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## Who Was Elizabeth Hanson? Book reveals the secret circumstances surrounding the death of the CIA's rising star

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# WHO WAS

Book reveals the secret circumstances surrounding the death of the CIA's rising star

# *Elizabeth Hanson?*

By Gerry Boyle '78

When Elizabeth C. Hanson '02 died in December 2009, along with six other CIA operatives killed by a suicide bomber in Afghanistan, little was publicly known about what the young woman did and why the agency had dispatched her to Afghanistan.

But *Washington Post* reporter Joby Warrick began investigating the attack, and soon the *Post* was reporting facts of the case: that the CIA personnel were killed by an informant, that the informant was someone the CIA believed to have infiltrated the highest ranks of al-Qaeda, that there was concern the informant might not be trustworthy. Warrick also revealed how shaken his CIA sources were by the loss of their colleagues.

"The way this incident hit them was so emotional," Warrick said in an interview for *Colby*. "We all got drawn into learning about who these people were."







The result was his book *The Triple Agent*, published last fall, which recounts the events that led up to the attack by the informant, Jordanian Humam Khalil al-Balawi. The book profiles the seven CIA agents who died and reveals concerns some had about what turned out to be a fatal meeting. Warrick, who has won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting, said he has continued to talk to CIA sources since the book was published, adding to the portrait of Hanson, an elite “targeter” who culled information to hunt down terrorists sought by the agency.

“She was an amazing person who did a job that most folks would never hear about,” Warrick said. “And she was quite good at it.”

In fact sources quoted in the book told Warrick that Hanson was one of the CIA’s most talented “terrorist hunters,” attracting the attention and praise of her supervisors and CIA directors Leon Panetta and Michael Hayden. Before she turned 30, she had been promoted to lead a high-level group of targeters charged with hunting down al-Qaeda leaders on a list that included Osama bin Laden.

“I talked to some of her supervisors, and they said she just was remarkably gifted at what it takes to be one of these targeters,” Warrick said. “And that is the ability to assimilate torrents of information to look for clues, to be a detective, to think innovatively about where to find things, about where people might be. And just to have the courage to tackle the information to help the agency when it clearly goes after people.”

E-mail, wiretaps, reports from informants, information gleaned from the Internet—it was monitored and analyzed around the clock in the underground facility at the CIA’s headquarters in Langley, Va., where Hanson worked.

Hanson not only analyzed the information, she also helped decide when the intelligence was sufficient to kill the person targeted, usually through a missile strike by a Predator drone.

“She wasn’t the one making the authorization,” Warrick said, “but she was the one making the recommendation ... and following it through to the very end, watching with her eyes on the screen as this was being carried out.

from a cloak-and-dagger operation to one geared to tracking information online or over the airwaves or through sophisticated electronic surveillance.

While it quickly became apparent that Hanson’s analytical skills were formidable, her casual style also became her trademark, Warrick writes. She typically wore jeans and flip flops at work, sometimes putting her mane of blonde hair in pigtails. The book reports that she kept

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“As you can imagine, that’s not something everybody can do. It takes a certain amount of fortitude but also the conviction that you’re doing the right thing.”

Hanson joined the CIA in 2005, he said, when she was just 26. While Colby records showed that she worked for a consulting firm in Washington, that company was a CIA cover. “I’ve got a copy of her ID badge [from the consulting firm],” he said. “It wasn’t a real job.”

She was prepped at The Farm, the CIA facility where new hires go through the intelligence version of basic training. Though the instruction includes firearms training and other military skills, Hanson was part of a crop of tech-savvy officers hired after 9/11, the book says, as the CIA changed

a pair of dressier shoes under her desk in case she had to report to higher-ups about al-Qaeda.

“And yet she not only did it, but she was really good at it,” Warrick said. “She was a surprising person, I think. Her supervisors talked about that combination that made her endearing. People respected her, but they couldn’t help but like her. That likeability aspect combined with the ability to be absolutely cold and methodical doing her job.”

Hanson was funny, sometimes goofy, charming and disarming, the book says. Some of her closest CIA friends knew her by her childhood nickname, “Monkie,” after monkey sock puppets made in her hometown of Rockford, Ill.

Hanson's Colby friends, including those she remained close to up until her death, said they knew little about her professional life. Warrick said the confidential nature of the job leads to a collegiality among people in the intelligence community. They date one another and socialize—go to bars and dinner parties with their colleagues, “the few you can talk to about it and really understand what you’re going through.”

According to a CIA officer who worked with Hanson and asked that his name not be used in this story, Elizabeth C. Hanson was known in CIA ranks as an young officer who was undaunted by the toughest assignments. In remarks delivered at a memorial service held for the seven fallen CIA officers on Feb. 5, 2010, the colleague said, “Liz kept a paperweight on her desk wherever she worked with the question inscribed ‘What would you do if you knew you could not fail.’ When



*Elizabeth Hanson '02 shortly before she reported to Afghanistan in 2009. She died four months later.*

Hanson), and 200 other government and CIA officials. While the ceremony was solemn, Hanson's CIA colleague made sure to include the quick wit that Hanson showed even in the most stressful situations. “There are several ‘Lizisms’ I could recite,” the col-

league said, in prepared remarks, “but my favorite was when we would brainstorm an idea—which may have been ahead of its time—Liz would remark “Sure that’s going to happen ... and I want a pony!”

her seriousness about her job. Said CIA Media Spokesperson Preston Golson, “Liz Hanson was a very courageous and talented officer and is remembered by her agency colleagues as being incredibly smart, energetic, and devoted. Colby College has every reason to be proud to have her as an alumna.”

