

FEMALE AND OVER FORTY? *You're an ideal spy!*

Curious, dogged, and able to multitask – three female spooks share their experiences with Lauren Mc Diarmid

Spy chiefs should recruit more women – and could do worse than targeting mid-life mothers. The murky, yet fascinating, world of spying has yielded some intriguing female figures, and in the UK, where women currently make up over a third of spies, a government report has suggested that mid-career mothers should be targeted for their emotional intelligence and “valuable life experience”. But what’s it like to work as a female spy? And why do women make better spooks? We spoke to three South African women in the field to find out.

‘Being undercover was so isolating, because I could never tell anyone what I was doing’

Olivia Forsyth, 55, is a former spy for the apartheid government. She was with the now-defunct Security Branch for eight years, and wrote *Agent 407: A South African Spy Breaks Her Silence*, about her experiences. Olivia lives in Tuscany with her husband Eric, 67, and has two grown-up daughters.

“I never pictured myself as a spy. After graduating with a degree in languages from the University of Witwatersrand, I joined the then Department of Foreign Affairs in 1981, and dreamt of travelling the world. I was posted to the Protocol section at the Union Buildings in Pretoria as a cadet, where I was responsible for issuing diplomatic passports, some to National Intelligence Service (NIS) agents. One of them told me that he travelled the

recruited as an intelligence operative. I was trained in surveillance-, reporting-communication-, and observation techniques, and did a panel of problem-solving and psychological tests. I was made to feel that I was part of something special. At the time, I knew very little about apartheid, and I just joined the SB because I thought it was a cool job. I was told the service’s greatest concern was communism; that they weren’t racist.



world collecting info, which sounded ideal.

Later that same year, I joined the Security Branch (SB) of the South African Police (SAP) as a sergeant, and was

It was only when I was sent to Rhodes University in Grahamstown in 1982 that I realised I was working for a cause I didn’t agree with. I was there undercover as a student to build up my profile as a left-wing activist. It was easy enough to play the role; I was recruited because I blended in well. I became a student leader in the anti-apartheid movement, and was promoted to lieutenant.

I couldn’t talk to anyone about the work I did. It was a challenge to covertly get picked up from a neutral location to voice-record my reports, give info and tip-offs about what was going on at the university, and do drop-offs.

After a change of heart, I decided to become a spy for the “other side”. I could have left and given up my career, but that would mean I’d be unable to work against apartheid. The only way to do it was to defect to the ANC as a double agent, but I had to wait for the right opportunity.

That chance came when I was sent to Harare in 1985, once I’d finished studying, still undercover as an activist. It was there that I joined the ANC as a spy for them. I felt at peace – I was finally on the right side. For months, I went between the ANC and the SB successfully, until one day, my luck ran out. I was taken to Quatro, an ANC camp in Angola. Up until that point, I didn’t think I was in danger, because I thought I was just there for training.

I was imprisoned with a group of women for eight months in a three- by >>

undercover lives

four-metre room. The only light and air we had came through a tiny window in a corner of the room, and a thin gap under the door. When we were allowed out, we had to run everywhere, and avoid making eye contact with the guards, which was considered disrespectful. By the time I was released in February 1987, I didn't recognise myself – my face was gaunt, and my skin had a grey-green tinge.

To this day, don't know who ordered my arrest. Once I was released, I spent 15 months in an ANC safe house, before escaping to the British Embassy in Luanda, Angola. I resigned from the services in 1989; I was relieved, and desperate to start living a normal life once again. I became a mother and worked from home. In 2001, I moved with my daughters to the UK, where I was born.

I was lucky that I didn't develop any long-term trust issues. I have been quite open about my past, and the only time that I've changed my work description was when applying for a job as an English teacher in the UK.

Most women are empathetic, good listeners, and can assess a situation quite quickly. They're also able to multitask, and can compartmentalise, making it easier to separate work- from home life, which is important if your work is top secret.

