

Parents of accused spy defend son's character, patriotism

■ **CIA:** The government charges Harold Nicholson sold secrets to Russia to pay his divorce settlement

The Associated Press

EUGENE — The parents of a CIA officer accused of spying for Russia say their son would never jeopardize his career, his family and his country.

Harold J. Nicholson — "Jim" to everyone who knows him — takes his children bowling, calls his mother for advice about roasting a turkey and proudly displayed an American flag in his Oregon State University dormitory window at the height of the anti-Vietnam War movement in 1969.

"Some guys in the room above them put a North Vietnamese flag in their window," said Nicholson's mother, Betty, a retired U.S. Forest Service worker. "Jim and his roommate went up and took it down. 'There's no flag above the U.S. flag!' they said."

Before a judge imposed a gag or-

der last week, the government had painted a portrait of Nicholson, 46, as a greed-driven turncoat who sold secrets to the Russians to finance a divorce settlement and then to romance a woman in Thailand.

But Nicholson's father, Marvin "Nick" Nicholson, 66, a retired Air Force master sergeant, says his son is innocent.

"He's too smart of a man to do what they say he did," Marvin Nicholson said.

"It sounds totally ridiculous to us," his wife said.

Harold Nicholson, the highest-ranking CIA officer ever charged with espionage, is facing evidence that allegedly includes failed polygraph tests, deleted files recovered from his computer, videotape of him photographing documents under his desk, and a rendezvous with a Russian agent in Singapore witnessed by the FBI.

Nicholson has pleaded innocent to the charges, which have devastated a close-knit family that includes Jim's sister, Tammy, 35,

and brother Robert, 30.

Nicholson won custody of his three children in a nasty legal battle with his ex-wife, but she has since taken them — Jeremiah, 18, Star, 15, and Nathaniel, 12 — to an unknown location, Nicholson's parents said.

"What he talks about with us is the kids — whether they have a means of support now that their bank accounts have been frozen, whether or not they're back in school," Betty Nicholson said.

Nicholson's brother, Robert, had taken vacation time to fly back to Washington, D.C., to stay with the children while Nicholson headed overseas. Before he could depart, however, Nicholson was arrested by FBI agents at Dulles Airport on Nov. 16.

"Robert called and said, 'Have you heard the news?'" Betty Nicholson said. "I said, 'Oh, my God, Jim's plane has crashed!' But Robert said, 'No — he's been arrested. I said, 'Arrested? What for?' And he said 'Espionage.'"

Like his lawyers, Nicholson's

parents say he can explain deposits totaling \$120,000, ranging from a Swiss bank account to Eugene's Selco Credit Union.

Their son earned a good salary, the Nicholsons said, and he made many investments over the years with money he saved when his job provided residences, government cars and even private school tuition for his children.

"He started putting money in those Selco accounts as soon as his children were born," Nick said. "And the Swiss bank account was in his own name, despite all the intelligence training he had. He obviously wasn't trying to hide anything."

Nicholson's parents say he had a few nice suits he wore to work. But mostly he dressed casually, favoring sockless sandals and wash-and-wear clothes. He had one vehicle and spent most of his nonworking hours with his kids.

Betty Nicholson said that when her son heard the FBI intended to seize his artwork, he joked, "I guess they want my Rembrandts."

"The FBI took an appraiser out," she said, and promptly reported, "That stuff is worthless. It's junk."

His parents and friends doubt the financial and emotional strains caused by his divorce would cause him to betray his country.

"His job was full of risks and pressures very few people in this country know," said Leonard Beystrom, best man at Nicholson's military wedding in 1973 and a friend since eighth grade. "He was trained to handle all kinds of situations. He was working things out."

Nicholson was an honors student and earned a four-year ROTC scholarship to Oregon State. He was born in Woodburn but attended elementary schools in Illinois and Okinawa, Japan. He went to junior high in Tacoma, Wash., then attended Desert High School near Edwards Air Force Base in California while his father worked on a then top-secret project: development of the Blackbird SR-71 spy plane.

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