

The Man Who Makes FACES

In the hands of this former secret agent,
disfiguring injuries disappear

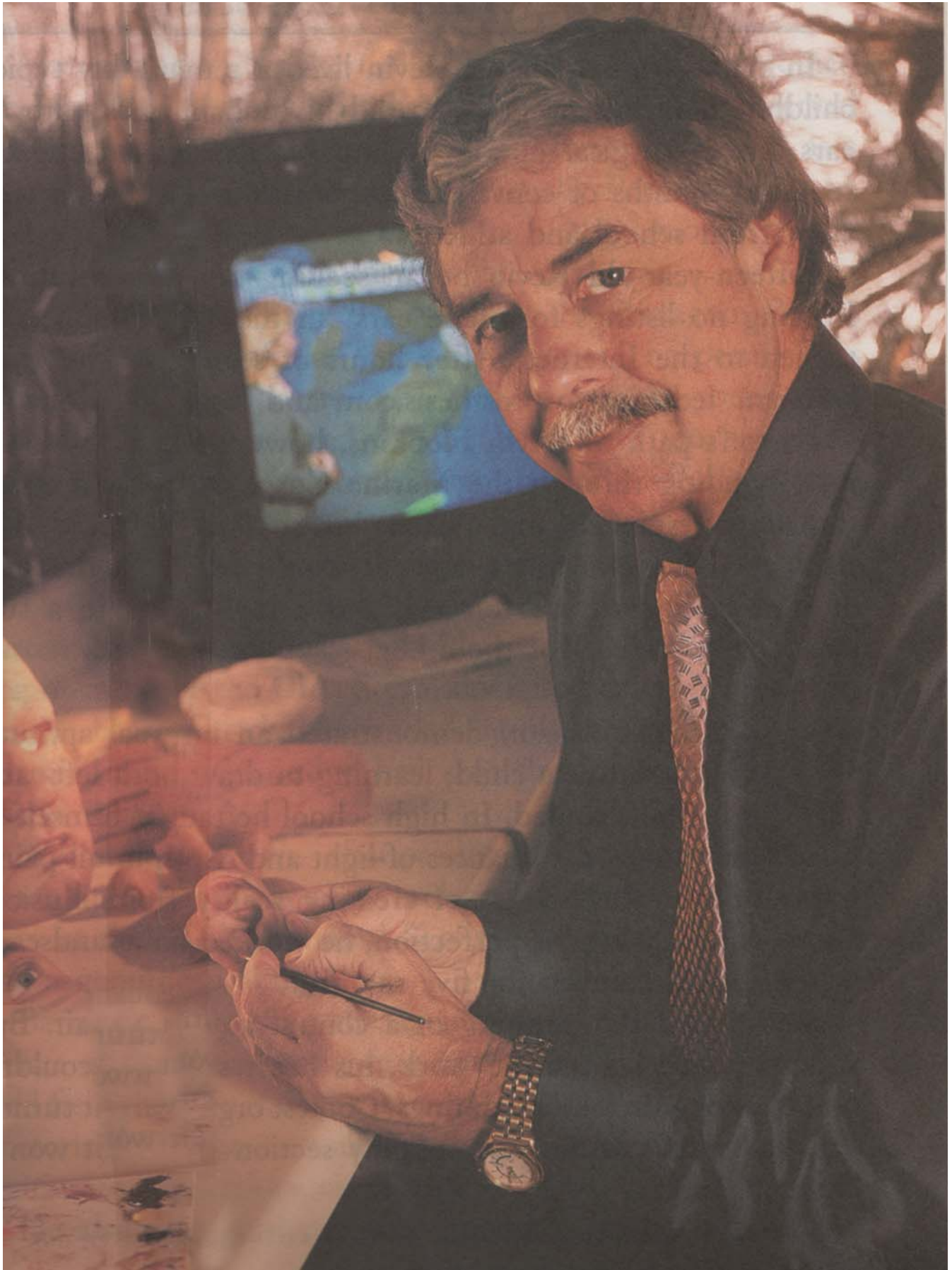
By ROBERT ANDREWS

From WASHINGTONIAN

KEVIN HOPKINS has his father's ears. And he has a spy to thank for them. Kevin was born with his right ear shaped like a peanut shell, basically an unformed nub of flesh. The left one was smaller than normal. Neither ear had a functional canal. As a result, Kevin had hearing problems that later would require a bone-conducting hearing aid.

