

Edward Snowden: From 'Geeky' Dropout To NSA Leaker

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Former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden has revealed some of the group's most carefully guarded secrets.

The reporting on the documents he leaked won a Pulitzer Prize for the *Washington Post* and *The Guardian*, announced on Monday.

But there's still a lot we don't know about Snowden himself — and his motivation.

In a new article in *Vanity Fair*, Bryan Burrough, Suzanna Andrews and Sarah Ellison take a closer look at Snowden in an effort to explain how a high school dropout, a "seemingly aimless geeky kid from the Maryland suburbs," came to possess and expose secret NSA documents.

The trio spent six months researching their *Vanity Fair* article, "The Snowden Saga: A Shadowland of Secrets and Light." Burrough reflects on the article with *Fresh Air*'s Terry Gross.

Interview Highlights

On Snowden's background

He dropped out of high school at 15. ... What ensued is, for me, one of the most fascinating periods of his life — this period from the age of 15 to the age of 20 where he didn't have anything like an actual job, nor was he doing anything other than occasional community

college classes. What he appears to have done is spent five years on his computers, on the Internet.

While I think if we didn't know what we know now we'd say, "Ah, he's a virtual slacker," in fact, it seems to be a period of incredible self-education in which he became an expert on systems, became an expert on so many things to do with navigating the Internet. The amazing thing is [that] it appears to be largely self-taught. And whatever you may say or believe about Edward Snowden, he is an invention of himself.

“ He got into a big snit with his supervisors because he felt he knew more about the computers and the NSA software than they did — and I don't have any doubt that that's true.

- Journalist Bryan Burrough

On the turning point when Snowden left his CIA job in Geneva

Reading between the lines, you take away a couple things: He got into a big snit with his supervisors because he felt he knew more about the computers and the NSA software than they did — and I don't have any doubt that that's true. What I thought was telling is we talked to a number of people that said, if you just look at the totality, this is a young man who clearly believed

that he was destined to be some type of a player here. There was a condescension in his comments.

He had quite a life there in Geneva maintaining the station's computers. He went from being a security guard in suburban Maryland to having his own nice apartment in Geneva, able to drive all around Europe. ... This is a kid who was fairly parochial at the time and he ... got this exciting life [in Europe] and what you see when he lost it, when he came back, is when you see those tremendously angry Ars Technica posts that suggest the depth of the anger that he was experiencing, having lost what appeared to ... be a charmed life.

More On Edward Snowden



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The Two-Way

On why Snowden had so much access to NSA files during his project in Hawaii

The NSA now tells us they're able to explain why Snowden was able to roam so free through the computers — including many niches he should not have otherwise been able to access. And it turns out, the NSA tells us, it was



Who Is Edward Snowden, The Self-Styled NSA Leaker?

because they had given Snowden a different assignment, a unique assignment if you will, just because he was in Hawaii.



The Two-Way Snowden Says His Mission Is Accomplished; 'I Already Won'

Hawaii is at the end of a long, long tagline with Washington and it's not necessarily always up to date on the latest procedures and things that should be gotten from Washington. Further, if there's ever any type of disconnect between Fort Meade and Hawaii — technically or communications-wise — Fort Meade, the headquarters of the NSA, was very concerned that somehow they would not be able to reach Hawaii: literally [would be unable to]

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communicate with them in the event of, I don't know, a nuclear problem or an earthquake or something.

What Snowden was doing was downloading and copying and backing up hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of pages of documents to make sure Hawaii had it all in case something went wrong. ... What no one realized at the time, of course, is that he was also making copies for his own reasons.

On the British and U.S. governments' attempts to stop the articles based on Snowden's documents

There was very little that either government could do to stop the publications because *The Guardian* just sprang this on the U.S. government two hours before the first thing got published and it took the NSA another four days. At least initially the NSA had no idea they were looking at a single leak of this PRISM program.

They didn't know if it might've come from a congressional aide, someone overseas, someone left a set of documents on the Metro in Washington; they just had no idea. And it wasn't until about the third day that it kind of dawned on them that this must be an actual leaker, a person. That's when they went in, and it took them about two days further to find out that it was Snowden.

On his own changing view of American intelligence issues

My working theory about all of these things ... has always been against conspiracy theories and in favor of human fallibility. I must

say that what Snowden has put out there suggests that I need to be a little bit more aware of the conspiracy theories because in this case, many, many things were said [about what] the NSA could do, which sounds like a conspiracy theory — eavesdropping on [German Chancellor] Angela Merkel or the Indonesian prime minister's mistress — I might have scoffed at, and we now know are not only capable of being done, but have been done. The only thing that surprises me now is when I'm told that there's something the NSA can't do.