Mystery of the Vanished Ruler

The fate of L. Ron Hubbard underlies Scientology's turmoil

A reclusive multimillionaire who preferred to work all night. A man terrified of germs who fought his growing array of ailments with a variety of drugs and massive vitamin injections. A brilliant and dominating figure who built an empire and who was both revered and feared. And now, to make the comparison more compelling still, the question of his fate. Even longtime intimates have not seen him in more than two years. They do not know whether he is living in seclusion by his own choice, or whether he is mentally incompetent and a captive of former underlings. Some of his old aides think he may even be dead.

Those eerie similarities to the last years of Howard Hughes are part of the mysterious portrait that onetime associates sketch of L. (for Lafayette) Ron Hubbard, 71, founder and guiding inspiration of the Church of Scientology. As proclaimed by Hubbard, Scientology is a religion that sees life as a relentless struggle to erase painful mental images (called "engrams" in the cult's jargon) that block a person from achieving his full potential and that may accumulate through his successive incarnations. Hubbard has insisted that he lived through a series of incarnations and that he was in fact 74 trillion years old.

In Hubbard's absence, Scientology is deeply riven by bitter disputes. A dozen or so of Hubbard's youngest followers, who have spent much of their lives in the cult's bizarre world, have seized control of the organization. Claiming to be "on Source" with Hubbard, and to be acting under his direction, they are also trying to gain control of the church's assets, estimated to be more than $280 million. About 75 senior leaders have been purged by the young zealots in a coup that has shaken the 29-year-old church.

Fighting these activists for Scientology's riches is Hubbard's estranged son, Ronald DeWolf, 48, who changed his name in 1972 in an effort, he says, to escape harassment by Scientologists. DeWolf has asked a California superior court to appoint a trustee to protect his father's estate from the new leaders. In his court petition, DeWolf contends that his father, who he says has long suffered from "severe mental illness and physical disease," is either dead or "incompetent." DeWolf also charges that his father used "criminal means" to acquire "wealth, fame and power." In another California court, Scientology is seeking to recover three cartons containing about 5,000 Scientology documents. The papers were placed under court protection by Gerry Armstrong, 36, who was authorized in January 1980 by Hubbard to gather papers for a laudatory biography. Armstrong found documents so damaging to the cult's credibility that he quit the church in disgust. He vows to use the papers to prove his charges, made in a sworn statement for a court case in Florida, that "Mr. Hubbard had continually misrepresented himself and had lied about his past."

A rare picture of Hubbard: on his movie set in 1979

Meanwhile, the Internal Revenue Service has demanded some $6 million in taxes and penalties from Scientology for the years 1970 through 1974. The IRS says the sum is due from income not used for church purposes. If the IRS wins the pending tax-court case, there is every likelihood that it will proceed against the church for millions more in taxes and penalties for later years. At least 22 civil suits have been filed against the church by former members who claimed to have been swindled, harassed and even kidnaped. A court in Australia has revoked Scientology's status as a religion, and one in France has convicted Hubbard, in absentia, of fraud.

The mounting troubles of the church were dramatized on Jan. 7 when Hubbard's attractive third wife Mary Sue, 51, was sentenced to four years in prison by a federal judge in Washington. Once the church's second most powerful official, Mrs. Hubbard was the last of eleven Scientology members who were convicted for their roles in bugging and burglarizing the Washington offices of the IRS, the Federal Trade Commission, the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Justice, Treasury and Labor departments. These break-ins were part of a vast spying operation, created by Hubbard and directed by his wife, to gather information on "enemies" of the church. One Scientology document so identifies 136 governmental agencies at home and abroad. At its height, the espionage system, called "Operation Snow White" by Hubbard, included up to 5,000 covert agents who were placed in government offices, foreign embassies and consulates, as well as in private organizations critical of Scientology. Hubbard even assembled a dossier on President Richard Nixon and individuals ranging from U.S. Senators to members of the Rockefeller family.

Some dissidents in the church contend that Hubbard has gone into hiding to avoid legal hassles. They claim that for years he has secretly placed huge amounts of church funds and hoards of jewels in foreign bank accounts and vaults. According to this theory, Hubbard has let his youthful protégés take control in order to separate himself legally from the church and its suits while retaining many of its assets. Other Scientology defectors argue that while this may have been Hubbard's plan, the onetime loyal followers have taken advantage of his failing health and are now seeking to enrich themselves. If Hubbard actually is dead, the charge goes, the church is being looted by those who now control it.

Estimates of the number of Scientology members vary widely, but defectors who once held high positions in the church say that the worldwide membership was at most 2 million at the height of the movement in the early and mid-1970s, and that 75% of the total lived in the U.S. The church claims that millions more took at least some Scientology courses. The peak income year for Scientology reportedly was $100 million. Now, according to defectors, there are only some 100,000 active members in the U.S. and perhaps the same number abroad.

