

War Era Story Project 2012

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Office of Strategic Services Italian Operational Group "A" "Donovan's Devils"

On July 11, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed Colonel William J. Donovan, Director, to head America's first Central Intelligence organization, the forerunner of the CIA and forefathers of the Green Berets or Special Forces. On June 13, 1942, the Office of Strategic Services, O.S.S. was organized to be trained to work on secret intelligence, secret operations and clandestine operations behind the lines, etc.

General Donovan had the idea: why not form fighting units of first-generation Americans of European parentage? At that time, there was a large wave of Italian immigrants. Their family background and knowledge of the language would make them valuable fighters behind enemy lines in Italy, and they would be known as the Italian Operational Group, O.G.-"A."

On December 23, 1942, the operational groups were authorized by the Joint Chiefs of Staff directive, and highly trained to be used in enemy occupied territory, be trained parachutists and be able to work as small groups to harass the enemy. They also had to be able to train, supply, sabotage and lead partisan units engaged in warfare behind enemy lines.

Interviewing for recruiting O.G.s began April, 1943, from the infantry and engineer companies. Screeners looked for physical qualifications, linguistic ability and also those willing to volunteer for "extra hazardous duty behind enemy lines." The F.B.I. screened us rigidly for security and we took tests before qualification. We were ordered to report for duty for the beginning of America's first Operational Groups or O.G., First Military Soldiers of the Office of Strategic Services-O.S.S. U.S.A. (Italians).

The O.S.S. is considered to be the forerunner of the C.I.A. by Mr. Trent, director of the C.I.A., and its history has been much written about. However, Italian Operational Group "A," in particular, has remained largely undocumented, even though they are recognized as the forerunner of the U.S. Special Forces. It is the intent of this article to compile information about the OSS Operational Groups and their activities during World War 11 and to make the information available .

As soon as the Joint Chiefs of Staff approved the O.S.S. Operational Group and assigned the allotment of personnel, recruitment began. On April, 20, 1943, six officers from Ft. Belvoir, Virginia, reported for duty and received some basic infantry orientation. Two weeks later, we transferred to Area F, (Congressional Country Club), where they met us with a contingent of enlisted personnel from the 100th Division, Fort

Jackson, SC. Soon, more officers and enlisted men were recruited, medics and radio operators. We formed the first Operational Group activated and were identified as the Italian Operational Group A.

We were to receive basic training at Area F, but they were not ready for us. We trained only in hand-to-hand and knife fighting and foreign weapons. Then, we were sent to Ft. Benning, Ga, for strenuous training in jungle warfare and parachute training. Later in August, we arrived at O.S.S. Station near Algiers, a pine grove on sandy soil, where we lived in pup tents. We started parachute training, when suddenly operations began.

One group went to Italian-occupied Corsica with a French force to liberate the island and harass the German 90th Panzer Division. On September 25, 1943, four months after we were activated, the O.G.s suffered their first casualties – two enlisted men and an officer – during a heated battle.

The Simcol Mission I was assigned to consisted of 14 enlisted men and one officer who parachuted into southeast Italy to help recover Allied prisoners released by the Italians when Italy surrendered on Sept. 8th. Behind the lines, we split up into smaller groups to cover more territory. Then we spread out; four of us – Ange, Phil, Al and I – went to the outskirts of Campobasso. The commanding officer and his men were captured. We were behind the lines for nine months playing hide and seek with the Germans, looking for prisoners. We could not make contact with the enemy for fear of the prisoners' safety. We had many chances to do so, but we were always outnumbered in many sightings. We know we couldn't jeopardize the mission. We sent the prisoners to a port in Pescara where a fishing boat would take them to our Allies on the British 8th Army side, with whom we worked.

When we hit the ground, and while gathering our equipment, men were coming toward us and we were ready to shoot them. I heard them talking in dialect, so we held our fire to make sure they were locals. They said "Americani," and came toward us. One walked toward me, looking into the barrel of my gun. They were natives; we introduced ourselves and they helped gather our equipment. They wanted to join us and help us, but we had to say "no" for their safety and for our mission. Many years later, my daughter married a boy from Campobasso. We were invited to meet the family. One of his relatives came up to me, pointing his finger into my face, saying "you son o bitch you almost shoot me!" After all these years, he remembered and recognized me and my name. He was one of those men who helped us and wanted to start a partisan army. (Talk about a small world.)

