



# Sowing Dragon's Teeth

## OSS Operational Groups of World War II

Nathan C. Hill

MUCH HAS BEEN written about the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). Most of the writing revolves around its espionage exploits, clandestine activities, and its role as the predecessor of the modern Central Intelligence Agency. Usually any historical mention of the OSS Special Operations (SO) activities focuses on the three-person “Jedburgh” teams that parachuted into France or Detachment 101 (also known as the *Kachin Rangers*) in Burma. Overlooked by most historians is an important special operations unit inserted behind enemy lines during World War II: the Operational Groups (OG). The OGs were small highly trained military units tasked with organizing, training, and supplying French resistance *Maquis* movements to fight against the Axis powers behind enemy lines in the European theater of operations. The OGs have been historically ignored. The activities of the OGs proved the significant role guerrilla warfare could play on the modern battlefield and reintroduced the concept of guerrilla creation of the OSS and the OGs

In 1940, secretary of the Navy William Knox proposed that a mission be sent to England to acquire intelligence about the situation in Europe and develop relations with the British. Of great interest to Knox and President Roosevelt were the subversive “fifth column” actions the Germans were perpetrating in Europe.<sup>1</sup> The person chosen for this mission was millionaire Wall Street lawyer and World War I Medal of Honor winner retired Colonel William “Wild Bill” Donovan. During two missions between July and December 1940, Donovan gathered intelligence on the situation in Europe and the Mediterranean. Donovan’s findings showed the Germans to be “making the fullest use of threats and promises, of subversion and sabotage, and special intelligence,” and that “preparation in the field of irregular and unorthodox warfare was as important as orthodox military preparedness,”

Nathan C. Hill is a recent graduate from The George Washington University with an M.A. in military history. His research focuses on the U.S. involvement in insurgency and counterinsurgency during World War II and the Vietnam War.

PHOTO: Personnel of OSS camp, Ceylon, 1945 (National Archives, 540054)

and furthermore that “neither America nor Britain was [capable of] fighting this new and important war on more than the smallest scale.”<sup>2</sup> To win this “new and important war” Donovan looked to an age old idea, guerrilla warfare. He envisioned developing small units of highly trained personnel inserted behind enemy lines charged with committing acts of sabotage, intelligence gathering, and, most importantly, training and coordinating guerrilla resistance activities. In 1942 Donovan was put in charge of the Office of Strategic Services and “given the authority to operate in the fields of sabotage, espionage, and counterespionage in enemy occupied or controlled territory, guerrilla warfare, and [with] underground groups in enemy-occupied or controlled territory. . . .”<sup>3</sup> With this mission, Donovan and the OSS could begin recruiting and training the agents needed to accomplish his goal of “sewing [sic] the dragon’s teeth”<sup>4</sup> in occupied Europe.<sup>5</sup>

Donovan conceived of two types of units to be inserted behind enemy lines; first were the OGs, and second were the Jedburghs. The OGs and the Jedburghs were tasked similar missions to link up with existing resistance groups and coordinate their activities with Allied command, organize supply drops by wireless transmitter, and pass on intelligence; here is where the similarity stops. The Jedburghs were small three-person units acting covertly to support and direct guerrilla activity. Unlike Jedburghs who had to rely exclusively on the unknown capabilities of partially trained and armed resistance fighters as their primary offensive force, the OGs were trained soldiers capable of operating autonomously and unsupported by guerrillas behind enemy lines if necessary. Because of this fact, OGs were generally assigned missions that required active and aggressive actions against the enemy in critical areas of operation and against important high-value targets that were likely to be protected by strong enemy elements—missions that would normally have been assigned to elite commando units, such as Army Rangers or the British Special Air Service. Commanders knew what the OGs were capable of accomplishing and could rely on them to carry out mission objectives or die trying. Accordingly, in 1944, the OGs were designated the 2671st Special Reconnaissance Battalion Provisional (Separate), testifying that “OGs in effect constituted tactical military units.”<sup>6</sup>

