Ex-U.S. spy leading quiet life

By Alan Johnson
Dispatch Staff Reporter

Don T. Cherry’s black bag of goodies would make even a James Bond envious.

He has a powerful telescope with binocular eyepieces, a camera no bigger than half a pack of cigarettes and a microphone transmitter the size of a book of matches.

His “scrapbook” contains pictures of Soviet KGB agents, American operatives and North Vietnamese soldiers on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Cherry spent 19 years as an Air Force officer working for a number of government agencies, including the Central Intelligence Agency. His undercover work, primarily photographic surveillance, took him to such places as Germany, Laos and Thailand.

A few years ago he traded in his cloak and dagger for the more sedate tools of professional security consulting. Tuesday afternoon, Cherry spoke to students in Ohio State University’s Criminology Club.

His advice to students was to the point: “The secret to the whole thing is not to get caught.”

Said Cherry: “I can’t stress enough about not getting your hand caught in the cookie jar. It can be very embarrassing.

“I had what I thought were a couple of close ones, but I never got caught. I guess I was fortunate.”

Later, Cherry told The Dispatch, “This is how I got turned on to this business many years ago. I just enjoy working with this age group.”

Cherry, 55, graduated from OSU in 1953. He spent the next 23 years as an intelligence officer and director of security for the U.S. Air Force in a number of hot spots around the world.

“I really shouldn’t be alive after some of the things I’ve done,” Cherry said. His resume of covert activities includes 137 parachute jumps, 61 of them at night from helicopters only 800 feet up.

His photographic talents were honed in hostile foreign countries.

“You have to get by with some pretty cruddy stuff,” he said. “It’s not like in the movies. There people show you 8 by 10 glossies that show every eyelash.

“It doesn’t work that way in the real world.”

Covert surveillance for the government, although it took him to exotic places such as Laos and Thailand, was often a lonely, silent existence. “Your wife and children have to understand that they don’t talk about Dad’s work,” he said.”