

THEY DARED RETURN

THE TRUE STORY OF JEWISH SPIES
BEHIND THE LINES IN NAZI GERMANY

PATRICK K. O'DONNELL



London • New York • Sydney • Toronto

A CBS COMPANY

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TO ...

*Lily Bear, my 'cute-o-saurus' –
the greatest daughter in the world*

My Parents

*Fred Mayer, Hans Wynberg, and the other
members of the German-Austria Section,
whose intrepid heroism inspires the next
Greatest Generation of modern warriors*

David Stapleton, who knows it takes more than cold steel to win wars

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My journey into World War II history began thirty-five years ago when I was four years old. After picking up a World War II pictorial history book by accident and scanning a few combat photos, I was completely drawn in. This journey of discovery has included interviewing twenty-five hundred World War II veterans, travelling to Western Europe's most important battlefields, and even experiencing combat, as an embedded historian with today's American warriors, to find out if this generation is the next 'Greatest Generation'. They truly are, as my book *We Were One: Shoulder to Shoulder with the Marines Who Took Fallujah* (2006) demonstrates. *They Dared Return* is my sixth book on a subject that I cannot seem to escape. I'm fascinated by history and feel strongly about honouring the veterans by telling their stories. Each passing year more of our World War II veterans' stories slip away, lost to future generations, never to be told. Helping tell these stories is not just my job, it's my passion! It's a part of me, something I have willingly risked everything for, including my life.

Serendipitously, the stories always seem to find me, and this is certainly the case with Frederick Mayer, whom I met eight years ago. After interviewing hundreds of World War II veterans, I found Mayer and his story captivating. This book is about Fred's mission: Operation Greenup. It also touches upon members of 'the Jewish five', five best friends, including Operation Greenup's May and Hans Wynberg. All were former refugees from Nazi Germany, who dared to return behind the lines. The other members of the Five: Bernd Steinitz (Dillon Mission) and George Gerbner and Alfred Rosenthal (Dania Mission) are touched upon in this volume when they intersect with Greenup, but they deserve separate treatment. Nevertheless, I included their original mission reports as an addendum to shed light on their extraordinary stories. Their daring was fuelled by patriotism and willingness to make a difference against an enemy that killed many of their family members. But this book is not just about the 'five'; it also includes the untold story of a hero who turned his back on the German army for his own private reasons: Hermann Matull. But Frederick Mayer is the focal point of this volume, and a special breed of man he is. At eighty-nine years young, he still chops wood every day, mows the lawn, and serves food to the poor every week. He is humble and shies away from telling this story. He's an extraordinary person – someone who has taught me a great deal about life.

But the story is the story. In an unbiased manner, I tried to tell it by presenting the reader with exactly what happened, from all the key stakeholders' points of view, including Austrian civilian members of the German security service, and, of course, the daring and heroic OSS agents who went behind enemy lines to bring down Hitler's Third Reich.

I would like to thank first and foremost the OSS veterans for sharing their stories, especially Frederick Mayer and his best friend to this day, Hans Wynberg, a retired professor emeritus of chemistry at the University of Groningen. Wynberg is an equally extraordinary individual, who spent countless hours on the phone with me and sent long e-mails recalling his time behind the lines. I am also grateful to Bernd Steinitz and George Gerbner, who provided invaluable information about the other missions of the Jewish five. Finally, I want to acknowledge those brave veterans mentioned in this book who have died – admirable men, such as Dyno Lowenstein and Walter Haass, whose hidden contributions made the missions possible.

I would also like to thank my agent and friend, Andrew Zack, and the best publicist any author could ever have, Lissa Warren. I am grateful to Chris Butsavage for his keen suggestions and editorial

comments, and to historian Dr. Troy Sacquety for his thorough and critical feedback for this book and on my previous book, *The Brenner Assignment: The Untold Story of the Most Daring Spy Mission of World War II* (2008). My friends Madison Parker and Casey Trahan, for their keen eyes. And also Ben Ibach for his excellent and numerous ideas that enhanced the narrative. Special thanks to Morgan Wilson. The OSS Society's current president, Charles Pinck, who has advocated and encouraged my work and books, deserves my heartfelt gratitude. Most importantly, I would like to thank my editor and friend, Robert Pigeon. Bob's peerless editorial skills, judgement, and ideas greatly enhanced the narrative and made this book a reality.



PROLOGUE

April 1945, Gestapo Headquarters, Innsbruck, Austria.

‘Jude!’ the tall one barked, glaring into the man’s swollen eyes.

‘Ach Quatsch!’ (Nonsense!), another Gestapo officer stated. It was inconceivable that a Jew would dare return to the heart of the Third Reich as an Allied agent.

In the dank room, the Gestapo officers slapped and punched the spy in the face. His cover was holding water, and so the tall one stripped him from head to toe. Despite the agent’s bullish strength, the SS men brutally manhandled him, shoving him to the floor. Cuffing his hands in front of him and pulling his arms over his bent knees, they forced him into a constricting foetal position, then shoved the barrel of a long rifle into the tiny gap behind his knees and his cuffed hands. With a man on each side of the rifle, they lifted his naked, rolled-up body and suspended the human ball between two tables, like a piece of meat on a skewer. Uncoiling a rawhide whip, the tall one put his full weight behind each swing, mercilessly thrashing the agent’s body like a side of beef.

‘Wo ist der funker?’ (Where is the radio operator?)

‘Wo ist der funker?’

A crimson pool spread beneath the agent’s body. In spite of the torment, he refused to crack, reiterating that he was merely a foreign worker (like thousands employed in the Reich’s factories).

