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Operation Cardinal: “...So You Must be a Spy”

by Bill Streifer

John W. Brunner was a member of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during WWII, in charge of the cryptography section of the Communications Center at OSS HQ in Kunming, China. The following is a brief history of the OSS:

Early in World War II, President Roosevelt realized that the existing intelligence agencies were not providing him with the information he needed, so he asked World War I hero, prominent international lawyer and, incidentally, his Columbia University classmate William “Wild Bill” Donovan to go to Europe to find out what was happening there. Donovan’s report was so impressive that Roosevelt asked him in 1941 to head an organization called the Office of the Coordinator of Information (COI). When the U.S. was drawn into the war, this organization was renamed the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and given broad new powers and independence. The OSS not only provided most of the usable intelligence in all theaters of operations but also conducted propaganda operations and provided large scale support to resistance/guerrilla operations in all theaters.

When the war ended, J. Edgar Hoover, who wanted to take control of all of the OSS international operations, asked President Truman to discontinue the OSS, which Truman ordered done. By mid-September, however, he realized that this would leave him without a reliable intelligence service, so on September 20, 1945 he ordered that the Research and Analysis and Photographic branches of OSS be transferred to the State Department, the guerrilla branches discontinued, the field intelligence operations transferred to the War Department and that the independent status of OSS be terminated as of October 1. The field intelligence operations assumed the name of Strategic Services Unit of the War Department (SSU). They quickly resumed responsibility for Research and Analysis as well. On October 1, the OSS effectively ceased to exist, but only on paper.

The only thing that changed when OSS morphed into SSU was that guerrilla operations were no longer necessary. In a short time, the name changed again (in China) to External Survey Detachment of the Navy (ESD). On January 22, 1946 the SSU was renamed the Central Intelligence Group. By 1947, this had changed to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in which final form it still exists and even resumes guerrilla operations when needed.

John W. Brunner
former OSS

During WWII, President Truman was eager for the Soviet Union to end its neutrality in the war against Japan. Major General John R. Deane who headed the U.S. military mission in Moscow was certain that U.S. armed forces could not defeat the Japanese Kwantung Army in northern Korea and Manchuria “with anything like the facility with which the task could be accomplished by the Red Army already facing it.” It therefore was “extremely important,” Deane said, that “Russia be induced to accept this as her mission.” Then, on August 8, 1945, at a hurriedly summoned news conference, the President made a brief, yet extremely important announcement. With a broad grin, Truman said, “Russia has just declared war on Japan. That is all.” The following day, he addressed the nation. “The military arrangements made at [the Potsdam Conference] were of course secret,” the President said. “One of those secrets was revealed yesterday when the Soviet Union declared war on Japan.”

According to London's *Sunday Observer*, the Soviet invasion of Manchuria and northern Korea was part of a five-point secret agreement between Roosevelt and Stalin prior to Yalta. Although the New York Times called the report "highly speculative," Secretary of State Byrnes later acknowledged that U.S. military leaders were aware of the agreement but secrecy was imposed for "sound reasons," saying its disclosure would "tip-off to Japan that the Soviet Union was planning to enter the war in the Pacific." The agreement called for Manchuria to become an independent republic temporarily within the Soviet zone of occupation. American military historians refer to the Soviet invasion of Manchuria as "August Storm" while Russian historians simply call it the "Manchurian Strategic Offensive."

During the Potsdam Conference on July 26, 1945, U.S. and Soviet Chiefs of Staff met to discuss the line of demarcation between the American and Soviet zones of operation in Korea and in Manchuria, if and when the Soviet Union declared war on Japan. General Marshall, Soviet General Antonov and Air Marshall Fallalev agreed upon a line which ran from Cape Boltina on Korea's northeastern coast, through a number of cities in China, and "thence along the southern boundary of Inner Mongolia." U.S. aviation would operate south of the line - including the cities of Mukden, Manchuria and Konan, Korea - and Soviet aviation would operate north of the line. U.S. and Soviet commanders also agreed the line applied both to reconnaissance as well as combat missions, U.S. air operations north of this line and Soviet air operations south of this line must be coordinated, and that the line was subject to change. Since the United States had no intention of sending ground troops into China, only aviation and naval operations were discussed.