The turmoil in Scientology began to intensify with Armstrong's scrutiny of Hubbard's private papers. "I went from being a devotee to realizing I was the

victim of a con game," he says. Archivist Armstrong concluded in his court statement that Scientology is "behavior therapy masquerading as a 'church' and making a mockery of honest religious practices." His wife Jocelyn, also a former leader in the church, agrees. She declares, "Most Scientologists simply have no idea of what goes on or how the church is really run."

Armstrong discovered that even Hubbard's personal background was a sham. Public records show that when Hubbard had claimed to be traveling through Asia and the South Pacific from 1925 to 1929, learning what he called "the secrets of life" from magicians, lamas, priests and wise men, he was actually a mediocre high school student. Although Hubbard presented himself as a highly educated man, he flunked out of George Washington University's engineering school after two years.

Nor was Hubbard a World War II hero who miraculously cured himself of nearly fatal combat wounds, as he claimed. Hubbard never saw combat. After his discharge from the Navy in 1946, he was granted 40% disability pay for arthritis, bursitis and conjunctivitis. He continued to collect this pay long after he claimed to have discovered the secret of how to cure such ailments.

In 1954, while a popular science-fiction writer, Hubbard founded Scientology in Phoenix. The church, which grew at a phenomenal rate in the U.S. and abroad, was based on ideas in a bestseller titled *Dianetics* that Hubbard wrote in 1950. The aim of dianetics is to rid a person of restricting engrams. The technique involves the use of an "E-meter," which was patented by Hubbard. To use the E-meter, a person holds a tin can in each hand while a galvanometer wired to the cans ostensibly indicates emotional stress. While the subject is "on the cans," a Scientologist "auditor" quizzes him to uncover any embarrassing or painful experiences in his past. All such traumas are recorded. Defectors have claimed that church members are often required to confess their wrongdoings in signed statements, which have sometimes been used as blackmail to keep dissidents silent. In the late 1970s, to supplement dinnetics, Hubbard developed the "purification rundown," which he said would rid the body of the ill effects of chemicals, drugs, smog and radiation through the use of vitamins, grain oil, exercise and sauna treatments.

Hubbard's followers paid up to $40,000 to take Scientology courses that the church claimed could cure almost any physical or mental ailment. Some people spent hundreds of thousands in all. Says an IRS attorney who interviewed hundreds of members: "Many of them sincerely believed that Scientology helped their lives and made them better people." In the past the movement has attracted such celebrities as Hollywood's John Travolta and Television Sportscaster John Brodie, former star quarterback of the San Francisco 49ers.

As Scientology became more popular, Hubbard sold licenses to operate local missions and churches, which offered more advanced courses. Each such franchise was required to send 10% of its income to the parent church. Government attorneys who have studied the organization figure that more than a million people have been "audited" worldwide. Estimated fees: $300 per hour.

Haunted by his fears of such "enemies" as the FBI and the IRS, Hubbard in 1966 set up headquarters in a 330-ft. converted British ferry. He took nearly 500 Scientologists with him aboard the *Apollo*, including children signed over to the church by their parents and, according to defectors, controlled by brainwashing techniques. Aboard the *Apollo*, Hubbard acted out his wartime fantasies as he sailed the world's oceans. He was addressed as "the Commodore," his bevy of young women servants were called "Commodore's Messenger Org" (for organization), while his uniformed "Sea Org" elite formed his crew. Tonja Burden, 23, a onetime Hubbard favorite, contends that anyone breaking a rule was placed in foul chain lockers below deck: "I saw one boy held in there for 30 nights, crying and begging to be released."

Hubbard came ashore in 1975 and attempted, unsuccessfully, to take over the city government of Clearwater, Fla. Meanwhile, his followers set up secret bases in Dunedin, Fla., and in La Quinta and Gilman Hot Springs in Southern California. Hubbard spent most of his time hiding in the desert during the late 1970s; a tan Valiant auto and $500,000 in cash were always at hand for a sudden getaway. He supervised the production of Scientology films for the faithful. He also stashed money overseas, setting up holding companies in Liberia, Luxembourg and Liechtenstein, and awaited what former intimates call "the all-clear date," when his legal troubles would be over and he could publicly return to direct his flock.

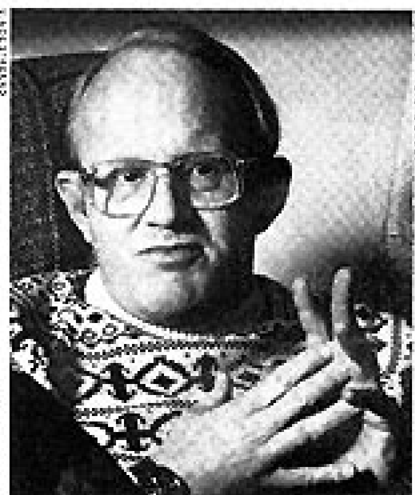
The all clear never came, and, in fact, Hubbard's problems grew worse. A complex paramilitary organization (he had secret police, finance police and watchers of the secret police) kept control of his followers, even at times sending them to church prisons for rehabilitation. But there were growing disaffection within his ranks and legal pressures from without.