When the whipping didn’t work, the Gestapo men decided to water-board their prisoner. They brought out two pitchers of water, and tipping their captive’s face to the ceiling, they poured the cold liquid down his mouth and nose. The water splashed into his mouth, forced open by rough hands. He felt like he was drowning, while the liquid painfully dripped into his perforated eardrum. The Nazis were methodical. One man poured while the second refilled the other pitcher. The torture assembly line kept running for six hours.

Suddenly, the door to the dank room swung open, revealing a tall man dressed in the full regalia of a high-ranking Nazi officer. His looming presence filled the room, throwing a shadow over the men and their work. Surprised, they turned and the session stopped – for the moment.

‘GET ME OUT OF THE INFANTRY!’

The desert sun beat down on Frederick Mayer as he hugged the ground and carefully manoeuvred into position. Fred’s adrenalin surged as he moved closer to the enemy headquarters. He heard the din of battle in the background, as the staccato drumbeat of a machine gun pierced the afternoon air. As first scout of the Eighty-first Infantry Division, Mayer was at the tip of the spear and led an elite reconnaissance unit, the Wildcat Rangers,* forward on the battlefield. In the immediate background Mayer heard the chatter of voices and the whirl of radio broadcasts relaying and barking orders. He was deep behind the lines, and, remarkably, the enemy headquarters he spied was not that well guarded. On his belly, .45 in hand, he slithered forward. In the blink of an eye, Mayer stealthily snuck past the guards and into the compound.

Mayer had been operating alone behind enemy lines for the past day. As a scout, Fred relied on his instincts, his ability to improvise, and his plain old chutzpah. Earlier in the day he had told his comrades that it was ‘silly to capture just a couple soldiers. Let’s bag the headquarters.’

With that, Mayer manoeuvred into position and charged forward toward the headquarters building. Mayer burst into a room containing the headquarters, and several officers, including a brigadier general, looked at the 5’7”, broad-shouldered, olive-skinned scout in disbelief. Reality seemed suspended for a brief moment. Stunned, the U.S. Army general stammered, ‘You can’t do that! You are breaking the rules!’

Fred responded, ‘War is not fair. The rules of war are to win.’

Cornered, the general had no choice but to concede defeat, and he sheepishly raised his hands in the air.

For Mayer this was a bittersweet moment: the 120-degree desert heat nearly melted away his glorious feeling of capturing the blue army’s general during the Eighty-first Division’s training exercise on a stifling July 1943 day in Gila Bend, Arizona.

Brig. Gen. Marcus Bell, assistant division commander of the Eighty-first, was impressed by the young Jewish corporal from Brooklyn. The next day he summoned Mayer to his command tent located at Camp Horn, Arizona.

Since mid-February, Mayer had participated in the special reconnaissance unit within the Eighty-first Division. As a Wildcat Ranger, he learned advanced infantry skills, such as infiltration, demolition, raiding, sniping, and hand-to-hand combat techniques. The youthful corporal excelled at the training and became the unit’s lead scout, a position reserved for only the most daring of men.

After the manoeuvres, Bell told Mayer he was ‘wasting his time here with the Rangers’ and asked if he wanted another challenge to do ‘something more interesting’. With a large grin, pearly white teeth and wavy black hair, Fred responded, ‘Get me out of the infantry.’

Within a few weeks, a letter arrived requesting that Frederick Mayer report to the headquarters of

the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in Washington, D.C. The letter would change his destiny. ~~Jewish refugee from Germany, an enemy alien whose family had barely escaped the camps,~~ Frederick Mayer was now a naturalized American citizen holding a paper in his hand telling him to report to the Congressional Country Club in Bethesda, Maryland, where the OSS had established a training base.

Frederick Mayer was born in 1921 in the city of Freiberg, Germany. He embarked on his military training at an early age as his father inundated him with stories of the horrors that occurred in the French fortress town of Verdun, where one million souls lost their lives. Mayer's father, a lieutenant in the Kaiser's army, had been decorated with the coveted Iron Cross Second Class for gallantry at Verdun. He had been a war hero and often regaled his son with tales of his wartime exploits, making quite an impression on the boy. Mayer later recalled, 'This was my military training.' A businessman after the war, Mayer's father provided for his family in the postwar chaos of the hyperinflated Weimar Republic.

Bull-like, with a stocky frame, Mayer was a great athlete. Until Hitler gained power, he had been a member of the ski and athletic clubs in high school. Known for his inquisitive mind and his ability to tear things apart, then reassemble them, Mayer soon sought an apprenticeship as a diesel mechanic with the Ford Motor Company. Charismatic, with an ever-present smile revealing his inner confidence, Frederick Mayer's view of life was to 'do your best at everything every day, control what you can, and what you can't, don't worry about'. His optimism expressed a joie de vivre, and he had few enemies – until the rise of the Nazi Party.

The Mayers were Jewish. During the early 1930s, a wave of virulent anti-Semitism accompanied the Nazis' rise to power. Despite his father's heroic service to his country during World War I, Mayer's family was not immune to the anti-Jewish sentiment. Fred remembers first-hand being called a 'Jewish bastard'. Yet he always stood up for himself and promptly flattened the perpetrator, knocking him to the ground. The Nazis soon turned anti-Semitism into a state religion. Mayer's father was a patriot and believed, like many other patriotic Jewish veterans, that their service would trump the radical racial views of the Nazi Party. In 1938, Mayer's father still clung to the false hope that his service in the Kaiser's army would insulate the family from harm. He took the view that as he had been a German officer, nothing [would] happen to [him and his family]'. Mayer's mother was more pragmatic, stating bluntly, 'We are Jews, and we are leaving.'

