



## Peter Rafael Dzibinski Debbins

- 46 years old at time of sentencing
- Debbins mother was born in the Soviet Union
- Debbins met his wife in the Russian city of Chelyabinsk, where they were married in 1997
- Granted a Secret eligibility determination in 1996
- Granted a Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmented Information (TS/SCI) eligibility determination in 2004 (later suspended)



# CDSE

Center for Development of Security Excellence

# CASE STUDY

## Espionage

### WHAT HAPPENED

Peter Rafael Dzibinski Debbins was born in Minnesota, and his mother was born in the former Soviet Union. While growing up, Debbins developed a strong interest in the Russian Federation in part due to his mother's heritage. He regarded himself as a "son of Russia." Debbins first visited Russia in 1994, when he was 19 years old. He traveled to Russia frequently between 1995 and 2010. During one of his early visits to Russia, Debbins met his now-wife in Chelyabinsk, a city in Russia with a nearby Russian air force base. They married in 2007.

Debbins began meeting with Russian intelligence officers beginning in 1996, when he was a Reserve Officers' Training Corps student at the University of Minnesota. Sometime in 1997, he signed a statement saying he wanted to serve Russia and was assigned a code name by Russian intelligence agents — Ikar Lesnikov.

After graduating, Debbins received a reserve commission in the U.S. Army and served on active duty as an officer in the U.S. Army. Debbins deployed to the Republic of Korea as a Lieutenant in the Fourth Chemical Company. In 2001, Debbins joined the U.S. Army Special Forces. In June 2003, after completion of his training, Debbins served as a Captain in the First Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group stationed in Germany and granted a Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmented Information eligibility determination (TS/SCI). His unit deployed to Azerbaijan in 2004. During this deployment, Debbins committed a security violation and was removed from his command. His national security eligibility was also suspended.

Debbins' bitterness over his Army career was a major motivation for his willingness to provide information to his Russian handlers. Over the course of the conspiracy, Debbins provided Russian intelligence agents with sensitive details about his chemical and Special Forces units. Debbins also provided the Russian intelligence agents with names and information about several of his former Special Forces team members, allowing the agents to recruit them to conspire with the Russian intelligence service.

Debbins was arrested and charged under the Espionage Act. He subsequently pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 15 years and 8 months in prison.

### INDICATORS

- **Access Attributes** – As a U.S. Army Reserve Officer, had knowledge of troop strength, armaments, training, and other information that would be valuable to a foreign adversary.
- **Allegiance to the United States** – Debbins' Russian heritage prompted his deep interest in Russia and its culture. Debbins regarded himself as a "son of Russia." He had frequent contact with foreign intelligence agents.
- **Foreign Influence and Preference** – Debbins traveled frequently to Russia and married a Russian woman.
- **Security and Compliance Issues** – While deployed in Azerbaijan, Debbins was investigated for a security violation and removed from his command. His national security eligibility was also suspended.

## IMPACT

- “Debbins flagrantly and repeatedly sold out his country, including while he served as a Captain in the U.S. Army Special Forces,” said Raj Parekh, Acting U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia. “The defendant’s brazen disclosures to Russian intelligence agents jeopardized U.S. national security and threatened the safety of his fellow service members. This prosecution underscores our firm resolve to hold accountable those who betray their sworn oath and bring them to justice for their exceptionally serious crimes.”
- “Debbins violated his oath as a U.S. Army officer, betrayed the Special Forces, and endangered our country’s national security by revealing classified information to Russian intelligence officers, providing details of his unit, and identifying Special Forces team members for Russian intelligence to try to recruit as a spy,” said John C. Demers, Assistant Attorney General for National Security. “His conduct is a personal betrayal of colleagues and country, and it reflects the threat of Russian intelligence operations targeting our military. Today’s almost 16-year sentence reflects the seriousness of his conduct. It should also serve as a warning to those who would be tempted to do the same.”

## ADDITIONAL INFO

- Debbins first visited Russia in 1994, when he was 19 years old. Thereafter, he traveled to Russia in 1995, 1996 - 1997, 1997-1998, 1999, 2000, 2003, 2008, and 2010.
- During one of his early visits to Russia, Debbins met his now-wife in Chelyabinsk, a city in Russia with a nearby Russian air force base. Debbins and his wife married in Chelyabinsk in November 1997. Debbins’ father-in-law was an officer in the Russian military and lived in Chelyabinsk. Debbins’ wife, who was born in Russia, naturalized as a U.S. citizen in July 2010.
- Debbins graduated from the University of Minnesota in September 1997 and received a reserve commission in the U.S. Army. In July 1998, Debbins began his active-duty service in the Army. Between his graduation in September 1997 and returning to the United States to start his active-duty service in July 1998, Debbins lived and worked in Russia.

### Questions to consider:

- What signs of foreign preference might have been observable by Debbins’ friends, family, or co-workers?
- What programs does your organization offer to educate employees about concerning behaviors and how to report them?

### Resources for further exploration:

- Counterintelligence Awareness and Reporting for DOD CI116.16  
(<https://www.cdse.edu/Training/eLearning/CI116>)
- Espionage Target - You  
(<https://www.cdse.edu/Training/Security-Training-Videos/Insider-Threat/Espionage-Target-You>)
- Counterintelligence and Insider Threat Support to Security Video  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqqku1cSRj8>)

## Supporting Through Reporting!

Contact the appropriate POC to report any observed potential risk indicators:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Title: Supervisor/Security Officer/ITP

Agency/Department: \_\_\_\_\_  
Senior Official/ITP Manager