

This monthly article highlights one of our branch members. We hope that you enjoy knowing a little more about your fellow members and the interesting life they have had. If you have someone you would like to nominate or if you would like to help author an article, please email the editor, Ron Nakamoto, at [ron.nakamoto\(at\)yahoo.com](mailto:ron.nakamoto(at)yahoo.com).

RUSS ATKINSON

“Cliff ducked down out of sight. Maybe he should have kept running instead of stopping to watch. He was afraid that if he started running now, he’d give away his position. Instead, he began crawling down the hillside quietly. The brush was heavy, and he knew he couldn’t be seen from where Leaming had been standing. If Leaming came over to the edge of the roadway and peered down below, maybe then, but the foliage being so thick, he thought not.

The familiar deep voice boomed, “Come out, Knowles. I know you’re down there.”

Cliff froze.

“I’ll shoot.”

Cliff didn’t move.

The crack of the rifle proved Leaming wasn’t bluffing.”

– Excerpt from *Death Row*, a *Cliff Knowles Mystery* by author, Russ Atkinson



This month we meet Russ Atkinson, a former FBI agent and attorney turned mystery novelist. Russ was born and raised in San Jose. He attended Lincoln High School where he competed on the swimming and water polo teams. He started his undergraduate studies at UC Santa Barbara, then, fascinated by Asian culture, spent a year in Japan with the Education Abroad Program and completed his degree at UC Berkeley, graduating with High Honors in Mathematics in 1969. Expecting to be drafted upon graduation and sent to Vietnam, he took a job as a computer operator at Fairchild Semiconductor in Mountain View. The letter from the draft board never came. Instead his lottery number came up in the 300s. After heaving a sigh of relief, he applied for law school and the next year entered Boalt Hall of Law at UC Berkeley.

Russ enjoyed law school tremendously. He worked part time as a research assistant for his tax professor, did tax returns for an accountant, and worked as a law clerk in a

private firm. He had planned on becoming a tax lawyer, but in one of those twists of fate, instead followed the advice of his uncle who was retiring from the FBI. He applied to be a Special Agent and was accepted. Russ jokes that he entered the FBI under the “Nepotism Program”.

After his New Agent Training in Quantico, Virginia, Russ was assigned to the Seattle Office. He was assigned primarily to Selective Service cases. These cases were hopeless to pursue in 1974 because the prosecutors knew no liberal Seattle jury would convict a draft dodger at that point, but the U.S. Attorney was getting pressure from Washington to prosecute them. Russ got a confession from one draft dodger who was a heroin addict and would have been 4F had he bothered to register. The prosecutor and the boy’s mother worked out a deal where he’d plead guilty to failing to register in exchange for being sentenced to a drug rehab program at government expense – which was exactly what she had wanted! That was the only selective service conviction for the entire squad for that year.

His next office, a year later, was New York. There he was assigned to a foreign counter-intelligence (FCI) squad doing surveillance. New York was a miserable experience for him. His car was stolen off the street. His surveillance partner was a smoker. Sitting in a car for eight hours with a smoker in a New York summer, waiting for someone to come out of a door was not why he’d went to law school. He was approached by two muggers one night, but scared them off with his gun. In the winter his apartment was never above 59 degrees. Russ soon escaped by putting in for Language School. With government logic, they saw that he knew some Japanese, so they sent him to learn Chinese Mandarin.

After a year at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, Russ was assigned to the San Francisco office where he worked Chinese FCI cases. He was transferred to the Berkeley Resident Agency (RA) the next year. He bought a house in the Oakland hills that had previously belonged to Sal Bando, the captain of the World Series-winning Oakland A’s. He also became a Legal Advisor as an additional FBI role. In 1979 he was reintroduced to Erica, a woman who had been his classmate in High School, in fact the class valedictorian. Although they had never dated in high school, they soon hit it off and became engaged. Erica was working at Stanford, her alma mater. Rather than have her quit her job to move to Oakland, Russ wangled a transfer to the Palo Alto RA. They bought a house in Los Altos and were soon parents of two children, Corinne and Lincoln. They have been happily married for 26 years.