After a two-year struggle with bureaucrats on both sides of the Atlantic, the Mayers finally obtained a visa through contacts in the United States. Arriving with only the clothes on their backs, the family immigrated to New York, where Mayer's father and the entire family sought work in Brooklyn. A jack-of-all-trades, young Mayer held more than twenty different jobs. While he was working in one of these positions, he recalled, his boss made an anti-Semitic remark, and as he had done in Germany several times, he took matters into his own hands and laid out his boss, quitting on the spot.

Hitler's December 8, 1941, declaration of war against the United States following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor was a call to arms – and Mayer answered the call. That morning, he promptly showed up at his local recruiting centre in Brooklyn. Mayer felt that 'the United States [had] provided [his family] a haven. I felt a need to give something back.' The morning Mayer reported to the draft board, he was summarily dismissed for being an 'enemy alien'.

Discouraged, yet undaunted, Mayer's opportunity to serve his adopted country came unexpectedly a few weeks later, when his brother was summoned before the draft board. His brother was a college student at the time, and Mayer wanted him to finish, so he went before the draft board in his brother's place and volunteered his own services. Seeing Mayer's determination, the board acquiesced.

The twenty-year-old Jew was then shipped to Fort Rucker, Alabama, where he received several months of basic training. Graduating boot camp, Private Mayer received orders to report to the Eighty-first Division. For the most part, Mayer kept his nose clean, except for an AWOL incident while on manoeuvres in Tennessee, after which he found himself digging ditches into red Tennessee clay. After the Tennessee manoeuvres, Fred's division was shipped to Camp Horn in Gila Bend, Arizona, for desert training. Ironically, the training would prove almost useless when the division was shipped off to the Pacific. It was while en route to the California port town of San Luis Obispo for amphibious warfare training that Mayer received the letter that would change his life.

COUNTRY CLUB

Fred Mayer carefully opened the manila envelope with a return address stamped Washington, D.C. Inside his orders indicated that he was to report immediately to the nation's capital. He hopped on a train and, after several days of travel, arrived in Washington. Exhausted from the long ride, Mayer nevertheless swiftly hailed down a cab outside the imposing marble facade of Union Station and asked the driver to take him to the Congressional Country Club. Remarkably, considering Mayer's orders were secret, the driver knew exactly where to go and even hinted at a knowledge of the location of the secret training ground.

A few miles later, the quaint neighbourhoods of northwest D.C. had given way to rolling farmland and the summer homes of Washington's elite, when the cab arrived at a posh golf club and stately Georgian-style building fronted by large white columns. The building was flanked by olive drab pyramidal tents, and the grounds were a beehive of activity, with uniformed operatives milling about. Bomb detonations and the high-pitched crack of pistol fire sounded in the background.

Orders in hand, Mayer reported to Capt. Howard Chappell, commanding officer of the German Operational Group (OGs). A former parachute instructor at Fort Benning, Georgia, Chappell was a mountain of a man. A muscular 6'2", sun-bronzed and blond-haired, with an ornery temperament and commanding presence, Captain Chappell was obviously in charge. Mayer thought to himself, Chappell could pass for a Nazi officer.

After brief introductions, Chappell rounded up Mayer and all the other new 'OGs', as they were called. A more eclectic group of desperados could not be found: former Luftwaffe pilots, Jewish escapees from German death camps, Polish deserters, world-class athletes, and even a former convict. Sixty years later, one recruit mused, 'The whole bunch were the craziest people I have ever met in my entire life.' Fred felt at home; he fitted perfectly into the ragtag outfit.

Chappell informed them why they were all gathered at the upscale country club: to penetrate enemy lines and strike at the heart of Nazi Germany. On these grounds and fairways, Chappell would try to forge what would ultimately be a precursor to the U.S. Army's Special Forces. The gathered men were the roots of a tree that would eventually grow many branches: America's Special Operations units.

Without a model to guide them, Chappell and his group made it up as they went along. The OG units divided into teams according to the countries in which they would operate. The basic unit organization consisted of four officers and thirty enlisted men, further segmented into two sections of sixteen men. Each section required a variety of operatives with different functional skills: radio operator, medic, demolitionist, weapons specialist, and team leader. But all OG operatives had two things in common: 'aggressiveness of spirit and willingness to close with the enemy'.

The OGs were part of a much larger organization called the Office of Strategic Services. The OSS was born in the summer of 1941, had initially been called the Office of the Coordinator of Information (COI) and was America's first central intelligence organization.

America had long had an aversion to spying. A foreign navy intelligence officer once complained that, for Americans, ‘espionage is by its very nature not to be considered as “honorable” or “clean” or “fair” or “decent” . . . The United States has always prided itself on the fact that no spies were used and its intelligence officers overseas have always kept their hands immaculately clean.’ When the first decrypted Japanese messages once landed on Herbert Hoover’s desk in 1929, Secretary of State Henry Stimson infamously remarked, ‘Gentleman do not read each other’s mail.’ Appalled by its use of what he perceived to be underhanded techniques, Stimson shut down the ‘Black Chamber’, a cryptographic service cracking Japanese codes.

Before the OSS was created, multiple government departments gathered information in reports sent arbitrarily up the chain of command in the hope that the most crucial information would find its way to the White House. No clearing house existed to ensure the information was shared, funnelled, and packaged for White House review and direction.

