

The original spooks; This week marks the 70th birthday of the OSS, precursor to the CIA. Despite its brief lifespan, the agency's cast of wacky alumni remain legendary

Scott Van Wynsberghe. **National Post** [Don Mills, Ont] 15 June 2012: A.17.

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For a flop, it sure looked good. In September, 1943, during the Second World War, a team of U.S. commandos joined Allied forces storming the beaches around the Italian port of Salerno. The team's mission included a bid to contact the Italian navy and get their officers to surrender. Italian sailors, however, were already giving up, without any fancy covert stunts.

Still, those commandos were a wonder to behold. One of them was Marcello Giroi, the brother of an Italian admiral. A second was "Jumping Joe" Savoldi, a college-football star turned professional wrestler. Next was at least one of two sons of the Ringling North circus family (either Henry or John; accounts differ). Who the heck would employ such an oddball gang? The Office of Strategic Services. Founded on June 13, 1942 - 70 years ago, this week - the OSS blazed a path for the CIA, and its legacy is still controversial today.

The origins of the OSS were complex and had a strong Anglo-Canadian flavour, thanks to spymaster William Stephenson. A Winnipeg-born businessman and First World War veteran, Stephenson had fallen in with the British intelligence service MI6. Starting tentatively in April, 1940, and then on a permanent basis in the following June, MI6 used him to improve security co-operation with the then-neutral U.S. and nudge Washington towards the anti-Nazi cause. Accordingly, Stephenson drew very close to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, but a different opportunity emerged in the form of William Donovan.

A prominent lawyer and a genuine First World War hero - he won the Congressional Medal of Honor - Donovan had served as assistant U.S. attorney-general in the 1920s, making him Hoover's superior. Several biographers of the two men agree that they did not get along back then, and writers Richard Dunlop and Curt Gentry even claim that Donovan tried to have Hoover fired. (True or not, Hoover always hated Donovan.) After a long stretch in private practice, Donovan came to the attention of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1940 and was sent on fact-finding tours of war-torn Europe. The British were delighted by this and showered him with information on their military and intelligence campaigns. They also began to eye Donovan as a man with potential.

By the end of Donovan's second European tour, in the spring of 1941, he was becoming so conversant with security matters that he started urging the White House to revamp the U.S. intelligence system. Simultaneously, William Stephenson was running a virtual Washington lobby with the same goal, and he convinced Donovan to apply for the job of U.S. espionage czar. Months of intense manoeuvring by the duo culminated on July 11, 1941, when Donovan was formally installed as President Roosevelt's personal Coordinator of Information (COI).

Initially, the COI was all title and little clout, and Donovan's office was slated for less than a hundred staffers. However, Donovan was unstoppable; and he sextupled his staff by the end of 1941. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought the U.S. into the war

at that point, and the COI added another thousand positions by May, 1942.

Donovan was now a real player in national security - and the backlash was severe. He was bitterly resented as an interloper by U.S. army and naval intelligence (not to mention the FBI). The bureaucratic infighting became so bad, says historian Bradley F. Smith, that a compromise had to be reached. On June 13, 1942, President Roosevelt issued an executive order that converted the COI into the OSS, which was put under the control of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, thus placating the military

While running spies, aiding resistance forces opposed to the Axis powers, conducting psychological warfare and building up a research-and-analysis wing, Donovan attained an empire of some 16,000 personnel. This workforce spanned a startling spectrum running from the very elite of American society to proletarian radicals.

Donovan's ranks included a Vanderbilt (William), a Du Pont (Alfred), two Morgans (J.P.'s sons Junius and Henry) and three Roosevelts (FDR's son James and Teddy Roosevelt's grandsons Kermit and Quentin). On the other extreme were a number of Marxist scholars (including Herbert Marcuse and Maurice Halperin), plus veterans of the Communist-controlled Abraham Lincoln Brigade of the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s. This was not lost on the Soviet Union - supposedly a U.S. ally in the Second World War - and a 1997 essay by scholar Hayden B. Peake established that the analytical sections of the OSS alone contained over a dozen definite or probable Soviet spies.

In between the extremes, the OSS also recruited Hollywood director John Ford, Ernest Hemingway's son Jack, Leo Tolstoy's grandson Ilya, chef Julia Child, Boston Red Sox catcher Moe Berg, scuba-diving pioneer Christian Lambertsen, ex-FBI gangbuster Melvin Purvis, an unknown number of convicted criminals, and (shades

of Indiana Jones), at least eight archaeologists. As well, a wacky array of OSS scientists tinkered with everything from mind-altering drugs to bomb-laden bats.

Given its eccentric cast of characters and its feuds with other agencies, the OSS unsurprisingly was barred from large parts of the world. J. Edgar Hoover, with the backing of the State Department, kept Donovan out of Latin America. In the Pacific, General Douglas MacArthur and Admiral Chester Nimitz shut the door. In Europe, General Omar Bradley seems to have been a problem. In China, a vicious secret-police chief for the Chiang Kai-shek regime, named Tai Li, reportedly traded violent threats with Donovan rather than coordinate against the Japanese.

Despite all the obstructions, the OSS accomplished a lot. In the north of Burma (now Myanmar), a small detachment convinced some 10,000 of the Kachin people to fight Japanese occupiers, thousands of whom were slain. In France, Donovan organized an amaz-ing airlift in which 320 B-17 bombers dropped supplies to the French Resistance on a single day in 1944. Also in 1944, OSS teams working across the Balkans rescued some 2,200 downed Allied fliers.

But there were also disasters. In 1942, a controversial French Admiral, Jean Darlan, was assassinated in an arcane, inter-French squabble, and the killer turned out to be from a unit trained by the OSS. In 1944, an OSS team in northern Italy murdered its own commander and embezzled money. Near Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) in 1945, an OSS lieutenant-colonel, Peter Dewey, was caught between native rebels and French imperialists and perished in the mess, becoming the first American to die in Vietnam. In China in the same year, OSS Captain John Birch ran into a group of Communist guerrillas and got himself killed, turning his very name into an antiCommunist rallying cry back home. (Some conservatives called him the first victim of the Cold War.)

Such a mixed record was bad news, and the many enemies of the OSS closed in as the war ended. In September, 1945, an unsympathetic President Harry Truman ordered Donovan to disband his force. (The CIA would not be created until 1947.) Already, however, the OSS had entered into legend.

In 1946 alone, Hollywood released three major movies about the OSS, and the mystique was still growing in the 1960s, during the presidency of John F. Kennedy. Under JFK, the labor secretary, a treasury undersecretary, an assistant secretary of state, the chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission and three presidential advisors were all OSS veterans. (On the other hand, the Bay of Pigs fiasco in Cuba caused Kennedy to fire CIA director Allen Dulles - also an OSS veteran.)

In the 1970s and 1980s, a much darker image arose. One of President Richard Nixon's troublemakers in the Watergate scandal was E. Howard Hunt, an ex-OSS man. When the Iran-Contra scandal hit President Ronald Reagan, his CIA director, William Casey, was implicated, and Casey, too, was from the OSS. To the very end, Donovan's crowd was dicey.

Scott Van Wynsberghe lives in Winnipeg, William Stephenson's hometown.

Credit: Scott Van Wynsberghe; National Post

Illustration

U.S. Department Of Defense / William Donovan, second from front left, chief of the OSS, reviews his troops during the Second World War.; Caption:

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