all the former Special Branch officers and agents had been given authorisation to speak to them so they have co-operated, thinking that they would not be breaking the Official Secrets Act when it is quite obvious now that some of them have."

MI5 were furious that informers and agents were identified. One senior Whitehall official said: "MI5 would never, ever, reveal the identity of anyone who had carried out any work for the service. I know that the Security Service were shocked that the police were allowing their informers to be exposed in this way.

"The problem is that now no one will trust us. If they think they are going to be on television in 20 years' time, no one will tell us anything."

MI5 has a strict policy of never allowing details of agents or informers to be made public. It still keeps secret the identities of people in Ireland who helped military intelligence 100 years ago, in case their descendants face problems now.

Sam Collyns, the producer of True Spies, said : "I am not naive enough to believe there are not dissenting voices within the police and security service over what we did."

He added that he and his colleagues had "authorisation from the very top", having spoken to a number of chief constables as well as Sir John Stevens, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner. He said that they had given help in providing subjects to be interviewed.

"Steve" had co-operated of his own free will, he said, but admitted: "He was partially disguised - I would not pretend he was completely disguised. There was always a high probability that if people wanted to know who he was they could work it out."