When first formed, the fledgling COI came under assault by the government agencies traditionally responsible for gathering intelligence, who viewed its head officer, William Donovan, as an intruder in their territory. The very agencies the COI was attempting to coordinate – the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), Army Intelligence (G-2) and the State Department – formed a loose anti-COI alliance. The four departments took steps to curb the new agency’s scope and influence. For example, the military put code-breaking off limits, and the ONI and FBI excluded the COI from operating in the Western Hemisphere.

COI nevertheless expanded its intelligence scope into research, analysis, and propaganda, collaborating closely with the British intelligence services. British hand-holding and tutelage were present from the very beginning. Coincidentally, a young lieutenant commander in British intelligence, Ian Fleming, future author of the James Bond books, helped lay the foundation for the nascent American intelligence services. Still, American special operations and secret intelligence lagged behind other branches of the OSS because it took so long to train effective operatives and saboteurs.

The advent of war didn’t help establish COI’s position in the eyes of the other American intelligence-gathering agencies, including the newly formed Joint Chiefs of Staff, who trusted their own intelligence organizations and distrusted Donovan. In order to solve this problem of perception and, at the same time, gain the support of the military and access to greater resources, Donovan proposed bringing COI under the command of the Joint Chiefs.

On June 13, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt officially endorsed the idea. COI’s name was changed to the Office of Strategic Services, and the organization was placed under the authority of the Joint Chiefs.

To lead the new agency, the president could not have chosen a more dynamic or qualified figure than Wall Street lawyer William J. Donovan. One of America’s most highly decorated heroes of World War I and a former assistant attorney general of the United States, he was a larger-than-life figure. Commanding a battalion of the 165th Infantry Regiment, better known as the ‘Fighting Sixty-ninth’, Donovan won the Medal of Honor, a Distinguished Service Cross, and two Purple Hearts, earning himself the nickname ‘Wild Bill’.

After the war, Donovan travelled extensively, resuming his legal practice and serving as assistant attorney general under President Calvin Coolidge. In the late 1920s, he served as personal political advisor to President Herbert Hoover. His position of influence and power allowed him to build relationships at all levels of American society and throughout the world.

In 1940, Donovan travelled overseas as an official emissary of President Roosevelt to report on

Britain's staying power in the war. Hoping to win American support, Prime Minister Winston Churchill granted Donovan unprecedented access to Britain's greatest intelligence secrets. Churchill eventually recommended that FDR appoint Donovan as America's intelligence chief.

Many of the techniques and strategies America has used to fight every clandestine war since World War II developed out of Wild Bill Donovan's vision. After his appointment as chief of the OSS, Donovan formulated an integrated 'combined arms' approach of shadow-war techniques: 'persuasion, penetration, and intimidation . . . are the modern counterparts of sapping and mining [used] in the siege warfare of former days.' Propaganda represented the 'arrow of initial penetration'. Espionage, sabotage, and guerrilla operations would then soften up an area before conventional forces invaded. His integration of shadow-war techniques was a groundbreaking approach to covert warfare. Unlike today's Central Intelligence Agency, which is largely 'stove-piped' and focused on intelligence gathering and analysis, the OSS was truly an integrated organization which covered everything from anthropology to nutrition.*

Donovan considered the Germans his main competition, saying they were 'big league professionals in shadow warfare, while America lagged 'behind as the bush league club'. The only way to catch up with Germany, he told Roosevelt, was to 'play a bush league game, stealing the ball and killing the umpire'.

Making the best of his vast network of personal contacts, Donovan possessed a flair for picking the right people for the right job. In several cases he drew upon the social elite in America; many OSS staffers had prominent military, political, and business relationships in Europe, especially Germany. As one senior OSS staffer put it, 'We looked for people with existing connections into Germany.' In the organization's early months, acceptance into the OSS was largely through invitation and recommendation. Wild Bill threw together the OSS practically overnight from scratch. Organized into many departments, Donovan's OSS quickly grew into a complex organizational chart of alphabet soup-like acronyms. Major departments of OSS under Wild Bill included:

- Research & Analysis (R&A) for intelligence analysis
- Research & Development (R&D) for weapons and equipment development
- Morale Operations (MO) for subversive, disguised, 'black' propaganda
- Maritime Units (MU) for transporting agents and supplies to resistance groups and to conduct naval sabotage and reconnaissance
- X-2 for counterespionage
- Secret Intelligence (SI) to put agents in the field to gather intelligence covertly
- Special Operations (SO) for sabotage, subversion, fifth-column movements, and guerilla warfare
- Operational Groups (OG) also for sabotage and guerilla warfare, made up of highly trained foreign-language-speaking commando teams

To fill these departments, he tapped his high-society connections: Ivy League schools, law firms, and major corporations. Some may have dubbed the OSS 'Oh So Social' for its blue-blooded foundation, but in truth, the OSS recruited anybody with useful skills. Safecrackers freshly sprung from prisons purloined documents from embassy safes and delivered them to Ivy League professors for analysis. Debutantes worked alongside army paratroopers. One study noted, 'The OSS undertook and carried out more different types of enterprises, calling for more varied skills than any other single organization of its size in the history of our country.'

For work in the field, the OSS needed not only the best and the brightest intelligence analysts but also out-of-the-box thinkers and risk takers. The OSS was filled with iconic and dynamic figures who would continue to capture the spotlight long after the war had ended: film giant John Ford; chef extraordinaire Julia Child; future Supreme Court justice Arthur Goldberg; Teddy Roosevelt's son Kermit; and even Chicago White Sox catcher Moe Berg.