Master of Disguise—Robert Barron creates prosthetic body parts; the face is for a man severely burned in a car fire.





In spite of his disability, Kevin lived a remarkably typical childhood. But as he grew, so did his unhappiness with his ears. Every surgical option he and his parents investigated required months of convalescence, which would mean time away from school and athletics.

Fifteen-year-old Kevin began seeking his own solutions. Finding no listings for “fake ears” in the Yellow Pages, he turned to the Internet. After hours of searching, the word *prosthetic* led him to *prosthesis.com* and Robert Barron.

Barron's path to Kevin Hopkins, however, was not so direct, winding through the Marine Corps, the world of international espionage and various hot spots of the Cold War. But when the two finally met, it would represent the start of a more normal life for one, and a high point in a surprising new career for the other.

ROBERT BARRON demonstrated an unusual aptitude for art as a child, learning to draw both left- and right-handed. In high school he taught himself to render the nuances of light and depth in oil paint. Captivated by the process of creating reality from illusion, and always striving for perfection, he worked on a landscape of the Grand Canyon for five months.

He entered the painting in a contest at a state fair. But when he went to see the work, his heart sank: he couldn't find it among the other paintings. Contest organizers, it turned out, had put it in the photography section—where it won a blue ribbon.

The Man Who Makes Faces

After attending Southern Illinois University, Barron joined the Marine Corps in 1963 where, during Vietnam, he served as a graphic training-aids designer in Okinawa. He left as a sergeant in 1967 and started a job at the Pentagon. There, he became art director of *Direction*, a Navy monthly. And there, his talent got him into trouble.

Frustrated by parking difficulties at the Pentagon, Barron created his own “official” parking permit. The permit was perfect, but one of Barron’s co-workers saw the young man parking in spots reserved for the Pentagon’s top brass and squealed. Standing before a judge, Barron ruefully surrendered his permit and paid a \$50 fine. Several days later he got a call: could he interview for a job at another agency?

The interviewers, “Terry” and “Steve,” met Barron in an austere government office. Barron later found out Terry headed graphic arts for the CIA. Steve supervised crafts used to create the bags of tricks demanded by international espionage. Barron figured the judge had sent the forged permit to a friend at the CIA.

Several months later—after passing a battery of psychological tests, a physical exam and a polygraph—Barron reported for duty at the CIA’s Technical Services Division. This time he had a genuine parking pass.

Barron’s first year at the agency was similar to the experience of almost any new employee breaking into a specialized field. But the skills he learned—airbrushing photographs, doctoring documents, counterfeiting identity cards—had few legitimate applications outside the CIA.

He also developed expertise in another area: disguise. An

unremarkable appearance and convincing documents can gain a CIA officer access to secrets unobtainable otherwise. The challenge is perfection. A slip-up with the disguise or an outdated visa stamp at a police checkpoint can mean prison or death.

CIA case officers—those who “run” agents in the world’s most volatile places—increasingly turned to Barron. His “mission impossible” disguises, coupled with identity papers, passport and “pocket litter” (theater ticket stubs, drugstore receipts, a worn address book) enabled officers to spirit defectors or “blown” agents through borders, past hostile security guards. Over the years he worked his magic throughout Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America.

IRONICALLY, Barron’s continual search for perfection turned him toward his second career. Looking for new disguise techniques, Barron attended an annual symposium for prosthetics designers in 1983. He thought modern prosthetic materials might be useful to the CIA. But as he watched slides of the ravages of disease, injury and flawed genetics, he had an epiphany: if he could disguise someone so well that he or she could not be detected by a hostile agent, couldn’t he help people with disfigurements go about everyday life without attracting a second glance?

Barron became friends with one of the nation’s top prosthetics experts. While still at the CIA, he spent weekends and vacations in his laboratory.

Through him, Barron met the man who would become his first client; he’d lost one eye and much of the surround-

ing cheek and nasal passages to cancer. Surgical reconstruction was then considered impossible.