In March 1980, Hubbard disappeared, apparently in the company of two married associates, Pat and Ann Broeker; since then none of the three has reportedly been seen by other Scientologists. His wife, who claims she feels no ill will toward Hubbard even though he let her take the rap for spying on the Government, says she hears from him regularly by mail. Some old acquaintances maintain that they have received letters from him, one as recent as three weeks ago.

In Hubbard's absence, the cult has changed dramatically. In January 1982, his young followers created the Religious Technology Center "for the primary purpose of ensuring and maintaining the purity and integrity of Scientology." One of the Sea Orgs, David Miscavige, 22, who

President Heber Jentzsch

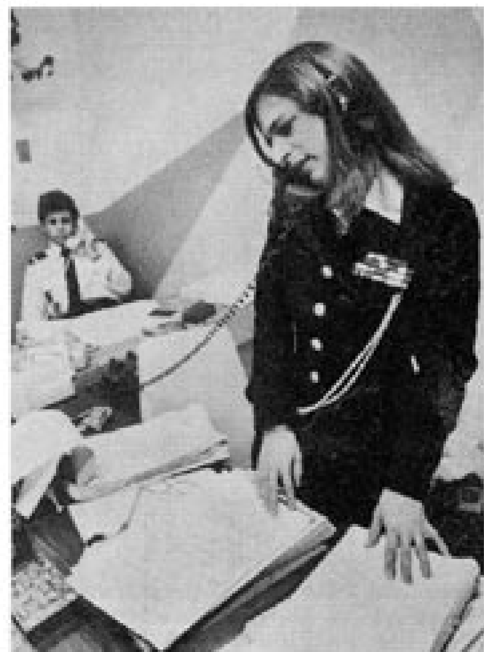
Defectors Gerry and Jocelyn Armstrong



Ron DeWolf, Hubbard's estranged son

claimed to be in regular touch with Hubbard, contended that the founder had "donated" all rights to his courses and techniques to the new corporation. Some defectors, however, insist that the church planned to purchase these so-called trademarks from Hubbard for $85 million. Others believe the new corporation, in which Hubbard is not officially involved, was formed to shield him and his assets from the many lawsuits.

The new leaders also announced at a meeting of mission holders in San Francisco last October that the technology center would audit the financial records of each mission, charging $15,000 a day for the procedure, and that all franchise holders would be put on the cans for a security check. As discipline tightened, even Hubbard's daughter Diana, 25, was ordered to pull weeds in 120° heat at a rehabilita-



"Sea Org" members in the Los Angeles center

tion project in the California desert.

A purge of veteran Scientologists quickly followed the takeover. Bill Franks, 26, was thrown out of his office in Clearwater in December 1981 and fired as Scientology's executive director. "It's just a power grab," he says of the new leaders' acts. Their motive, he charges, is "totally money, absolute greed." Bent Corydon, chief of the mission in Riverside, Calif., which was one of the church's largest (1,000 members), claims that dark-shirted "finance policemen" demanded that he turn over $40,000 in the mission's treasury. He complied, and has since set up a new church unaffiliated with Scientology. "I got fed up with the young guys," he says. "The church has been attacking its own loyal people."

Alan Walter, a Scientologist for 20 years and a mission holder in the Middle West, contends that "Hubbard was a genius in many ways. He was set up by these kids. They were doing insane things. It was a reign of terror." Larry Wollersheim,

who considered himself "a cult salesman," says that he was trained to locate the assets of church members and then help them devise explanations to relatives for why they needed so much money. "I was constantly hammered to coerce people to get loans," he claims.

Michael Flynn, 38, a Boston lawyer, is representing 28 people who claim they have been victimized by Scientology. As a result, he appears at the top of an enemies list drawn up by Scientology leaders. Flynn claims that he has continually been threatened and harassed by Scientologists. He keeps a gun in his office desk and often uses bodyguards. A private pilot, he contends, "I nearly died a couple of years ago when the engine of my plane quit. Someone had put gallons of water in the gas tank, but I can't prove who did it." A current officer of the church maintains that Flynn "is a man desperate for money" who hopes to reap riches from his cut

Attorney Flynn: heading an "enemies" list

of any successful suits against the church.

In answer to the charges against Scientology, Heber Jentzsch, 37, who was elevated to the titular presidency of the church by the new leaders, denies any wrongdoing by the organization. Jentzsch insists that Hubbard is neither dead nor demented. He also says that Hubbard has gone back to his first vocation, writing, and "he deserves a little privacy at 71."

Meanwhile, in the desert near Palm Springs, Calif., at the edge of the San Jacinto Mountains, where Hubbard once stalked the sands wearing a cowboy hat, cursing and yelling as he directed Scientology films, security is tight. Guards at the Gilman retreat scrutinize cars moving along a highway past a black iron gate, and security men range amid the cactus, chattering into walkie-talkies. There is a sign that says GOLDEN ERA STUDIOS. The only visible reminder of the former presence is a bronze plaque on a replica of a ship's deck. It is dedicated to "L. Ron Hubbard, master mariner." ■