



W. R. Rieky

LESLIE C. DIRKS

1936–2001

Elected in 1980

*“For contributions to technology development of importance
to the national security of the United States.”*

BY HANS MARK

I HAD THE PLEASURE AND privilege of working for a few years with Leslie Dirks, one of the most talented and accomplished scientists and engineers on the payroll of the U.S. government. I first met him in 1977 and worked closely with him for the next three years.

Les was born in 1936 in Minnesota, so we were almost contemporaries—I was older by seven years. We had in common that we were both graduates of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which was a strong bond. He went on to be a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University and to teach physics for a year at Phillips Academy. In 1961, he joined the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), where he was quickly recognized as an extraordinary scientist-engineer and a talented leader. By the time I met him in the spring of 1977, Les was deputy director of science and technology. In that capacity, he headed one of the major units of the National Reconnaissance Office, which I headed at the time. We became very close friends in short order, and my wife and I frequently went out with the Dirks family. I often felt like Les’ older brother.

Les Dirks had a fine mind; I know only two or three people who were his equal. His highly original technical innovations to our intelligence-gathering satellites contributed substantially to our national security. He was also a superb technical manager

who knew how to inspire people to do their best. In spite of the highly classified nature of his work, he received a good deal of public recognition for his many accomplishments. In 1979, President Carter awarded him the National Security Medal, and, in 1980, at the age of 44, he was elected to the National Academy of Engineering.

What I remember most fondly about Les were the dinners his wife Eleanor prepared for us at his house and playing “Space Cadet” with the Dirks’ children. Les and his wife raised three wonderful children, Anthony, Jason, and Elizabeth. Tragically, Eleanor lost her gallant battle with cancer in 1987.

In 1990, Les married Janet Church, who survives him. Janet recalls that he enjoyed having his children visit, and she remembers particularly his happiness in 1991 when his son Anthony and his wife Ann brought their one-month old son, his first grandchild to visit. Les was an avid reader, enjoyed all kinds of music, and was a frequent bicyclist and hiker.

Les retired from the CIA in 1980 and moved to California to join the Hughes Aircraft Communications Satellite Organization, headed at the time by his distinguished predecessor in the CIA, Dr. Albert C. Wheelon. In 1991, the CIA named one of its buildings the Dirks-Duckett Wing after Les and another of his predecessors, Carl Duckett. Les died on August 7, 2001. I miss him, and I mourn him.