Barron took an impression of the affected area with a material similar to that used by dentists. From this model, he fashioned a plaster mold, which he filled with a layer of acrylic resin. When dry, it formed a sculpting shield that fit perfectly into the injured area. Barron filled this pocket-like shield with a special clay, and positioned a prosthetic eye in the clay. The eye would not move, but it looked the same as its counterpart. Using sculpting tools, Barron carefully built up the cheek with more clay, creating an eyelid and details such as bags under the eye and even crow's-feet.

From the final clay mock-up, Barron created another mold and then poured in a medical-grade silicone, adding enough color to make the mixture slightly translucent. Out of the mold came the facial prosthesis, about the size of a man's palm. At a later session, Barron fit the silicone prosthesis into



Like Father, Like Son— Kevin Hopkins and his dad have lots in common, even Kevin's fake ears. His "headband" is actually a hearing aid.

place, then hand-tinted it with a cosmetic pigment matching the patient's skin color.

When Barron had finished, the man looked in the mirror again and again. He turned to Barron, then back to the mirror. He smiled, laughed and then cried for joy.

Says Barron, "I'll remember that man's expression as long as I live."

AT BARRON'S RETIREMENT in 1993, then-CIA Director James Woolsey awarded him the Career Intelligence Medal. Barron was described as "an extraordinary artist and master of the highly specialized craft of personal disguise, [whose] competency and artistic skills were unmatched."

Many CIA officers like Barron spend their lives undercover. If they decide to start a second career, they may be prohibited from detailing their experience in an interview. For a while, Barron would not even drop a hint as to what he'd done for 24 years.

Recognizing this, the CIA offers programs to help smooth the transition. Barron used this period to establish Custom Prosthetic Designs and officially begin his career as an anaplastologist in Reston, Va. Then he set out to build his referrals.

For a man who had matched his special talents against the KGB and other intelligence agencies worldwide, starting from scratch was difficult. Barron had only three before-and-after photos to illustrate his skills. Doctors were reluctant to refer patients to someone whose past was a blank page.

But Barron persisted, introducing himself to physician

The Man Who Makes Faces

after physician. He found an early supporter in Dr. Craig Dufresne. A reconstructive surgeon, Dufresne had been seeking better prostheses for cases in which surgery had proved ineffectual. Impressed with Barron's talent, he began referring patients to him.

"Bob makes it possible to join medicine and art, surgery and sculpture," Dufresne says. He calls Barron's prostheses "miracles for individuals where little hope was present before."

In time, Barron's referral circle expanded. With dentists Michael Singer and Jeffrey Lane, he began working on state-of-the-art technology in which titanium screws are surgically affixed to a patient's bone structure at the *facial defect*. After a substructure is attached, Barron designs the prosthesis, which may be attached with clips or small magnets. With such implants, the patient can wear a prosthesis for hours, even while swimming.

Barron has also developed prostheses for fingers, noses, eyes and ears. His finger prostheses protect sensitive nerve endings while sometimes providing tactile sensitivity. One patient reports her prostheses conduct pressure and vibration so well "it almost seems as though I have feeling in the fingertips." She's even able to type and play the piano again.

KEVIN HOPKINS had his first meeting with Robert Barron in August 1997. After an exchange of e-mails, Kevin and his father, Robert, made the drive down from their home in New Jersey.

Replacing an ear is an especially complex procedure. Typically, the prosthesis must be shaped to direct sound waves

into the auditory canal while maintaining a proper protective environment for inner-ear membranes. These prostheses also support glasses and hearing aids if necessary.

Barron examined Kevin's ears for what, to Kevin, seemed an agonizingly long time. Finally, Barron smiled. "I can help you with this," he said.

"We'll take an impression of your father's ears and sculpt them to fit over your existing ears," he told Kevin. "Your search is over."

Tears welled in Robert Hopkins's eyes and ran down his cheeks. Alarmed that he might have said something inappropriate, Barron sought to reassure the father. Hopkins waved Barron off and smiled.

"When Kevin was born," Robert Hopkins explained, "I thought, *If only I could give my ears to him.*" Hopkins paused. "You've just made that dream come true."