Fred Mayer and the other OGs found themselves in this environment, and their personalities fitted

the OSS's mission like a glove. Mayer's personal attitude of 'If you don't risk, you don't win' epitomized the spirit and vision of Donovan's OSS.

Back at the Country Club, Chappell whipped his men into shape. They mastered map-reading, demolitions, and other basic skills needed for operations behind the lines.

Within Mayer's thirty-man group, a clique formed among five Jewish refugees, including Mayer who had all escaped the clutches of Nazi Germany. They all spoke German, and they all wanted vengeance for their families' suffering at the hands of the Nazis. They all also shared a sense of duty to serve their adopted country.

Brilliant and 'somewhat of a know-it-all', George Gerbner was a Jewish refugee from Hungary; the twenty-four-year-old spoke four languages and later became an Ivy League professor. OSS records described him as 'intelligent, resourceful, in splendid physical condition and known for his good judgement'. Alfred Rosenthal, a German refugee nicknamed 'Rosie', was a nineteen-year-old graduate of the U.S. Army intelligence school who spoke German and Italian; he was 'quiet and conscientious'. Bernd Steinitz was a stocky world-class athlete with a gregarious and charming demeanour who barely escaped Nazi Germany in 1939; his entire family would later languish in the camps. Hans Wynberg was a natural-born radio operator: He had a mathematical mind and an ear for music, which, for him, made the dashes and dots of Morse code sing.

Within the Jewish clique, the men forged deep relationships that would last a lifetime. Rosie and Gerbner became good friends, and Mayer and Wynberg formed a legendary friendship. They met at a radio school, which for Mayer merely entailed some additional training in case his team's radio operator went down on a mission. For Wynberg, radio school was training in his speciality. 'Hans latched on to me and saw me as kind of an older brother,' Mayer later recalled. An OSS report described Mayer as 'aggressive, husky, resourceful, and a natural leader who has a remarkable ability to improvise in special situations'. The same report described Wynberg as 'intelligent, cautious and completely loyal to Fred'. Mayer was the yin to Wynberg's yang.

Hans Wynberg, the lanky, blond-haired, 6'2" Jewish operative, was born on November 28, 1922, in Amsterdam, Holland. In 1939, Wynberg's father decided to send Hans and his twin brother, Louis, both in their fourth year of high school, to the United States. His younger brother, mother, father, and most of his relatives remained trapped in Holland. His father put \$3,600 in a bank account, and the two boys lived with a diamond cutter, a business contact of their father's, in New York City. Hans enrolled in Brooklyn Technical High School and excelled in his studies, particularly chemistry. When money got short, he obtained a job as a research assistant at the pharmaceutical giant Pfizer, where he assisted the doctor who was one of the primary scientists involved with discovering penicillin. Hans was present during purification tests for the drug. While working for Pfizer, the Dutch army called him up for service, but the Nazis soon overran Holland, nullifying the request. During the sweltering month of August 1943, Wynberg joined the U.S. Army and reported to boot camp. Meanwhile back in Europe, communication from the Wynberg family ceased. Hans did not know it at the time, but the SS had rounded up his mother, father, and younger brother and placed them in Auschwitz, the infamous extermination camp.

Wynberg's life changed at boot camp when an officer approached him and said, 'We understand you speak German, Dutch and English. Would you like to help your country?'

Wynberg replied, 'Sure,' and two days later he was on a train to Washington, D.C.

While at the country club, the men learned the basics of hand-to-hand combat. Mayer recalled that he was ‘good at it, [especially] the jujitsu’. The men learned their craft from a fifty-something, grey-haired combat instructor from Shanghai, British Major Ewart Fairbairn, who developed one of the deadliest systems of street fighting known to man, called ‘gutter fighting’. Gutter fighting evolved from hundreds of street fights he was involved in as the assistant municipal police chief in one of the most dangerous cities on earth at the time, Shanghai, China. Fairbairn summed it up like this: ‘There is no fair play, no fair rules except to kill or be killed.’ The major emphasized knife and close-combat fighting: ‘Gutter fighting is for fools; you should always have a pistol or a knife. However, if you are caught unarmed, the tactics shown here will greatly increase your chances of coming out alive.’ Fairbairn’s gutter-fighting tactics involved such things as a karate chop called the ‘axe hand’. A single blow to the Adam’s apple with the bony edge of a hand could kill a man, he told the men. Mayer and the other OGs also learned knife fighting and the art of weapon improvisation, such as how to roll a simple newspaper into a stiletto that could pierce the soft tissue underneath an enemy sentry’s chin.

The men also met another notable character during their training, John Hamilton, known for his rugged good looks, red hair, and bushy eyebrows. In reality he was the famous movie actor Sterling Hayden. Hamilton taught various commando tactics on the fairways of the Congressional Country Club. Once, when demonstrating countermoves against bayonet thrusts, he flipped young Bernard Steinitz over his back with the flick of a wrist, dislocating the trainee’s shoulder, and sarcastically quipped, ‘Suppose I gotta ease up a bit.’

After learning hand-to-hand combat, demolitions, and other infiltration tactics at the Congressional Country Club, the men were sent to Fort Belvoir, where they learned to drive tanks and other military vehicles. Although some of the recruits looked like ‘drunken fools driving [the tanks] and accidentally drove one of the vehicles into a ditch’, Mayer was a natural. He later described his tank-driving skills as ‘I was a damn good tank driver.’