Once behind the lines, you had to be careful with the people, because you didn't know whether they were Fascist (Mussolini's party) or anti-fascist. Country people were anti-fascist and would try to help us find the prisoners because they mostly traveled in the country; also some were fighting with the partisans. Some of the prisoners may have stopped at the farmer's homes for food or shelter one time or another and moved on. Many Germans were in the area patrolling for us. One of the Fascists spotted us and reported us in the area. We had troubles galore after that. The house he had seen us at was burned, the family murdered and their 12-month-old baby pinned to the door with a bayonet along with a wanted sign with our names and promise of a \$1,000.00 reward, dead or alive. People found and shot him and hung him up with his tongue cut off as a warning to others.

Days after much searching and avoiding patrols and capture, a local farmer came looking for us to come and stay with him. We did so with fear because we found out we were about a quarter of a mile from German General Rommel's camp. The farmer said not to worry, that German soldiers used to come to his house at night, but not anymore. He assured us we would be safe. This was not to be. This was a big, isolated farm house with no utilities of any kind and one entrance, upstairs over a big barn, with cows, oxen and horses. We slept in the barn – phew! Later one night, we were in the kitchen and there was a knock on the only door. The farmer went to door and we four off-duty soldiers rushed to the bedroom. The wife cleaned the table and the farmer set the table with a gallon of wine, bread and cheese – smart man. Al let out a muffled cough and we hid behind the bed, our rifles pointed to door. The door opened and the mother says “little boy, bad cough,” and brings us a glass of water. Thank God we did not shoot! You must learn to hold your fire, until you are sure.

After searching for prisoners, we would return and hide in a hidden wine cellar, sleeping on top of barrels covered with hay. Then, we would leave early the next morning to search. One day while searching, we were out on a hill top and we heard planes. We looked up to see a British Spitfire and a German Messerschmidt fighting. After a while, the German went into a dive with the Spitfire behind him, diving in our direction. We saw bullets hitting the ground in front of us and we dove to the side, out of the line of fire.

Another day while patrolling, a German patrol spotted us. we ran up a field and spotted a field planted with tall growth. We ran around the field and back into the growth as far as possible and dropped down into the field. They searched all around us, but they did not find us and left. We could have killed them, but that would have endangered the people in the area and homes would have been burned. Evidently, the Germans knew we were in the area, but as long as we did not kill any of them, they did not bother the people. They did question some of them; they told them they were looking for prisoners.

Later, we ran into a person who said he was a prisoner, asking all kind of questions. We didn't think he was a prisoner. He was clean shaven and had short-cut hair and a slight German accent. He gave us a G.I. hand grenade, trying to prove he was an escaped pilot from a German prison. He said he was glad to see us, then he left. We were careful to watch if he was following us. We thought he was a German spy, so we got out of the area.

We heard Mussolini was held prisoner in the Gran Sasso Mountains, which were near. We thought if we could get him out, we could bring him back, but no luck. As we got to the camp, we saw them leaving in a small plane with Mussolini, and a truck-load of soldiers was leaving. There were workers at this coal making site who told us they took him out in the plane.

A mission to hunt or search for escaped or down prisoners was treacherous. While we were hunting for them, we were being hunted by the Germans. You have to be on guard and alert at all times and evade being captured or else. As noted, we were behind the lines for nine months, hunting and evading capture. There were so many experiences we encountered, and I don't believe how we got out of this war alive with all the the Germans and Fascists around us.

I thank God every day. I am here today at 96 years old, and I can remember all we went through. I am proud to have served under General Donovan and prove that his Ideas were right. It was the greatest organization in the history of the U.S.A., even today. Truman and his personal vendetta with General Donovan was a big mistake, and it makes me mad how there is never any mention of General Bill Donovan's Devils, his "Glorious Amateurs. We of the first hundred to arrive were greeted by him, and he threw a big Welcoming party at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, with great and encouraging words of what he thought we would accomplish.

I find the National Archives and C.I.A. has lots of material, including all the missions and history of our activities, and how O.G.-A and the Partisans broke the backs of the German Army in Italy, making General Kesserling, Commander of the German Army, admit defeat, forcing him to surrender and end the War – doesn't that mean anything? I can't understand why there was no documentation. I was among others chosen to Microfilm all his documents and papers and headquarters. When he decorated me, he remembered me and called me "Larry." God bless him, and may he rest in peace.

I forgot to mention, Captain Matterazzi was a great planner and coordinator of all the missions, and even went on some. I am grateful to him, for when we were receiving parachute instructions at Ft. Benning, on a practice jump, my chute did not open because the risers were twisted. He shouted up to me to kick my leg sideways, then I spun like a top, untwisting the risers. The chute then opened and I hit the ground very hard did, but not break any bones.