On August 9th, the Soviet invasion of Manchuria and Korea began. The following day, Colonel Charles Bonesteel III and Colonel Dean Rusk drew a new line along Korea's 38th parallel "to halt the marching Russian army." And that same day, U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union sent a telegram to President Truman and Secretary of State Byrnes which read, "Considering the way Stalin is behaving in increasing his demands on [T.V.] Soong [Chang Kai-shek's emissary to the United States]...I cannot see that we are under any obligation to the Soviets to respect any zone of Soviet military operation." General Deane concurred.

Mukden, Manchuria and Konan, Korea

In anticipation of a sudden collapse or Japanese surrender, General Marshall issued a basic outline plan, designated "BLACKLIST" which called for the "progressive and orderly" U.S. occupation of Japan and Korea as well as the "care and evacuation" of Allied POWs and civilian internees at the "earliest possible date." After Japan surrendered, General Wedemeyer, the commander of U.S. forces in China, requested that the OSS organize POW rescue missions behind Japanese lines. The missions drew OSS personnel from Special Operations (SO) and Secret Intelligence (SI) with skills in clandestine operations, communications, medicine and language training in Japanese, Chinese and Russian. Each team was assigned an area, and each was named after a bird. Operation Cardinal's area of operation included the Hoten POW camp in Mukden, Manchuria and two smaller camps where General Wainwright and Governor General Arthur E. Percival were being held prisoner by the Japanese. The Cardinal team was comprised of Major James T. Hennessy (Special Ops team leader), Major Robert F. Lamar (physician), Technician Edward A. Starz (radio operator), Staff Sergeant Harold "Hal" B. Leith (Russian and Chinese linguist) and Sergeant Fumio Kido (a *nisei* - second-generation - Japanese interpreter). Cheng Shih-wu, a Chinese national, accompanied the OSS team as interpreter.

On August 16th at 4:30 in the afternoon, a B-24 with extra fuel tanks departed Hsian, China for Mukden, the former capital of Manchuria. Six hours later, with Soviet troops 120 miles away and Japanese aircraft in the area, six men and seventeen cargo parachutes were deployed including 1300 pounds of rations and a half-ton of equipment: weapons, ammunition, two radios and batteries. Despite a 20 mph wind, the decision was made to jump. "Our first priority was to rescue the POWs," Leith

said. As the B-24 left the area, a kamikaze pilot headed his “Zero” straight for it. Fortunately, Lieutenant Paul Hallberg, the B-24 pilot, pulled back on the controls and the Zero passed underneath, avoiding a collision.

Hundreds of Chinese descended on the drop zone; one offered to lead four members of the Cardinal team down a dirt road toward the Hoten POW camp. After walking a half mile, they were confronted by a platoon of Japanese troops. When the Chinese guide saw the Japanese approaching, he ran away, and Major Hennessy waved a white handkerchief to signal their peaceful intentions. A Japanese sergeant ordered the team to “halt and squat down” while Japanese soldiers “aimed their rifles at us and clicked their bolts,” Hennessy said. While in the squatting position, the team was ordered to throw their weapons on the ground while Hennessy attempted to explain that the war was over and they were only there to establish contact with the POWs. The Japanese sergeant, who remained “suspicious and unconvinced,” responded that he had heard that the war with the United States was over, but that the Japanese were still fighting the Soviet Union.

The Japanese were officially notified of armistice forty-five minutes after the Cardinal team set foot in Mukden. And it was only by “sheer tact and presence of mind,” and utilizing the services of a Japanese interpreter, that Major Hennessy was able to convince the Japanese commander that the war was indeed over. The following morning, the Cardinal team was driven to Japanese secret police (*Kempeitai*) headquarters where they met a *Kempeitai* Colonel who bowed deeply and informed the Americans that he was surrendering. With hand gestures, he declared his intention to commit hara-kiri in full view of the Cardinal team. They declined the offer.