Following their brief stint with vehicle training, the thirty-plus-man German Operational Group hit the rails and travelled to Chappell’s old haunt, Fort Benning, where they were integrated into the airborne training programme. The men underwent the rigorous U.S. Army parachute-qualification programme, during which they learned to pack their own chutes. The training was tough; it was meant to wash out most of the recruits and to test whether they had the physical and mental acumen to be paratroopers, which even today is a mark of warrior status in the U.S. Army. The men had to complete rigorous physical conditioning and five qualifying jumps to earn the coveted silver jump wings, identifying them as paratroopers. To maintain their cover as normal soldiers, the OSS issued them with regular M-42 paratrooper jumpsuits. Discipline was strict at Fort Benning and included several daily rituals, as Hans Wynberg recalls:

We had to wash our uniforms every night and put them on in the morning (dried or not, but at Fort Benning that spring it was warm enough for the clothes to dry). Boots had to be polished including the soles. . . . We also had to refold our own chutes after we had jumped. The 16 risers [the ropes] were of course usually entangled because as you hit the ground and were tugged along by the partly inflated chute for a few yards, before being able to gather the chute together. This exercise (refolding the chute) has given me a lifelong expertise in untying knots!

To his dismay, one of the instructors punished Wynberg for merely looking up into the air:

Punishment was frequent but fairly mild [twenty push-ups] for minor infractions. Since other teams were of course also training at Fort Benning, planes were overhead all the time and paratroopers were jumping out on neighbouring fields. But, there was a strict rule that we were not allowed to look at the men who were jumping. This was done in order to prevent us from counting. Every jump consisted of a ‘stick’,* meaning twelve men who would jump, and if we did watch and count, it might occur that we counted eleven men instead of twelve, thereby realizing that one parachute had not opened! So watching the jumps was a strict no-no.

I was caught one time watching the jumpers and my punishment was running around our training field, while having my arms out and rotating my arms while shouting: 'I am a bad soldier.' I watched the planes. All this doing double time. _____

During the early days of U.S. airborne training, chutes sometimes didn't open, and training was hazardous; the school had a high washout rate, giving paratroopers elite status. Equipment failure was an ominous threat, and incorrect parachute rigging meant death. During one of the parachute jumps Mayer recalled being blown off course: 'A crosswind caught us and we ended up in the Chattahoochee.'

Despite nearly drowning in the muddy waters of the Chattahoochee, Mayer and most of the other men in the group successfully made their five qualifying jumps. For the members of the German Operational Group, this marked an important milestone. Since they had the mental toughness and physical prowess to graduate from one of the army's toughest training programmes, they received the coveted silver wings representing their qualifications as paratroopers. With their newly minted, shiny parachute wings and smart jump boots, the men headed back to the country club.

THE WAIT

After one too many run-ins with cabbies who knew the commandos' 'secret training ground', the always security-conscious, bordering-on-paranoid Captain Chappell persuaded Donovan to move America's secret warriors to California's Catalina Island. Located twenty miles off the Southern California shoreline, Catalina was an ideal location for amphibious warfare training. Known for its lush green hills and red-roofed vacation homes, the island was a resort. However, Chappell's men were headed for the other side of the island, a compound of dilapidated wooden buildings that had served as a boys' summer camp before the war. Life was soon to get a whole lot more spartan for the German OGs.

At Catalina, the men embarked upon survival training. Dumped into the remote, unpopulated section of the island, they split into six-man teams, and Chappell instructed them to live off the land for five days on their own. They slept under the stars, officers and enlisted men alike, in only their sleeping bags. During an initial training exercise, the teams were ordered to 'capture' an airport. In charge of one of the teams, Mayer later recalled that his team 'took the airport. [We] came in from the back. There were only a few guards [protecting the airport], and we took them too.' Mayer always approached things unconventionally. Instead of mounting frontal attacks, he preferred taking the unexpected route and liked to employ the element of surprise. After Mayer's group seized the airport, the men received a rare pass to travel to the resort side of the island.

Later, Hans Wynberg reflected upon the experience:

The one time we got a few hours leave was a brief visit to the only port of Catalina Island, namely, Avalon. It was the first time in months that we had received a pass. All of us were of course far from home. At that time I was sergeant and in charge of the entire 'company' of thirty men. As we returned to our camp from the outing in Avalon, it was clear that several men had had a lot (or too much) to drink. At that time [spring of 1944] I was twenty-one years old and had *never* drank any alcohol!

After we returned to our base camp and turned in, I was awoken by the shout of [the unit's executive officer]: 'Sergeant Wynberg, get that man.' As I got up I saw Private Willy (that was his name. He was a former inmate of a prison, and he was called 'Chicago Willy') standing next to his sleeping bag with a (forty-five) pistol in his hand (we were all armed at all times), wildly swinging the pistol around and shouting, 'The Japs are coming. The Japs are coming.' While the other officers were ducking behind their sleeping bags, I got up and calmly walked over to Private Willy and calmly asked him to 'give me his pistol', which he did after I assured him, 'It is all right, Willy. There are no Japs. Believe me.'

Wynberg always put his men first. Despite the fact that this was survival school, he requested extra rations from the executive officer of the unit. As he recalled, 'A few days later the men complained that we had way too little to eat, which was true. We were doing lots of marching and climbing amid the hills of Catalina Island and living on C rations.'

Wynberg went to the executive officer to demand extra rations from the unit's leadership. 'Lieutenant, the men are hungry and want more to eat.'

The lieutenant replied, 'Wynberg, not another word. I do not want to hear such things.'

'But, lieutenant, the men are hungry.'

‘Wynberg, I said “not another word”.’

