



Donovan's Devils: OSS Commandos Behind Enemy Lines—Europe, World War II

Albert Lulushi

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The stirring, little-known story of the forerunners to today's Special Forces.

The OSS—Office of Strategic Services—created under the command of William Donovan, has been celebrated for its cloak-and-dagger operations during World War II and as the precursor of the CIA. As the "Oh So Social," it has also been portrayed as a club for the well-connected before, during, and after the war. *Donovan's Devils* tells the story of a different OSS, that of ordinary soldiers, recruited from among first- and second-generation immigrants, who volunteered for dangerous duty behind enemy lines and risked their lives in Italy, France, the Balkans, and elsewhere in Europe. Organized into Operational Groups, they infiltrated into enemy territory by air or sea and operated for days, weeks, or months hundreds of miles from the closest Allied troops. They performed sabotage, organized native resistance, and rescued downed airmen, nurses, and prisoners of war. Their enemy showed them no mercy, and sometimes their closest friends betrayed them. They were the precursors to today's Special Forces operators.

Based on declassified OSS records, personal collections, and oral histories of participants from both sides of the conflict, *Donovan's Devils* provides the most comprehensive account to date of the Operational Group activities, including a detailed narrative of the ill-fated Ginny mission, which resulted in the one of the OSS's gravest losses of the war.

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Donovan's Devils: OSS Commandos Behind Enemy Lines—Europe, World War II Details

Date : Published February 9th 2016 by Arcade Publishing (first published February 2nd 2016)

ISBN :

Author : Albert Lulushi

Format : Kindle Edition 408 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Military, Military History, War, Military Fiction, Spy Thriller, Espionage, World War II

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From Reader Review Donovan's Devils: OSS Commandos Behind Enemy Lines—Europe, World War II for online ebook

Joel says

(Note: I received a free copy of this book through Goodreads First Reads.)

The OSS is primarily known as a spy organization- the precursor to the CIA- that operated during World War II; but they also operated commando units which operated behind enemy lines during the war, in places like Italy, Yugoslavia, and occupied France. Those units- filled with immigrants to America from the countries involved, or descendants of immigrants, who still spoke their native tongue- did things like coordinate Allied forces with local resistance movements, arrange supply drops, rescue downed Allied pilots, and perform sabotage raids. This book is a history of those commando units.

Many of the stories here are interesting, and shed light on aspects of the War which are often ignored. Some of the stories of German brutality towards resistance fighters and civilians who aided the Allies are horrifying.

However, to find these stories, the reader has to wade through a thick, confusing soup of names, dates, places, and various minutiae. Virtually every significant OSS commando, and resistance figures they meet, is given a little capsule biography; if you then encounter the same name 3 pages later, you don't remember who it is, because you've been introduced to 10 more names in the interim.

There's certainly nothing wrong with that level of detail. But it results in a book which I wouldn't recommend to readers with a casual interest in history. If you have a deep interest in World War II, though, this book will reward you; and most likely fill in some gaps in your knowledge.

Sean says

This book looks at the evolution and operations of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), which proved to be the precursor to the CIA, during the Second World War.

The opening detailing the foundation of the OSS by Donovan supported by FDR, and against the will of the US Military it must be said, and how they recruited and trained their men I found particularly fascinating. Donovan knew that the OSS needed to hit the ground running and learned from the already existing Allied (primarily British) forces such as the Commandos quickly, with great effort placed in training future trainers. The OSS was able to quickly bootstrap itself into being operationally ready in a surprisingly short time.

The section detail some of the actual missions in France and Italy are briskly written and engaging, as the subject themselves are so filled with danger and risk it would be difficult to do them justice with such a style.

Lulushi spends a lot of time (about 50 pages, almost a sixth of the book) on the Ginny team that was captured and executed by the Germans, its fate, the investigation that revealed its fate and the questioning and trail of the Germans involved. While it is a tragic episode and justice is partly wrung from it, it seems an excessive focus on one incident to this reviewer.

While it is mostly an engaging read, the missions to the Balkans seem to get a short shift (though their most heroic mission is well told), and there is a lack of placing the actions of the OSS in the context of the war as a whole as the individual missions are detailed. The analysis of the success of the OSS is mostly left to recounting the medals awarded and commendation given rather than a rigorous assessment of the costs and successes of the organization.

While a valuable look at the OSS's missions in Europe it just strikes me as something is missing in placing the operations of the OSS in the context of the war effort as a whole.

Note: I was fortunate enough to receive a copy of this book through a Goodread giveaway.

William J. says

This is an interesting read and in many ways a sad one. Although the OSS had success and eventually transitioned into the CIA, many of the missions resulted in the death of agents and in one case, Major William Holohan, the death appears to have been a murder by member of his own team for profit. The author provides excellent descriptions of the missions and the reader can get anxious about the trials and tribulations of the teams dropped behind enemy lines.

For those interested in this aspect of World War II or the origins of the Central Intelligence Agency, this is a good read.

David says

Albert Lulushi's book is filled with fascinating historical information, but what makes it very difficult to put down is the human detail he provides. I'm stunned by the amount of research he must have done and how he weaves the strands together. Whether your interest is primarily World War II in Europe or the creation of CIA and US Special Forces or if you just enjoy a highly engaging war history, you won't be disappointed with Donovan's Devils.