If you want to be a spy, you have to be comfortable with the work you're doing, and who you're doing it for. There are many roles in intelligence; only a small number of operatives work undercover. It's not at all like what we see in James Bond films, but it can be exciting if you find the right fit."

Agent 407: A South African Spy Breaks Her Silence (Jonathan Ball), by Olivia Forsyth, is available on takealot.com

Women in espionage

➔ **VALERIE PLAME WILSON** was publicly ousted as a CIA agent in 2003. She wrote *Fair Game*, on which the 2010 film of the same name was based.

➔ **MARTHA CNOCKAERT** was a Belgian nurse working undercover for the UK in a German hospital during WWI. She wrote her memoir, *I was a Spy!*, in 1932.

➔ **MATA HARI**, an exotic dancer, was discovered to be a double agent for France and Germany in WWI, and subsequently executed.

'There's a personal element to my work; it helps to have a softer side'



Glenda Paul, 40, lives in Mountain View. She's a private investigator in financial crime.

"I've been told I stick out like a sore thumb – I'm only 5ft tall, but my strong personality's been compared to a pit bull's. It definitely helps with the work I do, but I probably couldn't go undercover.

I joined IRS Forensic Investigations in 2009. We investigate financial crime, which I became interested in during my five years in the police service. I was led away from the service into the banks, where I worked my way up to fraud-investigation.

Financial crime is always difficult to pin down. The crime itself stays the same, but technology is evolving so quickly, and it's important to stay ahead, so I'm more studious now than ever before!

Our work has its dangers, and we've received a few threats while working on some trying cases. Luckily, none played out, so I take them with a pinch of salt.

I'm naturally suspicious because of my work, and my police experience went a long way toward building up my intuition. It's crucial in this business to be logical, to better connect the dots; and be analytical, to look beyond the surface.

There's always a personal element involved in working with our clients, so it does help to have a bit of a softer side, too. Often, they're at the end of their tether, and it's hard not to feel for them.

When it all gets to be a bit much, I know that once I'm home, I can just relax. I'm close to my family, and am a big foodie. I cook a lot and, on weekends, I'll try out different restaurants I've heard about. It's a great escape from the very different world I'm immersed in daily."

'I've heard some hair-raising confessions doing polygraph tests'



Polygraphist Lynette Heyns, 42, lives in Fish Hoek with her husband Dirk, 42, their son Adriaan, 21, and daughter Linique, 18.

"My dad was a police detective, and as soon as I turned 18, I joined the force. I was a detective for over 15 years, and loved my work, but during a polygraph course I took in 2006, I became hooked. I started working with my brother, Paul, in 2007 at his company, Sky Polygraph & Detective Agency.

I solved my first case while I was still studying polygraphy. For practise, the students had to test each other after exams to see if anyone had cheated, and we caught five students who had! And to think they thought they could get away with it – in a polygraph school!

I now do pre-employment interviews for companies, and question robbery suspects in private cases. I don't work

with the SAPS a lot, but did polygraph two suspects in a murder case in 2009 who failed the test, and were later found guilty.

I'm often underestimated and, sadly, disrespected because I'm a woman. A few of the men I've tested have made rude gestures and comments, but I've learnt to brush them off, because I know they're just doing it to try manipulate me.

My police experience helps me to understand people and get to know them better. It's also useful when I'm doing polygraph tests, because I can get people to open up more easily. You need to be strong, because you deal with all kinds characters. I've heard some hair-raising confessions – like one from a man interviewing for a driving job, who confessed to being involved in a murder!

Being a mom has sharpened my intuition, which works to my advantage. I've never given my children or husband a polygraph test, because we have very trusting relationships, but that's not to say I won't threaten my kids with it!

I eat, sleep, and breathe crime-solving! I read crime novels and watch detective series, and if I get a call-out at 11pm on a public holiday to do tests, I'll take it. It's so rewarding solving cases for clients, but you've got to put in the work." **w&h**