## Recruitment and Training

The OGs were not looking to recruit typical soldiers; they wanted intelligent, motivated soldiers willing to think and act creatively in the absence of direct orders—what we would call today those who can “think outside the box.” However, the most important requirement for perspective OGs was language proficiency. As previously mentioned, the OG’s first task was to arm and train the resistance fighters in their areas of operation in the use of dangerous weapons and complex guerrilla tactics. This required a near fluent level of language expertise. The OSS scoured the military bases of the United States looking for men that could fill this role. They looked to recruit first-generation Americans who were not only fluent in French, Italian, Norwegian, Greek, and the Slavic languages, but also who understood the social mores of their parents’ country of origin. If the candidate met the language requirement, the next requirement was “willingness to perform hazardous duty,” followed up by the question, “Would you volunteer to operate behind enemy lines in uniform?”<sup>7</sup>



William J. Donovan reviews the Operational Groups at Area F, the Congressional Country Club, prior to their departure for China. Bethesda, MD, 1945. (U.S. Army)

Since all the OGs came from the regular military units, they did not require basic training, but they did require specialized training on the theory and practice of guerrilla warfare. The OSS was breaking new ground: an undertaking such as this had not previously been conceived of in the U.S. military and there was no precedent in training a unit to operate as guerrillas behind enemy lines. The most important source of inspiration was the British Special Air Service and Special Operations Executive, who had considerably more experience in training commandos than the U.S. military. The British lent their knowledge in the form of manuals, course outlines, and eventually instructors who were invaluable to the creation of the OSS training program.<sup>8</sup> There are a few versions of the training syllabus used by the OGs, but all reflect the need for OGs to be proficient in the following skills: demolitions, small arms (with focus on foreign weapons), heavy weapons (including the newly introduced bazooka), armed and unarmed combat (specifically silent killing techniques), scouting, patrolling, reconnaissance, use of signal equipment, unit security measures, principles of small unit tactics, methods of guerrilla warfare, urban warfare, methods of organizing and training civilians in the techniques, execution of guerrilla warfare, and much more.

The OG's initial training curriculum consisted of 152 hours of instruction (not including physical conditioning). More than one-third (57 hours) of that training was dedicated to the OG's primary mission, guerrilla warfare theory and tactics. The advanced training consisted of an additional 106 hours of instruction focused intensely on demolitions, weapons, and preparation for jump training that would take place elsewhere. The OG trainees were not just graded on physical skills of marksmanship and close combat, they were also judged on their mental abilities and personality traits such as the ability to cooperate with others, leadership skills, and emotional stability. Once graduated from advanced training, the OGs went to Fort Benning, Georgia, or to a British Special Operations Executive training camp overseas for parachute jump training. By the end of their training, the typical OG underwent a total of 250 hours of training, not including prior infantry training. This made the OGs the best trained units in the OSS.<sup>9</sup>

## Company "B" 2671st Special Reconnaissance Battalion Provisional (Separate)

The OGs' operations took place all across the European theater during World War II. OG detachments were sent to Norway, Italy, France, Greece, and the Balkans. Plans to jump into Germany were scrapped after the fall of Berlin in May 1945. The overall mission of Company B was to support the southern invasion of France from the Mediterranean, Operation Dragoon. Company B consisted of 21 separate Operational Groups. Thirteen OG sections were dispatched out of North Africa, and the remaining eight came from the United Kingdom. This discussion focuses on one operation, Justine, which is representative of the mission goals assigned to OGs according to the Company B operational report. The missions assigned to all French OGs were:<sup>10</sup>

- Cutting enemy lines of communication.
- Attacking vital enemy installations.
- Organizing and training local resistance elements.
- Boosting morale and efforts of local resistance elements.
- Furnishing intelligence to local Allied Armies.<sup>11</sup>

## Operation Justine

On 29 June 1944, Operation Justine, consisting of 15 soldiers and commanded by First Lieutenant V. G. Hoppers, was inserted by air into the Vercors region of France 37 miles southwest of Grenoble in the department of Isère.<sup>12</sup> Its mission was to arm and train the Maquis, stiffen their defenses in the region, and engage in guerrilla attacks against enemy lines of communication and troops. The geography of the Vercors area where the OGs landed consist of heavily wooded, steep-sided plateaus and deep valleys with only three main roads leading into the area; those roads were flanked by either steep cliff faces or heavily wooded hills. The Vercors was perfect country for guerrilla fighting. Because of its defensibility, it became a haven for resistance fighters and earned the moniker "the Fortress of Vercors." The Resistance felt so secure in the Vercors that 5,000 Maquis amassed in the region, against the recommendations of the Allied command to keep their



