

Secret Operations of World War II. By
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***Secret Operations of World War II.* By Alexander Stillwell. London, United Kingdom: Amber Books Ltd, 2018. ISBN 978-1-78274-632-4. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. Pp. 224. \$21.77.**

The author has done an excellent job of providing an overview of the most prominent secret operations, and the exploits of some of the most heroic, but little known, agents operating for the Allied forces in World War II. Almost every page has photographs or artwork to illustrate some key point. Alexander Stilwell lives near London and is an accomplished writer and editor. He specializes in military history. In addition to this work, Stillwell authored several other books, including *The Encyclopedia of the World's Special Forces*, *The Special Forces Bible*, and *Special forces Survival Techniques*. This current study is divided into thirteen chapters, each focused on operations in a specific country. Some of the information has been available in many WW II histories, while other operations and the key players are less well known. The author has done an outstanding job with this book and it is very interesting and quite easy to read. There is an enormous amount of information packed into these pages. The professional or the interested amateur will not be dissatisfied with the pace of the book or the condensed but informative discussion of the operations and personnel. Anyone with a specific interest in any of the areas covered will be led to search out more in-depth treatments of selected portions of the subject matter. The sources cited by Stilwell will be very useful in locating more complete information on individuals or operations covered in the book.

The first chapter deals with the creation of the British Special Operations Executive (SOE). Brigadier Colin Gubbins led the SOE operations throughout WW II. This section also covers recruitment, training, and equipment. The section on equipment looks at weapons, sabotage devices, and other equipment. There is an overview of Operation Jedburgh, a joint operation involving British SOE, the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS), and the Free French Bureau Central de Renseignements et d'Action. The entire operation was to support Operation OVERLORD, the D-Day invasion. The teams were divided into three main categories based on goals. The first goal was to destroy railway communications; second, to use road ambushes to slow or even prevent German reinforcement of the Allied beachhead, and lastly to disrupt German military communications by attacking the infrastructure, such as telephone wires or other

communication systems. Several JED Team operations are described in a brief overview of each mission.

The next chapter deals with the creation of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in the United States. Some of the information is familiar, such as the creation of the OSS under the direction of William “Wild Bill” Donovan, who was awarded a Medal of Honor in WW I. For those who realize history repeats itself, it will come as no surprise to learn that the head of army intelligence, Major General George V. Strong, opposed the new OSS organization. The legendary director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), J. Edgar Hoover, jealously tried to push the FBI as the lead agency and has been identified as Donovan’s and the OSS’s worst enemy. Alan Dulles, whose brother John Foster Dulles would later become a major figure leading the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), was a major factor in the formation and operation of the OSS.

These first two chapters also emphasize the outstanding work and contributions of female agents in the SOE and the OSS. Many of these female agents, as well as a great many of the male agents, were captured and tortured before being executed. Stillwell reports the OSS had almost 4,500 female agents. The exploits of Virginia Hall are almost beyond belief. She was an American, trained by the SOE, who worked in Vichy France and Madrid. She was almost captured by Abwehr double agents, but escaped through the Pyrenees Mountains. Her accomplishments were all the more remarkable because she had an artificial leg. Virginia Hall was later decorated with the Distinguished Service Cross by General Donovan. This is only one of the stories of secret agent heroes in the book, whose names and exploits remain virtually unknown to this day.

The next ten chapters deal in large part with resistance fighters, operations, and SOE and OSS support to these groups in countries in the European Theater of Operations. There is a brief mention of the limited operations in the Far East and other areas, but the emphasis is on occupied Europe, as it was throughout World War II. The author has grouped the information under the countries where operations were carried out. For example, the successful targeting and elimination of Reinhard Heydrich is covered in the chapter on Czechoslovakia; along with one of the better known atrocities in reprisal, when the Germans totally leveled the village of Lidice. Although this was a British-inspired

operation and the Germans were aware of this; Hitler ordered 10,000 Czechs arrested, and all political prisoners executed. Top members of the Czech intelligentsia were ordered executed by Himmler, and hundreds of Jews in Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp were ordered executed by Gobbels. There are many other incidents described in the book where Axis forces retaliated for secret operations by murdering large numbers of citizens who had the grave misfortune to be near a scene or swept up in a round up. There are really great overviews of a number of operations in Belgium, The Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Italy, The Balkans, The USSR, and Poland.

