

# >> THE OSS SOCIETY: KEEPERS OF GEN. DONOVAN'S FLAME

By Susan L. Kerr and John D. Gresham

*"We were not afraid to make mistakes because we were not afraid to try things that had not been tried before."*

*"You can't succeed without taking chances."*

– Maj. Gen. William J. Donovan, OSS founder

*"I'm responsible for a group of very dangerous senior citizens."*

– Charles Pinck, president of the OSS Society

Ask any American adult about the CIA and there's a good chance he'll be able to identify its basic intelligence-gathering functions. Ask the same person about military special operations and he'll probably be able to speak somewhat about the Green Berets in Afghanistan and Iraq. Ask him what he knows about World War II's Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and he'll likely stare blankly at the question. Such is the state of public knowledge about America's first central intelligence agency.

The Office of Strategic Services was the first organized American intelligence initiative, conceived and put into action on June 13, 1942, by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on the advice of the top British intelligence officer in the Western Hemisphere, William Stephenson (known as "the man called 'Intrepid'") and William J. Donovan, a World War I hero, leading attorney, and an informal advisor to the president. Prior to that time, intelligence gathering was achieved on a piecemeal fashion. With the commencement of hostilities and the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the need for a central intelligence office to amass information, analyze it, and make recommendations for appropriate action became clear overnight. During its brief lifetime, just a few months short of four years, the OSS overshot these goals, setting the stage for the creation of both the Central Intelligence Agency and the U.S. special operations forces (SOFs). Eschewing the limelight, its recruits performed amazing feats of derring-do befitting the movies, and counted among its operatives several Hollywood figures such as

swashbuckling actor Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Academy Award-winning director John Ford, and Sterling Hayden, who won a Silver Star for bravery behind enemy lines. The majority were above-average Joes, and some Josephines, recruited from the ranks of the U.S. military, along with civilian trades and well-traveled intellectuals. An ideal OSS candidate was once described as a "Ph.D. who can win a barfight" and Donovan described OSS personnel as his "glorious amateurs."

The man who assembled this stellar cast was perhaps the biggest and quietest swashbuckler of them all: Medal of Honor recipient Gen. William "Wild Bill" Donovan. Donovan was one of those larger-than-life characters who strides across the landscape of history when he is needed most. He had been performing ad-hoc intelligence work well before Dec. 7, 1941. Roosevelt called Donovan his "secret legs." Since that time, military and intelligence professionals have appreciated and admired Donovan's depth of perception and breadth of vision. Richard Helms, director of central intelligence (DCI) from 1966 to 1973 and an OSS alumnus, said: "He was truly the father of American intelligence. Before him, our efforts were trivial." Donovan's personal qualities became the recruiting criteria for the infant OSS: a potent combination of brains, brawn, and bravado.

Recruits were encouraged to improvise and innovate. Donovan placed a high value on initiative and courage, saying that he would "rather have a young lieutenant with enough guts to disobey a direct order than a colonel too regimented to think and act for himself." He encouraged risk-taking or, as he called it, "calculated recklessness." He backed up his people when they stumbled. However, these unorthodox principles didn't win friends within the regular military and government circles. William J. Casey, one of Donovan's OSS recruits and DCI from 1981 to 1987 remembered, "You didn't wait six months for a feasibility study to prove that an idea could work. You gambled that it might work. You didn't tie up the organization with red tape designed mostly to cover somebody's ass. You took the initiative and the responsibility. You went around end; you went over somebody's head if you had to. But you acted. That's what drove the regular military and the State Department chair-warmers crazy about the OSS."

This is the part of Donovan's legacy that lives on in the special operations community. Two units within OSS, the Jedburghs and operational groups, forerunners of today's U.S. SOF, parachuted into Europe and Asia behind enemy lines to work with resistance groups. They had to become instantaneous peacekeepers and diplomats when dealing with partisan bands bent on revenge against certain elements of



Maj. Gen. William Joseph Donovan, the namesake of the prestigious OSS Society award, shown as a brigadier general.

their own countrymen, improvising all the way. Nearly anyone can be trained to be a killer. Only the very best can synthesize the attributes of citizen, soldier, spy, and diplomat into one remarkable human being. With an outrageous *elan*, OSS was an organization designed to do great things. What Ford said about Donovan applied equally to OSS: "Gen. Donovan was the sort of guy who thought nothing about parachuting into France, blowing up a bridge, pissing into Luftwaffe gas tanks, then dancing with a German spy on the roof of the St. Regis Hotel." This was the OSS ethos.

War does not last forever, and in April 1945, Donovan's strongest supporter, Roosevelt, died. The succession of President Harry S. Truman to the presidency meant trouble for Donovan and the OSS. It was a clash of personalities and wills from the start. Donovan's iconoclastic leadership style simply did not mesh with the organizational-man mindset of Truman, who knew little about intelligence gathering. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, a longtime Donovan and OSS nemesis, drew out his long knives. With his signing of an Executive Order on Sept. 20, 1945, the Office of Strategic Services was no more, its activities split up between the Department of War and the Department of State. Just two

years later, however, the need for one main intelligence organization became apparent as the Soviet Union emerged from World War II bent on surpassing its former allies. Passage of the National Security Act in 1947 found the Truman administration creating a new clandestine agency to replace the defunct Office of Strategic Services, the Central Intelligence Agency, using a plan created by Donovan. Most of its early members were OSS alumni.