(Library of Congress, LC-W633-56651-ZC)

**Mulberry harbor assembled in preparation for the invasion of Normandy, with military vehicles crossing a floating roadway, Cherbourg, France, 1944.**

units small and mobile. To make matters worse, within days of the OGS arrival, the leadership of the “Fortress Vercors” imprudently declared itself “The Free Republic of Vercors.”

The first offensive action taken by the OGS was an ambush on 7 July. The section with 20 Maquis they had trained and armed set an ambush on a main north-south route near the village of Lus-la-Croix-Haute, 44 miles southeast of their headquarters in Vassieux-en Vercors and 40 miles south of Grenoble. The ambush location was a “strip of road about 300 yards in length, shaped like a horseshoe” flanked on the east by a 30-foot high escarpment, a perfect location for an ambush.<sup>13</sup> The men were arranged in an L-shaped ambush. At the top of the “L” were two men, one armed with a bazooka and another with a Browning Automatic Rifle (light machine gun) tasked with stopping the lead vehicle and any others attempting to flee down the road away from the ambush. The remaining men were

positioned along the escarpment above the road and were armed with small arms (rifles, submachine guns), hand grenades, and Gammon grenades.

Shortly after the ambush was set, the unit was notified by a local sympathizer that a German convoy of 6 trucks and 120 troops was about an hour away. When the convoy arrived at the ambush site, the first truck was struck and disabled by a bazooka round. The second truck in line attempted to maneuver around the disabled truck but was stopped by the Browning machine gun. The remaining three trucks and one bus were attacked by the men positioned along the road. They rained down small-arms fire and grenades on the German soldiers in the rear of the trucks who were savaged by the shrapnel-packed Gammon grenades.<sup>14</sup> A second truck was destroyed by a bazooka round as the Germans exited the remaining vehicles and began to set up machine gun and mortar positions to return fire. In traditional guerrilla style, as quickly as the attack was initiated, it was stopped.

The OGs and the Maquis fighters fell back to a preestablished rendezvous point 10 miles away. All arrived safely, save one Maquis fighter who was known dead and a second who did not arrive at all. The next day, the missing man was found in a nearby village, where, having been captured, he was tortured to death by the Germans in front of the villagers. The death toll inflicted on the Germans by the OGs and their Maquis counterparts was 60 dead and 25 wounded and three trucks and one bus destroyed.

One week after the ambush at Lus-la-Croix-Haute, Bastille Day, a massive Allied airdrop of 1,457 containers (with red, white, and blue parachutes) holding small arms, ammunition, and other supplies landed in the Vercors. The declaration of the "Free Republic" led to stepped up guerrilla attacks, and now a sizeable airdrop forced the Germans to take action. On 16 July the OGs received intelligence that there were troop buildups occurring in Grenoble to the northeast and to Valance in the west, and there was intelligence that an airborne assault would soon take place. On the morning 19 July, the drone of aircraft could be heard above the plateau, and the men of the Vercors saw 20 planes towing 20 gliders. At first, some thought that this was a long-awaited insertion of allied infantry, but as the gliders drifted to earth, it became apparent that it was not reinforcements but a German airborne assault. The gliders landed on a partially completed landing strip being constructed near Vassieux and disgorged 400 SS *Sturmtruppen*. The Maquis fought bravely against the *Sturmtruppen* (one Maquis manning a heavy machine gun decimating two gliders), but they were driven off and the Germans invaded the village of Vassieux.<sup>15</sup> The OGs organized an assault on the village to wrest it from German control. Fighting ranged over three days. The OGs and Maquis were unable to dislodge the *Sturmtruppen* but succeeded in pinning them down in the village. Coinciding with the air assault, German infantry, artillery, and armor and French paramilitary "Milice" forces attacked the Vercors from the northeast and west.<sup>16</sup> By this time it was decided that despite a heroic defense so far, without heavy weapons, artillery, or air support, the Maquis could not hold "Fortress Vercors" against the massive German assault.