The last chapter in the book deals with German secret operations. Operation EICHE was the mission led by Otto Skorzeny to rescue Italian Prime Minister Benito Mussolini and get him to safety. Although Mussolini and his mistress were recaptured and publically executed later in the war this daring operation remains a prime example of special forces performing unconventional activities. Skorzeny's troops wore German military uniforms and the Luftwaffe planes were clearly marked when they carried out this operation against the Italian Carabinieri. On the other hand, in Operation GREIF supporting the last major German offensive in Europe German soldiers with good English language skills dressed in American uniforms and infiltrated American lines. Several were captured and executed without delay for this violation of the laws of war.

The largest attempt to copy the SOE and OSS operations by landing Nazi agents or spies in foreign territory involved the DUQUESNE SPY RING led by Oberstleutnant Nikolaus Ritter and Joubert Duquesne. Fortunately, the Gestapo had approached a native of Germany, by then a naturalized American citizen, and recruited him for this spy operation. William Ritter had been a U.S. citizen since 1936 and was approached while on business in Germany in 1940. Upon his return to the United States, Ritter went to the FBI and the result was a very successful counter operation leading to the arrest, prosecution, and sentencing of thirty-three German operatives. Also in 1942, the Germans attempted to launch Operation PASTORIUS in the United States by landing two teams of four men each to carry out long term sabotage operations. One team of four was landed in Florida, and another team of four landed on a beach on Long Island. The leader of the Long Island group, George Dasch, and a German-American named Ernest Burger decided to turn themselves in to the FBI. The other six agents were

rounded up and by August 1942, all had received death sentences. Dasch and Burger appealed and because of their cooperation Dasch had his sentence commuted to thirty years, while Burger's was commuted to a life sentence.

There are several lessons in Alexander Stillwell's book which can be useful to professionals in the field today; as well as to students of history and to anyone with a keen interest in the greatest war the world has ever seen. First, many individuals who may not physically seem to be the ideal for special operations can play a role. Sometimes their average outward qualities are very useful in establishing a role in occupied areas. It is far more important to recruit and train people with the proper spirit and motivation than to concentrate on gender or other stereotypical qualities. Secondly, it is obvious from reviewing these operations that no resistance group can sustain successful operations against a major military force without outside assistance, not only agents and advisors, but supplies of food, weapons, and other equipment. As the reader will see, many agents and groups were betrayed by double agents, faulty communications, or even rival political groups. Even a concentrated effort against the Axis powers did not prevent individual groups with different political views from hindering each other and sabotaging each other for purposes of attaining power and control in the future. The USSR was accused of deliberately withholding support from the Polish resistance in the Warsaw uprising with the intention of letting the Germans kill off and weaken the Polish people to make Russia more dominant after the war. Russian forces also executed some 20,000 Polish officers and leaders in an action very much like the Nazis purging the Jewish population. It is obvious that any attempt to work with resistance groups requires an agent to have a clear understanding of the political considerations and carefully work within defined boundaries for the ultimate goals without becoming involved in tangential actions if possible. Lastly, this book makes clear the awful price the citizens of occupied lands paid for the successful secret operations in the various countries. Massive retaliations against innocent civilians did not slow down the partisan resistance fighters or the operations launched in support of the war effort. The torture and execution of suspected or actual agents also failed to halt the operations.

This book is recommended for a number of reasons. Alexander Stillwell is a very good writer and although the book covers a wide range of topics, all

are well presented and very interesting. As mentioned previously, this book can stimulate interest in more in-depth research into specific operations and individuals. It also is a valuable historical reference work which reinforces the concept that human intelligence and human operatives are prime requirements in warfare even today. In our age of technology some things can be handled utilizing the tools we have developed. For example, it might have been possible to take out Reinhard Heydrich with a drone, but even that might not have prevented the brutal retaliation. Other accomplishments still would require human operatives and resistance fighters. An example of these activities might include guiding downed airman and other individuals to safety. Everyone will find something of value in this book.

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