But most demobilized OSS personnel scattered across the county, either picking up professions interrupted by the war, advancing in rank within the military, or committing themselves to lives as public servants. Donovan himself returned to the practice of law for a time, serving as special assistant to Telford Taylor, the chief prosecutor of Nazi war criminals at the Nuremberg War Crime Tribunals. After obtaining justice for OSS personnel killed, sometimes gruesomely, by the Germans, he went back to his highly successful Wall Street law firm while still offering his unique experience and insight to American presidents, eventually serving as ambassador to Thailand for a year under President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Upon learning of Donovan's death in 1959, Eisenhower said: "What a man! We have lost the last hero." Other OSS graduates continued careers in the intelligence community. Allen Dulles, William Colby, Helms, and Casey went on to lead the CIA. To a man, each credited Donovan for setting worthy goals and core values for their community. Other OSS veterans such as Maj.



Donovan poses with members of the OSS Operational Groups, forerunners of today's U.S. special operations forces, at the Congressional Country Club in Bethesda, Md., which served as the primary OSS training facility.

Gen. John Singlaub, who was a member of the Jedburghs, remained in the military and left an indelible mark on what was to become the U.S. Army Special Forces, the Navy SEALs, and other SOF communities among the service branches.

The men and women of the Office of Strategic Services shared a brief and unique experience under Donovan's tutelage. Unable to truly share their tales and life-changing experiences with others who served in World War II, it was perhaps only natural that they would stay together after the war. Thus, the Veterans of Strategic Services (VOSS) was born in 1947 as a means of keeping the organization's spirit alive. Estimates of the number of OSS members during the war are in the range of 13,000. Of these, perhaps 1,000 to 1,500 participated in the activities of the VOSS at its peak. Initially social in nature, VOSS evolved over time to preserve its unique history and to honor those who followed in Donovan's footsteps. The first William J. Donovan Award®, which honors the outstanding attributes of the OSS's founder who had passed away in 1959, was presented to Dulles in 1961. Other recipients have included Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, President Ronald Reagan,

Lord Mountbatten, Sir William Stephenson, Gen. David Petraeus, and Maj. Gen. John Singlaub. Ross Perot will receive the award this fall at their annual dinner in October.

In the late 1990s, as its members were aging and concerned that the contributions of Donovan and his OSS might be forgotten over time, VOSS changed its name to The OSS Society and moved its headquarters from Rockefeller Center in New York City to Washington, D.C. The son of one of the VOSS members, Charles Pinck, urged his father, Dan Pinck, who served behind enemy lines in China, to attend one of the last big gatherings of OSS veterans in the mid-1980s, an event populated with people like Casey, Colby, and Helms. Intrigued and inspired by his father's OSS service, Pinck volunteered to help VOSS when he moved to Washington in the early 1990s and became president of The OSS Society in 2002. Today, Charles Pinck is a man on a mission to keep the memory of OSS alive, and to apply lessons learned by the OSS in World War II to present-day challenges. The OSS Society recently held a symposium, for example, with the Joint Special Operations University ("Irregular Warfare and the OSS Model") that is available online at [www.ossreborn.com](http://www.ossreborn.com).

The OSS Society is no longer limited to OSS veterans. Its members include descendants of OSS veterans, current and retired members of the U.S. intelligence community and U.S. special operations forces, academics, and others with a serious interest in the OSS. Its board of





directors includes Adm. Eric Olson, Gen. Bryan Brown, President George H.W. Bush, and five former directors of central intelligence.

In addition to presenting the William J. Donovan Award, The OSS Society also bestows its Distinguished Service Award. Usually reserved for OSS veterans, there have been notable exceptions, such as it's presentation to an Eastern European partisan, Maria Gulovich, who saved the lives of an OSS team in Slovakia. In 1946, Donovan personally awarded Gulovich the Bronze Star at West Point in front of the Corps of Cadets, the first woman so honored. In 2009, the recipient was Dr. Christian Lambertson, Ph.D., who was instrumental in the development of combat rebreather systems for the OSS and post-war SOF organizations. The OSS Society publishes *The OSS Society Journal*, offers research assistance and speakers upon request, hosts an online discussion group with more than 1,200 members, and has erected OSS memorials throughout the United States.

Pinck's major goal is the creation of an OSS museum in the Washington, D.C.-metro area. "This wouldn't be just an archive or a library, but a fully interactive museum that would tell the remarkable story of Gen. Donovan and OSS and the contributions made to it by all our military services. Too few Americans know about the OSS: The most remarkable organization ever created by the U.S. government." But at its core, the OSS Society will always be about the values and achievements of the OSS and its founder, Gen. William Donovan. For in the middle of the greatest conflict in the history of the world, for a few years, it was OSS that put forward America's best, brightest, and bravest.

To learn more about The OSS Society, please visit its Web site at [www.ossociety.org](http://www.ossociety.org).

Above: Adm. Eric Olson presenting The OSS Society's Distinguished Service Award to Dr. Christian Lambertsen at the 2009 William J. Donovan Award Dinner. Right: Charles Pinck, president of The OSS Society.