The OGs and their Maquis guides began a tortuous two-week retreat traveling under the cover

of darkness, hiding in forests thick with German and Milice patrols, "never allowed to speak above a whisper," and subsisting on "nothing but raw potatoes and a little cheese." Finally, on 9 August the section escaped the dragnet around Vercors and found their way to other resistance groups. At the end of the ordeal, the men of operation Justine were in bad shape, tired, sick, and malnourished. First Lieutenant Hoppers lost 37 pounds; some men were unable to walk for weeks, and others suffered from dysentery lasting a month.

Though the Vercors itself was lost, overall Justine was a success for the OGs and the doctrine of unconventional warfare. First, the ambush led by the OGs was a smashing success with 60 German KIA to two Maquis lost. Secondly, this and other attacks forced the Germans to commit troops and aircraft to assault the Vercors. An estimated 22,000 German troops and significant equipment (infantry, armor, artillery, aircraft, and Milice) were used in the attack and the attempts to seal off the region. These troops were "all diverted from the front in Normandy or from defensive positions in the south."<sup>17</sup> The verifiable damage inflicted by the OGs and their Maquis compatriots were 250 *Sturmtruppen* KIA during the battle at Vassieux (over half of that assault force) and the downing of three aircraft. The only causality for the OGs was First Lieutenant Chester L. Myers, who came down with appendicitis prior to the German attack and, while recovering from surgery, was captured and shot by the Germans. Operation Justine proved that a small, aggressive, and well trained guerrilla force could affect battle not only on a tactical level but also on the operational level, producing results that greatly outweighed their physical and material costs.

One can gauge the achievements of the OGs and the success of the doctrine of unconventional warfare by looking at the Operational Groups "box score."

Following are the OGs Box Scores:

- Known Germans Killed 461
- Known Germans Wounded 467
- Known German Prisoners 10,021
- Air Craft Shot Down 3
- Power/Telecommunications Lines cut 11<sup>18</sup>
- Americans Killed Officers: 3 Enlisted: 4
- Americans Wounded Officers: 4 Enlisted: 2

- Americans Captured or Missing Officers: 2  
Enlisted 2<sup>19</sup>

- Locomotives Destroyed 3
- Vehicles Destroyed 33
- Bridges Destroyed 32
- Roads Mined 17

Taking into account that there were only 356 OG personnel operating in France, the ratio of enemy dead, wounded, and captured in action to OGs is astounding. Killed in action 65:1, wounded in action 66:1, and captured 2,505: 1. These “scores” as they are only represent incidents that the OGs were directly involved with and reported on. If one were to take into consideration the damage inflicted on the enemy by those Maquis that were armed and trained by the OGs, it is no doubt these “scores” would be considerably higher. Nor do these numbers accurately register the importance of timely tactical intelligence rendered to Allied command regarding German troop movements.

There were other factors that stymied the overall effectiveness of the OGs. The greatest complaint by the OGs in the after-action reports was that they were deployed too late to be as effective as they could have been. It was mentioned in all reports compiled by Lieutenant Colonel Cox that, had the OGs been dropped into the region months earlier, they would have had time to train the Maquis more effectively, obtain increased situational awareness, and accomplish considerably more. That within such a limited time frame the OGs accomplished as much as they did is remarkable: most of OG operations only lasted from one to two months on average, yet provided stunning results. The OSS and the OGs had proved the military potential of unconventional warfare, yet in October 1945, President Truman issued an executive order abolishing the OSS and all its subsidiaries, save the Research and Analysis branch, which was transferred to the Department of State.<sup>20</sup>

As the Cold War grew colder, the U.S. military began to recognize the military potential of disaffected citizens living on the other side of the Iron Curtain. In 1951, the Office of the Chief of Psychological Warfare issued a report that estimated a “370,000 man potential within the USSR and satellites.”<sup>21</sup> The potential to recruit nearly 400,000