Accompanied by an escort of Japanese soldiers, members of the Cardinal team were taken to the Hoten POW camp where sixteen hundred British, Australian, Dutch and Americans prisoners - malnourished and emaciated - survived nearly three-and-a-half years of internment. When it was discovered that General Wainwright was not among the prisoners, an attempt was made to contact OSS headquarters in China. When that failed, Major General George M. Parker, the highest ranking American POW, and Colonel Matsuda, the commandant of the camp, informed the Cardinal team that General Wainwright and other high-ranking officers were in Sian, about 100 miles northwest of the Hoten POW Camp. The next morning, Leith and Lamar, accompanied by a Lieutenant Hijikata, a guard, and an interpreter boarded a train for Sian. After long delays and a change of trains, they arrived at the camp at 3:00 o’clock the following morning.

After a brief rest, the OSS team met Generals King and Moore, Governor Tjarda Von Starckenbergh, General Wainwright and Arthur E. Percival, Governor General during the fall of Singapore, a defeat which Churchill described as the “biggest humiliation in British military history.” Leith recalls that Wainwright looked thin and his hearing was failing. “He had experienced a brutal captivity,” Leith later wrote. General MacArthur described seeing Wainwright for the first time:

I rose and started for the lobby, but before I could reach it, the door swung open and there was Wainwright. He was haggard and aged...He walked with difficulty and with the help of a cane. His eyes were sunken and there were pits in his cheeks. His hair was snow white and his skin looked like old shoe leather. He made a brave effort to smile as I took him in my arms, but his voice wouldn’t come. For three years he had imagined himself in disgrace for having surrendered Corregidor. He believed he would never again be given an active command. This shocked me. “Why, Jim,” I said, “your old corps is yours when you want it.”

When the Soviet Army began occupying Mukden on or about August 21st, they issued passes to the Cardinal team which allowed them to move freely about. However, since vehicles were in short supply, none were supplied to the Americans. That evening, a Soviet Army mission of four officers and an interpreter arrived at Hoten. They took control of the camp from the Japanese and announced that the POWs were liberated. The prisoners, now armed with Japanese weapons, patrolled the camp. According to Colonel Victor Gavrilov, Institute of War History at the Russian Defense Ministry, the

POWs had been “starved and tortured by the Japanese guards; they could have hardly made good warriors.”

After a brevet promotion to Major, Leith accompanied Wainwright and the other VIPs to PeiLing airport, north of the city, where a C-47 and B-24 awaited their arrival. Days later, the nineteen-man POW Recovery Team No. 1 under the command of Lieut. Colonel James F. Donovan arrived in Mukden to “reinforce and assist” the initial OSS contact team. After the Cardinal team was relieved, Hal Leith, who spoke Russian and Chinese fluently, remained behind to “keep an eye on the Russians and the Communist Chinese 8th Route Army.” However, the problem of repatriating the officers and men from the Hoten POW camp remained.

“Without informing the Soviet side,” Gavrilov said, “the U.S. command started sending one plane after another to Mukden in order to transfer its men, and supply them with essentials.” At first, the Soviet command detained the crews of these planes to “clarify the situation.” Later, however, the headquarters of the Baikal Front ordered its forces to assist U.S. aviation in the delivery of goods to the POWs at Hoten.

Between August 27th and September 20th, over one thousand B-29s began flying POW supply missions to 157 camps throughout the Far East. Each aircraft carried 10,000 pounds of much-needed food and medical supplies. However, the planned altitude of 500 to 1000 feet for parachute drops proved too low for efficient operation of the cargo parachutes, and reports began to pour in of barrels plummeting to earth, resulting in damage, injury, and, in some instances, the death of civilians and military personnel. As Leith noted in his diary, “The B-29 air drops have improved the food situation 200%. I am really glad.” Meanwhile, OSS headquarters received a message from the Cardinal team which read, “Unless dropping can be improved, recommend it cease as it has done more harm than good.”

