REALITY WINNER

- 26 years old (at time of sentencing)
- Defense contractor supporting an NSA facility
- Six-year Air Force veteran prior to contract position

CDSE

Center for Development of Security Excellence

CASE STUDY

Unlawful Retention and Transmission of National Defense Information

WHAT HAPPENED

Reality Winner was a contractor at the National Security Agency (NSA) facility in Georgia. Prior to that position, she served in the United States (U.S.) Air Force from 2010-2016 and held a Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmented Information security clearance (TS/SCI). She continued to hold a TS/SCI at the NSA.

Winner had a deep distrust of the current administration according to her journal discovered during an investigation. She also posted on social media and expressed support for Taliban leaders and Osama bin Laden as well as proclaiming that she wanted to burn down the White House.

Winner installed software on her computer that enabled her to surf the internet, chat, and send instant messages anonymously. She researched whether it was possible to insert a thumb drive into a Top Secret computer without it being detected, and inserted an unauthorized thumb drive never recovered by the government, into a Top Secret computer.

On May 9, 2017, Winner used the unauthorized software to search for, identify, and print a classified intelligence report of a U.S. Government Agency dated May 5, 2017. Winner then secreted the document in her pantyhose and removed it from the building. On May 9, Winner sent a hard copy of the intelligence report to an online news outlet. The intelligence report revealed the sources and methods used to acquire the information contained in the report, which, if disclosed, would be harmful to the United States and valuable to our adversaries.

In an interview with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) on June 3, 2017, Winner admitted knowing that the document contained information about intelligence sources and methods, which she knew was valuable to U.S. adversaries. She also admitted knowing that the information contained in the intelligence report had not been released to the public. Winner, had been trained on the proper handling of classified information, and knew that she was not permitted to remove the intelligence report from the facility where she worked, retain it, or transmit it to the news outlet.

INDICATORS

- **Access Attributes –** Winner held a TS/SCI and had access to classified information.
- **Security and Compliance Incidents –** Winner researched how to insert a thumb drive into a computer without it being detected and attempted to do so.
- **Technical Activity** Winner installed a sophisticated software tool on her computer designed to render her internet activity anonymously and untraceable. Evidence found on her computer shows an image of addresses for media outlets seeking leaked information.

IMPACT

- Winner plead guilty to one-count of unlawful retention and transmission of national defense information. She was sentenced to 63 months in prison followed by a three-year term of supervised release.
- The sentence was announced by Assistant Attorney General for National Security John C. Demers, "The defendant schemed to take and disclose classified information she had sworn to protect – and then did so almost as soon as she had the chance. Today, she has been held accountable for her crime thanks to the hard work of the Department's prosecutors and agents. I hope their success will deter others from similar unlawful action in the future."
- "[Winner] used her position of trust to steal and divulge closely guarded intelligence information," said U.S. attorney Bobby L. Christine. "Her betrayal of the United States put at risk sources and methods of intelligence gathering, thereby offering advantage to our adversaries.

ADDITIONAL INFO

- When obtaining Top Secret clearance as a government employee or contractor, the handling of top secret information is clearly spelled out along with the ramifications of mishandling such information.
- Information may be classified as TOP SECRET if its unauthorized disclosure can reasonably be expected to cause exceptionally grave damage to the national security of the United States.
- Winner's actions were not protected as a "protected disclosure." Disclosure to a media outlet is not "whistleblowing." Presidential Policy Directive/PPD-19 states that a "Protected Disclosure is: (a) a disclosure of information by the employee to a **supervisor in the employee's direct chain of command** up to and including the head of the employing agency, … or to an employee designated to receive such disclosures, that the employee reasonably believes evidences is a violation of any law, rule, or regulation; or (ii) gross mismanagement, a gross waste of funds, an abuse of authority, or a substantial and specific danger to public health or safety." [emphasis added]

Questions to consider:

- What distinguishes a "whistleblower" from an "unauthorized disclosure?"
- If you know of an unauthorized disclosure, to whom should you report it?

Resources for further exploration:

- Presidential Policy Directive/PPD-19 (https://www.va.gov/about_va/docs/president-policy-directive-ppd-19.pdf)
- Dangerous Disclosure: Graphic Novel by PERSEREC, April 2020 (https://www.cdse.edu/Portals/124/Documents/jobaids/insider/dangerous-disclosure.pdf?ver=oaV4Ra01RIWPOdIkeDRudA%3d%3d)
- Unauthorized Disclosure of Classified Information and Controlled Unclassified Information Course (https://www.cdse.edu/Training/eLearning/IF130/)

IF YOU SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING!

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

Name: _____ Agency/Department: _____
Title: Supervisor/Security Officer/ITP Senior Official/ITP Manager