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Snowden Doomed to Dreadful Life in a Capsule

By Michael Bohm

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Two weeks have passed since former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden received temporary asylum from Russia, and he hasn't uttered a word. Nor do we know where he is located.

The only information we have is a cryptic statement on Aug. 1 from Snowden's Russian lawyer, Anatoly Kucherena, that he is staying with "American friends" as part of his "acclimatization" process in Russia.

But who are these American friends? And how exactly is he being "acclimatized"?

It could very well be the case that these Americans are really FSB agents and that Snowden is staying in a government dacha under close surveillance.

Snowden might have landed in Moscow by accident and didn't start out as an agent for Russian intelligence, as the authorities claim. But he may have essentially become one as

a condition for receiving asylum.

During Snowden's 40 days in Sheremetyevo Airport's transit zone, he likely worked closely with Russian authorities as a condition for receiving asylum protection. According to leading independent intelligence experts, Snowden may have revealed to FSB agents additional detailed information about how the NSA spies on Russia, helping the FSB better circumvent those measures. In addition, Snowden may have shared NSA blueprints that amount to, according to Guardian columnist Glenn Greenwald, "basically the instruction manual for how the NSA is built."

If this is the case, Snowden's "acclimatization" is probably a prolonged debriefing process by authorities to make sure he understands the strict, confined rules that he will now have to live by as a "refugee."

Because of Snowden's record of leaking information, the FSB is probably taking extra measures to make sure he now fully understands the meaning of the words "top secret." After all, the Kremlin dislikes — and highly distrusts — leakers even more than the White House does and will thus keep Snowden on a particularly short, tight leash.

If there is one message Russian authorities want to deliver to Snowden during this acclimatization period, it is: "Ed, you aren't in Hawaii anymore."

So what can Snowden do in Russia on such a tight leash?

Technically, the American is only a temporary refugee. But this status will likely be renewed indefinitely every year, dooming Snowden to stay in Russia forever because he cannot risk traveling to his preferred locations of Nicaragua, Bolivia or Venezuela. Or he could simply receive Russian citizenship.

As far as full-time work, the founder of the social networking site Vkontakte, Pavel Durov, has offered Snowden a cushy job that presumably would pay no less than the $200,000 annual salary he earned at Booz Allen, the NSA contractor.

"Snowden could help millions of our users protect the privacy of their correspondences," Durov said, according to Interfax.

Good luck with that.

Even if Snowden were allowed to take that position, he would certainly have his work cut out for him at Vkontakte, given the purportedly close working relationships between major Russian-based websites and the Federal Security Service.

But judging by Russia's treatment of other defectors from the intelligence community, the authorities won't allow Snowden to take a high-profile position with a prominent company. Most likely, he will remain in an isolated location with minimal contact with the outside world — a form of house arrest. What's more, he will probably be limited to an unchallenging job that is a huge drop from the prestigious one he had at Booz Allen.

Snowden's life in Russia will likely resemble that of Lee Harvey Oswald.

Oswald left the U.S. Marines, renounced U.S. citizenship and defected to the Soviet Union in 1959. Although Oswald was given generous perks by Soviet standards, the authorities sent him to Minsk to work as a lowly lathe operator at a drab electronics factory. "There is nothing to buy with the money I earn," Oswald complained at one point. "No nightclubs or bowling alleys, no places of recreation except the trade union dances. I have had enough."

What's more, Oswald was under constant surveillance.

Oswald lasted only 2 1/2 years in the Soviet "workers' paradise" and begged the U.S. Embassy in Moscow to issue him a new passport so he could return to the U.S., which he did in 1962, a little more than a year before U.S. President John F. Kennedy was killed.

Although Snowden can find more ways to spend his money in modern-day Russia than Oswald could, he will still be under constant surveillance. Snowden will likely have to give regular accounts to Lubyanka of all of his activities, his movement within Russia will be heavily controlled, any media appearances will have to be cleared by the FSB, and his phone calls and e-mails will be closely tracked.

The irony, of course, is that once Snowden experiences the full brunt of FSB's suffocating control, the "U.S. surveillance state" that he fought so hard to dismantle will seem like child's play in comparison.

If Snowden was bored, claustrophobic and depressed living in the capsule hotel at Sheremetyevo Airport for six weeks, he's got a lot more of that coming. Living like a refugee on the FSB's strict terms, he will soon realize that he never really left that capsule after all.

But unlike Oswald, Snowden won't be able to turn to the U.S. Embassy to pluck him out of this Russian capsule.

It is precisely these confined and restricted circumstances that doomed nearly every U.S. defector — from "Big Bill" Haywood in 1921 to Edward Lee Howard, who died in 2002 at his Moscow dacha — to a life of depression, boredom and alcoholism in Russia. It is no surprise that nearly all of them died in their 50s.

Perhaps President Vladimir Putin put it best in July 2010 after he met with Anna Chapman and the other sleeper agents who returned to Moscow after a Russian turncoat snitched on them: "The lives of traitors always end badly ... either from alcoholism or from drugs."

In the upcoming months, Snowden might be paraded in carefully orchestrated appearances on state-controlled television as a "brave whistleblower, dissident and human rights defender against U.S. repression." But once the authorities have milked everything they can from him, Snowden, like other U.S. defectors, will wither away in isolation and despair — dreaming of the comfortable, successful life he once had in the U.S. before he leaked classified information.

In the end, life in his eternal Russian capsule may be nearly as bad if he had received a prison sentence in the U.S.

Michael Bohm is opinion page editor of The Moscow Times.

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