In northern Korea on August 29th, an aberrant parachute drop nearly caused an international incident when parachutes failed to open properly and a barrel crashed to the ground nearly injuring a Soviet colonel. Later that afternoon, when another B-29, called the “Hog Wild,” appeared over the Konan POW Camp and refused to obey instructions by Soviet fighter pilots to land immediately, Soviet Major Savchenko, the commander of the 14th Fighter Bomber Regiment, convened a “war council” to determine how best to respond. According to Savchenko’s vice commander, Ivan Tsapov, “Being in charge of the zone, we demanded that our rules be obeyed. Even Russian transport and bomber plane pilots kept order. They gave notice on flights in our zone a day earlier. Americans did not want to do so.” When Lieutenant Joseph Queen, the B-29’s airplane commander, continued to ignore demands to land and instead flew out to sea, Yak fighters fired on the American bomber, causing one of the B-29’s four engine to burst into flames. Queen then crash-landed his B-29 on a Soviet airdrome after six members of the crew parachuted into the cold and turbulent Sea of Japan. As the B-29 came to a stop, the crew jumped to safety while Russians threw dirt on the engine to extinguish the fire. Staff Sergeant Arthur Strilky, the Hog Wild’s radio operator, later stated, “The chances of living through that crash are so remote that I still feel that Joe saved all of us.”

When General MacArthur learned of the incident, he fired off an angry cable to General Antonov, Chief of General Staff, Soviet Armed Forces, and a member of the Soviet Supreme High Command, which read, “The American plane was plainly marked and its mission could not fail to have been identified as purely benevolent.” In response, Antonov sent a cable to MacArthur which read, “I feel, Dear General, that you will agree that in the action of the Soviet fliers in this incident, there were manifested only measures of self-defense against an unknown plane, and that there were no other intended acts.” Later, the Soviet front received an order from Antonov to arrange transportation of the prisoners from Mukden to Dalian by rail, instead of by air. “Apparently, this was done to rule out unauthorized landings,” Gavrilov said, and to prevent another “willful act,” like that which the commander of the Hog Wild had committed. “Besides, by rail was also safer.” And on September 10th, seven hundred and fifty Mukden POWs left by train for Dalian; the remaining prisoners departed the

following day. Victor Gavrilov credits Soviet forces with the release of the POWs at Mukden. Hal Leith, a member of Operation Cardinal, credits the OSS.

“The camp is deserted,” Leith said, and Operation Cardinal’s primary mission was accomplished. Camp Hoten once again assumed its role as a prison, this time for 5,000 Japanese soldiers who had been captured by the Russians. Cardinal turned out to be the “most challenging and difficult” of the OSS “mercy missions” due to “the large number of POWs to contend with” and the distance from home base. Although some OSS team members survived the encounter “relatively unscathed,” others were forced to suffer various forms of indignity including being stripped naked and having their face slapped by the Japanese. Later, increased Soviet hostilities prompted Donovan to request that American personnel withdraw from the area immediately. And on October 5th, Major-General Kovtun Stankevich, garrison commander of Soviet forces in northern Manchuria, accused Leith of spying. “You are fluent in Russian but you don’t have a Russian name so you must be a spy,” Stankevich said. Leith and the others were offered two choices: “Leave immediately or get a free trip to Siberia.”

After denying the accusation “to no avail,” Leith’s party, along with Charles Renner, the French Consul General and family, departed Mukden for Beijing on a C-46 transport plane the following day. “At the airport, we put sugar in the tank of our jeep,” Leith said. “We didn’t want to leave anything useful for the Russians, any more than we already had.” Months later, after Soviet forces left Manchuria, Leith returned to Mukden.

Operation Cardinal: “... So You Must be a Spy” is based on conversations with Ivan Tsapov, Arthur Strilky, Hal Leith, John W. Brunner, plus information from the following sources:

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My Bio

Bill Streifer, B.A., M.B.A., Beta Gamma Sigma, is the author of fiction and non-fiction on military and intelligence topics during WWII and the Cold War. Streifer's current book project, *The Flight of the Hog Wild* by Bill Streifer and Irek Sabitov with an introduction by Dr. Benjamin C. Garrett, Senior Scientist at the FBI's forensic WMD laboratory, concerns a possible intelligence/aerial reconnaissance mission over Soviet-held northern Korea. On August 29, 1945, an American B-29 Superfortress on a POW supply mission was shot down by Soviet fighters, an incident which some believe may be the first military encounter of the Cold War.