Later Wynberg once again pestered the lieutenant, whereupon he was ‘demoted to private for disobeying an order’.

Hungry and armed with Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knives and .45s, the men soon took matters into their own hands. Survival training be damned, they put their weapons to good use and blasted a lone steer. Industrialist Philip K. Wrigley, son of the founder of the famed chewing gum company and the owner of the entire island, kept a herd of dairy cows near the woods. The men ‘snuck up on the cattle much like Indians hunting buffalo’. At a prearranged signal they ‘picked out a calf at the edge of the herd and shot it’. One man, Tiny Waggoner, an experienced butcher who had ‘worked in a New York butcher shop before the war’, took it from there. He ‘did a masterful job converting part of our bounty into delicious steaks’. Healthy and practically unscathed, these full-bellied German OGs rolled back into camp. Chappell interpreted the men’s resourcefulness as a positive trait and did not chastise them excessively. Instead, he filled out an IOU for Mr Wrigley’s dead calf.

After they had successfully completed survival training at Catalina Island, Chappell felt his OGs were ready for the real deal.

During the balmy, early summer days of 1944, Fred and the other OGs finally got their call to action. They received orders to embark on a troopship for Europe. The Jewish members were particularly excited to get into the fight and potentially make a difference in a war that threatened to destroy the race and, on a more personal level, their families. The team boarded a Liberty troopship bound for an unknown destination.

The ship was packed with regular infantrymen as well as Chappell’s group of thirty of America’s special operations troops. Everyone on board took part in a guessing game as to their final destination. Only Chappell knew they were steaming to North Africa. The rest of the OGs logically thought they were headed for England.

The Liberty ship maintained formation in a convoy to avoid the torpedoes of the enemy wolf pack. The journey was uneventful. Mostly the men played cards, shot craps, and were bored out of their minds.

After weeks at sea, a foreign port finally came into view through a thick fog. Excitement rippled through the OGs as they approached land. A tugboat came out to guide the ship to its mooring near the wharf, and the men prepared to disembark.

Once ashore, the operators found themselves in Oran, an Algerian port of two hundred thousand. Three-quarters of the population were of European descent. Founded by Moorish traders in 903 BC, the Barbary Coast town had been sacked countless times by a wide assortment of European and Middle Eastern navies, armies, and pirates. The ambience of the city’s pirate legacy still lingered as the commandos stepped ashore. The rugged city fitted Chappell and his motley crew like a glove. Oran had been captured by the Allies in 1942 and became an improvised depot for men and supplies on their way to the Italian front. It suddenly became obvious to the OGs that ‘no one in Oran knew we were coming, and no one knew what to do with us’, recalled Wynberg. Soon they learned why: They were in the *wrong* city.

The OGs filed ashore with the rest of the troops. Chappell’s first stop was to see the commanding officer of the replacement depot, or ‘repo depot’, to which the OG had been assigned. A replacement depot was essentially a holding tank for men who were to be shipped off to existing units to replace combat casualties. Chappell entered the white stone building serving as headquarters for the repo

depot. After requesting a meeting with the commanding officer, Chappell was ushered into the general's office, located prominently in a cluster of stone buildings set aside as repo depot HQ.

With signature bravado, he extended a calloused hand.

'Sir, my name is Captain Howard Chappell of the OSS.' The general looked at him, sneering.

'Who the hell are you?'

'OSS. Office of Strategic Services.'

'We don't know anything about OSS,' responded the general, who then announced, 'You are to report as replacements for other units.'

At this point in the war, very few people had any idea what the OSS was because it was still a secret organization whose existence was disclosed only on a need-to-know basis. OSS headquarters were equally disorganized and had neither formed an office in Oran by the time Chappell arrived nor sent instructions to anyone in the city. One of America's most highly trained operations units was marooned in a bureaucratic nightmare. No one knew who they were, and it was beginning to look as if this crack unit would soon be used as replacement cannon fodder for other chewed-up units. In fact, the commanding general initially decided to send Chappell's OGS to England to be used as replacements for airborne units. Chappell refused the general's orders, while he made repeated requests to other high-ranking officers. But his requests fell on deaf ears.

With no radio, telephone, or other means to communicate with OSS headquarters, Chappell took matters into his own hands. 'After almost getting court-martialled in Oran, I learned that the OSS had a secret base in Algiers,' he recalled. By hook and by crook, Chappell obtained train tickets for all of his OGS from Oran to Algiers. Wynberg recalled the memorable train ride:

The train trip to Algiers was slow since the trains stopped in at least half a dozen villages in between. When the train stopped, it was immediately surrounded by dozens of yelling and gesticulating Arabs, youngsters as well as grown-ups. We soon realized that they were aiming at buying our bedsheets [as clothing]. Without hesitation I joined my fellow comrades in arms in making money by opening the windows at the next stop and, with my bedsheets in hand, offered them to an Arab boy who was waving a pack of paper money notes. As the train pulled away the boy grabbed the sheets and pushed the notes in my hand. As I sat down to count my money I realized that the top of the bunch of notes was indeed a low-value piece of paper money while the rest was merely blank paper.

After a few hours' journey, the train rolled into Algiers and the OGS disembarked and set up camp twenty miles outside of town.