In her more than two years as a targeter at Langley, Hanson had helped find “some of the biggest targets in the jihadist world,” according to Warrick. But she hadn’t worked in the field, which would give her the opportunity to talk to informants directly, ask her own questions. It also would broaden her areas of expertise, which would be needed if she were to continue her rapid ascent through the CIA ranks.

“That’s what I think she was trying to cultivate for herself,” Warrick said. “[The skills] don’t always go hand in hand but, for someone who is on the trajectory she was on, they’re always looking to increase their ability in multiple areas.”

Hanson volunteered for duty in Afghanistan to her mother’s chagrin. Her mother, also named Elizabeth Hanson, worried that Kabul was dangerous and tried to talk her daughter out of her decision, Warrick writes. The younger Hanson went anyway and in August 2009 arrived in Kabul. She continued to work as a targeter, based in the fortified U.S. Embassy, but sometimes she met informants at safe houses. Her targets were al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders, including bin Laden.

But it was the informant al-Balawi that took Hanson to Khost, a mountain base on the Pakistan border, where the CIA team assembled in December to await the informant’s arrival.

Al-Balawi had been inserted into Pakistan by Jordanian intelligence months before and had tantalized his handlers with what appeared to be access to the top

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“Liz kept a paperweight on her desk wherever she worked with the question inscribed ‘What would you do if you knew you could not fail.’”

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given some of our agency’s most difficult missions, Liz was relentless, always seeking to fight terrorists in new and brilliant ways.”

The ceremony at CIA headquarters in Langley, Va., was attended by President Obama, CIA Director Panetta (who knew

echelons of al-Qaeda. He produced video of meetings with senior al-Qaeda leaders and recounted his interactions with people wanted by the CIA. The meeting in Khost was to be his first debriefing.

Warrick's book recounts extensive negotiation about security at the meeting, including whether al-Balawi would be searched. A senior CIA officer at the base decided to bypass standard security measures in order to ensure that al-Balawi would feel comfortable. Hanson, while not involved in security, would have been aware of the discussions and concerns, Warrick said.

"Everybody knew this was a big deal," he said. "Potentially some big things could happen because of this informant. There was also some nervousness about who he was—was he a con artist. She was part of that discussion, that anxiety level that preceded his arrival."

According to Warrick, Hanson called her mother the night before the scheduled meeting and ended the conversation by saying, "Pray for me. Just say a prayer that it goes well." 

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## A SCHOLARSHIP FUND

"Unlike many people, Elizabeth never had to worry one day about paying for her college, which is extraordinary in today's world," said Elizabeth A. Hanson of her daughter, Elizabeth C. Hanson '02. "That said, I don't think a month, often a week that went by she didn't say to me, out loud, 'Thank you, Mom, for my college education.'"

The Elizabeth C. Hanson Scholarship Fund was established by Hanson's friends after her death. An anonymous alumnus has pledged to match all future gifts from members of the classes of 2001 and 2002. More information is available at [www.colby.edu/memorialgifts](http://www.colby.edu/memorialgifts) or by contacting Christine Marden, 207-859-4388, [cbmarden@colby.edu](mailto:cbmarden@colby.edu).

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## A Sense of Duty

Elizabeth Ann Hanson said she had read only parts of *The Triple Agent*, the book that recounts events surrounding the death of her daughter, CIA officer Elizabeth Curry Hanson '02. But Hanson knows the story.

"I know everything that is in there, because everyone who is still alive, anyone who has been involved with it, I have talked with each and every one of them," she said. "I don't know the book, but I do know them."

Many members of what she calls the CIA "extended family" called or wrote to her on Feb. 14, which would have been Elizabeth's 33rd birthday. A group that she calls "amazingly and wonderfully" close-knit has taken her in, she said.

Hanson said the members of the group are committed to each other and to their work. Elizabeth C. Hanson pursued her career, her mother said, not out of personal ambition but from a sense of duty. "She was not as much about ambitious as she was about, 'This is my country. I have to do this right. We need to get the job done.'"

Hanson said that, though her daughter could chat up a storm, she didn't divulge information about her CIA work. In fact she knew some of her daughter's friends and coworkers only by their initials. "No one had any idea," she said. "None. Which is the way it needed to be."

But Hanson did say she was very close to her daughter, that Elizabeth called her most days, when it was possible.

She described her daughter as someone who could wear a strapless evening dress to an embassy party and look stunning, though she never knew it. "And an hour later she could be in a mud hole, working. She was an extraordinary lady in many, many ways."

Her daughter, Hanson said, filled the family home in suburban Chicago with books and kept the complete works of Shakespeare on her handheld computer. She was studious but also threw herself into the physical training that was required in her job. Prior to her assignment overseas she took a driving course, training to drive up mountains, through mud and snow.

"And she would come home with her little car," Hanson said. "It was like some of the shows you see on TV of the guys in their mud trucks."

But Hanson ranged into the past to describe the essence of her daughter. When Elizabeth was 3 or 4, her mother took her to buy a Halloween costume. The curly-haired towhead picked out a steel-gray outfit that had a helmet and a breastplate and a sword.

Hanson had read her daughter the story of Joan of Arc, and the next year little Elizabeth wanted to wear the warrior costume again. "She said, 'Mama. I remember Joan of Arc. Mama, I be Joan.'"

Hanson paused. "I'm not so sure," she said. "Maybe she was Joan."

Asked about the career choice made decades later, Hanson said her daughter was part of "a band of extraordinary patriots."

At the same time, she said, "It frightened me to death. Like I said, I'm a mom."

Her daughter wasn't frightened, even after the blast. Hanson said a wounded survivor reported Elizabeth ran to him before collapsing. "She was either going to shield him or help him," she said. "She was not running away. That was not Elizabeth."



*Elizabeth C. Hanson as Joan of Arc.*