For the next ten years Russ worked FCI matters in Palo Alto and dealt with many of the high-tech firms familiar to SIRs members. There was a never-solved sabotage of a military satellite at Ford Aerospace. A former soldier, angry about some pension matter, volunteered to provide classified information to the Russian consulate and was caught in a sting. Russ led the search of his home. That veteran was convicted of espionage. By 1991 the Cold War was pretty much over. After a second stint in San Francisco, Russ requested a transfer to San Jose to work criminal matters.

Russ finished his career in San Jose working mostly high-tech crimes and serving as the Principal Relief Supervisor of the High-Tech Squad. This position is the person who acts as the squad supervisor when the supervisor is not there. Cases included truck hijackings (of chips and disk drives), a kidnapping for ransom of a high-tech executive, copyright infringement, fraud, and Russ's own specialty, trade secret theft. Russ was the case agent on the first conviction in California under the Economic Espionage Act of 1996. The victim in that case was Varian. A former Varian employee who had been fired, was then working at a radiology firm, and somehow managed to decrypt the encrypted trade secrets on a laptop computer accidentally left behind by a Varian tech who was servicing a cancer treatment machine. Russ's hobby of cryptography made him the logical choice to work the case. He managed to figure out how the subject had pulled it off and that led to a conviction and four-year prison term. He also began an insider trading investigation of Raj Rajaratnam, a billionaire who ran a hedge fund specializing in Silicon Valley firms. This led eventually, years after Russ's retirement, to a conviction and the longest sentence in U.S. history for insider trading. Russ continued to serve as a Legal Advisor throughout his career in the FBI.

In 1999 Russ accepted an offer to become the west coast security manager for AOL. He was stationed at Netscape in Mountain View but also had responsibility for security at other AOL acquisitions such as MapQuest. In 2000 he took the position of Security Director at Ariba, but was laid off in the dot com bust of 2001. He began practicing law and was hired on at Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) where he handled a wide variety of matters, including eminent domain, labor arbitrations, pension board matters, tax, contract review, and general civil litigation. One of his matters was defending VTA in a federal case by a woman who felt her failure to get a promotion was due to racial discrimination. When Russ got her case thrown out pre-trial, she appealed. The Ninth Circuit upheld the trial judge's decision. When she then appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, Russ became admitted to practice before that esteemed body. He was disappointed when the Supreme Court refused to hear the case as he never got to argue before that court. Russ retired from VTA in 2007.

Russ has pursued his many interests since then, which include cryptography, running, guitar, geocaching, reading, and writing novels. He served as the president of the American Cryptogram Association. He ran a half marathon in 2010. Russ has uploaded over thirty videos to YouTube including drone photography and his fingerstyle guitar playing. He constructs puzzles and supplies the monthly crossword for *The Grapevine*, a magazine for former FBI agents. He writes a blog (<http://blog.ackgame.com/onwords/>) and has published seven novels, known as the Cliff Knowles Mysteries.

Russ wrote his first novel, *Held for Ransom*, in 2001. It was largely based on real kidnapping cases he had worked in the FBI. His literary agent was unsuccessful selling it, so Russ stashed the manuscript in a file cabinet and forgot about it. In 2011 (ten years later) he had to empty the cabinet to move it for carpet layers. He threw the manuscript away. His wife told him maybe he should look into self-publishing. Fortunately, he still had the file on his computer. He looked into it and learned that self-publishing is easy and cheap. He uploaded the book to CreateSpace (paperbacks) and

Amazon (Kindle e-book) and it began selling. He was hooked. Soon followed six more murder mysteries: *Cached Out*, *Fatal Dose*, *Death Row*, *Gut Shot*, *Behead Me*, and *A Will to Die*. All but the last one were inspired by real FBI cases.

Since joining SIR Russ has assisted the webmaster maintaining the website and was one of the initial members of the book discussion group, which he greatly enjoys. He and Erica continue to live in Los Altos. Their son Lincoln is a software engineer for Sumo Logic in Redwood City and is married to a Google marketing manager. Their daughter Cori is a chemist in Austin, Texas and is engaged. He is patiently waiting for their first grandchild. Russ continues to write and pursue all his hobbies. You might see him Tuesdays and Fridays running at Rancho San Antonio.

(Editor's note: It was an effortless pleasure to have selected, interviewed and drafted this month's Member Profile article. From the time Russ acknowledged his notice to the self-authored draft he submitted must have taken all of several hours. Who will be the next Sir to follow in Russ's footsteps?)