But in Algiers, the men once again had to contend with being at the wrong place at the wrong time. As the days in bureaucratic limbo rolled by, boredom set in, and the men began to wonder if they would ever be able to utilize the months of intense training they had received. Quite frankly, Mayer's team began to have serious doubts about whether they would see any action at all. There were numerous rumours that the OGS would deploy behind the lines on a mission, but every time the men got their hopes up, the rumours proved false. Regardless, Chappell continued pushing his men and finding ways to keep them busy. Wynberg recalled one experience that broke the monotony:

In Algiers we had of course nothing to do, so our officers had to think of keeping us busy. Our captain, a bit of a cowboy, ordered us, Freddie, Alfred, George, Bernie, and I, together with five others, to march to the airport and back and do this without rations, only our canteens with water. After a few hours of marching we decided that we would go into a village and into an eating place in this village. We were greeted with enthusiasm by the Algerian owner, whose daughter waited on us and served us delicious eggs and pancakes. We left the cafe and pitched tents about two miles outside the village. As I woke up early the next morning I saw a group of about two dozen Arabs marching towards our camp. I woke the rest of the fellows, and as the group arrived it became clear after much shouting and gesticulation that the father of our waitress had the impression that if you talked to his daughter, the way Alfred had (he knew enough French to have talked with the daughter/waitress the previous evening), it meant marriage! It took at least an hour of shouting (and some money) to

convince the father that Alfred was not going to marry his daughter.

Algiers was a cosmopolitan city that contained a sizeable Jewish population. Several of the five were able to find a Sephardic Jewish synagogue and attended services. Wynberg later reflected on his time in Algiers and the extracurricular activities of one particular member of the five:

Having nothing to do in Algiers meant we did get evenings or even weekends off and were allowed to go into Algiers (we had pitched camp about twenty miles outside the city). Although I visited the Kasbah just once, George Gerbner, the fellow from Budapest, not only went to town every night but befriended one of the many pretty French girls left behind while their mates were fighting with De Gaulle's Free French.

They had been trapped in North Africa for months, barely escaping the clutches of the repo dep numerous times. But like travelling vagabonds, the OGs were eventually on the move again, this time by ship. Captain Chappell had finally been able to contact OSS headquarters in Italy and arranged for the group to travel to Europe. Nevertheless, as Wynberg recalled, they were kept in the dark and told that their travels were top secret. One member of the team, however, had other things on his mind:

After two months in Algiers we received orders to embark on a British troopship which was in the harbour and which, with 500 British soldiers aboard, would take us to Naples. In complete secrecy we broke camp that morning at 5 a.m., got into our trucks, and headed for the harbour of Algiers; [we were repeatedly told] that we were [travelling] under great secrecy. . . . We got aboard the ship, being greeted by the British soldiers and sailors, and as I wandered to find a place to sit for the trip to Italy, I noticed that the ship was tilting towards the shore where it was anchored. I went to the railing of the ship as five hundred British soldiers and sailors were cheering and staring at a pretty French girl standing on the waterfront waving her arms and shouting, 'George, George [Gerbner]. Don't leave me. Take me along.'

A ROLL OF THE DICE

Fred Mayer cupped his hands together, shaking the dice as he wound up and tossed them against the side of the tent. Gerbner, Rosenthal, and Steinitz craned their necks to watch with anticipation for the result of the roll. They were betting ‘blood money’, literally: They had donated their blood to the local Red Cross. For \$10, Mayer crapped out. He was a lucky man, but his luck had never held with dice.

‘I lost my blood,’ recalled Mayer.

Frustration was mounting. For the past several months, Howard Chappell’s German Operation Group had been homeless and missionless. After Chappell had successfully spirited the group away from North Africa into Italy, their original destination, Mayer’s operations team found itself, once again, without a mission. But Mayer kept his frustration to himself. For several more weeks, the OGs pondered their fate. Boredom is one of the toughest challenges any soldier faces: each person has his own threshold for it, and the anticipation of combat makes most men want to get the fight over with in order to confront their destiny. Besides that, however, and beyond the sense of purpose and duty that had brought them here, Mayer and four others had a larger axe to grind. They were Jewish, and that was their war – more so than for most of America’s other GIs.

Mayer’s frustration boiled over after his unlucky dice roll, and he turned to the others in the group. ‘We are going to sit here until doomsday unless we do something about it,’ he said sharply to the other OGs.

With emotion apparent, the men stared at Mayer, nodding in agreement. Then, he boldly suggested how they should take action: ‘We’re going to go to Allied Intelligence in Caserta and try to change our fate,’ he told the others. Wynberg would later recall, ‘We essentially mutinied.’

Because the men had not informed Chappell of their intention to try their luck elsewhere and had left without even speaking to him, they were essentially AWOL. Procuring a jeep, the five set off for Caserta, where they had a vague idea that Allied Forces Intelligence was headquartered. Roaming the streets of Caserta, the men found an MP and asked where they could find the headquarters. They were directed toward a villa, which served as a headquarters for the battalion stationed there. Stumbling and bumbling around, the men somehow found their way into LTC Howard Chapin’s office. Before the war, Chapin was an advertising executive for General Foods; now, he sent intelligence agents into central Europe, including Austria and Germany. Chapin’s special German-Austrian Section was a branch within OSS’s SI, or Secret Intelligence, division. Differing from the commando-like OGs, SI was devoted to the craft of intelligence and the art of espionage. Hundreds of OSS secret intelligence agents around the world had infiltrated the Third Reich, from the carefully planted valet of the Gestapo chief in Paris to the former circus acrobat surreptitiously serving as a German nurse. With the assistance of their British counterparts, the OSS was learning and mastering the rules of human intelligence gathering and spy craft that are still being used today.

At Chapin’s SI desk, the men found the sympathetic ear they sought. When the five walked into the office, Chapin nodded and asked them to take a seat. They took turns telling Chapin their unique stories as to why they were there.

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