“Jedburghs” in front of a B-24 just before night at Area T, Harrington Airdrome, England, 1944. (DOD)

guerrillas inside the Soviet bloc during a future war piqued the interest of some in the U.S. military in developing an unconventional warfare unit along the lines of the original operational groups. On 1 May 1952, the Psychological Warfare Center was founded in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, to train soldiers in the same skills and tactics taught to the OG sections in 1944. The man chosen to head the command and train the new unit was Colonel Aaron Bank, who was trained as an OG but dropped into France as a Jedburgh in 1944. We can see the influence of the OGs in the recruitment and training of the 10th Special Forces Group. The requirements for Special Forces are nearly identical to those of the OGs: “airborne trained or volunteer for jump training; language capability (European) . . . [and] volunteer to parachute and operate behind enemy lines in uniform.”<sup>22</sup> Some of the initial instructors at the 10th Special Forces Group center were OSS veterans, and the OSS and OGs were considered the benchmark for the 10th Special Forces. Bank said he “was determined to obtain a level of proficiency equal to or better than the unit’s OSS predecessors.”<sup>23</sup> **MR**

NOTES

1. Kermit Roosevelt, *War Report of the OSS*, Office of Strategic Services (New York: Walker, 1976), 3.
2. *Ibid.*, 7-8.
3. *Ibid.*, 105.
4. This quote is in reference to the ancient Greek myth of Cadmus who founded the city of Thebes. Cadmus killed the sacred dragon that guarded the spring of Ares and at the urging of the goddess Athena. He was told to sow the dragon's teeth into the earth; where the teeth were planted sprang forth a group of armed warriors who went on to found the city of Thebes with him. Donovan no doubt meant this as an allusion to the OSS agents in a Cadmus like role planting seeds of resistance and springing up guerrilla warriors from nothing to attack the enemy's rear.
5. Memorandum 94, 22 December 1941, William J. Donovan to President Franklin Roosevelt.
6. Roosevelt, 87.
7. *Operational Group Field Manual*, 8. Aaron Bank, *From Oss to Green Berets: The Birth of the Special Forces* (Novato: Presidio, 1986), 2.
8. John Whiteclay, Chambers II, *OSS Training in the National Parks and Service Abroad in World War II* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 2008), 52.
9. *Ibid.*, 199-200.
10. LTC Alfred Cox, *Operational Report: Company "B" 2671st Special Reconnaissance Battalion Provisional (Separate)*. 1944: OSS Records (RG 226), Entry 99, Box 44, National Archives II.
11. Not mentioned in Cox's report was the protection of installations (bridges, power stations, and factories) deemed vital to the success of the invasion that might be the targets of destruction by the retreating Germans, called "counter-scorching" missions.

12. Sources for Operation Justine comes from, unless otherwise noted, Cox, *Operational Report: Company "B,"* 1-9; *Original Field Report: Operation "Justine" 6/28-8/24, 1944*, OSS Records (RG 226), Entry 99, Box 41, National Archives II.
13. Cox, *Operational Report: Company "B,"* 3.
14. British Gammon grenades consisted of canvas-like material bag and impact fuse. That the user would pre-fill the bag with up to 2 pounds of C-2 plastic explosives or other materials (the OGs of Justine used one pound of C-2 and one pound of scrap iron). Once the pin was pulled the grenade thrown would explode on impact, making this weapon as dangerous to the user as the enemy if not handled correctly. The Gammon grenade was considerably more powerful than a standard grenade and was quite useful in destroying vehicles.
15. Blake Ehrlich, *Resistance: France 1940-1945* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1965).
16. The *Milice* were the militia forces of the French Vichy government working with the Nazis.
17. National Archives II, *OSS Operational Groups with French Resistance, February 1945*, OSS Records (RG 226), Entry 99, Box 16.
18. *National Archives, Results of Partisan Operations Controlled or Led by OGs*, OSS Records (RG 226), Entry 99, Box 40, Folder 8, II.
19. National Archives II, *OSS Aid to the French Resistance in World War II: General Donovan's Report to the JCS, 1945*, OSS Records (RG 226), Entry 99, Box 40, Folder 6.
20. President Harry S. Truman Executive Order 9621, 20 September 1945.
21. *Ibid.*, 125.
22. Bank, 168-69.
23. *Ibid.*, 172.

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