

World War II

By the summer of 1943, the tides of World War II seemed to be turning ever so slightly to the Allies' side. Earlier in the year, Hitler had been forced out of Stalingrad and Tunisia. The Allies landed in Sicily, bombed Rome, sent German troops scurrying out of Italy, and arrested Mussolini. But it was a tug of war. Hitler countered by invading Allied-occupied Italy, where he rescued Mussolini in the middle of September. If we were going to win this war, Uncle Sam needed every man he had, but I was twiddling my thumbs as a briefer to a paper-pushing general in sunny Orlando, Florida.

A lot of enlisted men would have envied my position. Life was, in many ways, gentle as the Florida breeze. I woke up each balmy dawn, read a few intelligence reports in the morning, briefed the general as succinctly as possible, then usually spent the rest of the day at the Officer's Club on the lakeshore, falling in love with various girls at night. But when a particularly dramatic love affair ended in September, there was nothing to keep me from joining the action.

My expectations to jump into the fray were crushed, however, when my application for overseas duty was refused because I had already served twice.

As a graduate of Brown University in 1940 with a B.A. in English, I had already done a stretch in the navy as assistant first lieutenant on the destroyer *Mayo*, where I scouted German U-boats, manned the

range finder on the topmost part of the ship, and saw action as our fleet guarded shipping in the North Atlantic. Unfortunately, I was injured in a fall on an icy deck and, much to my disgust, offered two vile alternatives—shore duty as a supply officer or a medical discharge.

I had lost a lot of my Naval Academy classmates in Pearl Harbor and Wake Island, so I wanted to continue serving in the fray, but I was also very action oriented and felt that others could handle the easy supply job better. So, with regrets, I accepted the medical discharge and recuperated at my parents' home in Albany, New York, where my father, a lawyer, was an insurance industry lobbyist at the State Capitol.

By the shores of the Hudson River, I purged my repressed energy by banging out my first novel, a fictionalized account of convoy duty in the North Atlantic titled *East of Farewell*. When the manuscript was finished, I sent it to Knopf, the publishing house that had once employed a Brown University mentor of mine named Dr. Kapstein. Amazingly to me, the work was quickly accepted and became the first book published about World War II by an American who had actually served in the war. The reviews were all I could have hoped for, but I couldn't compete with the real-life war blaring in the newspaper headlines and newsreels. Sales were not good enough to escalate me to full-time author.

The publication did lead to employment working on navy training films in New York City, where I enjoyed a good salary and many girlfriends, and nightlife was swinging at the 21 Club and the Copacabana.

But those horrible headlines never quit. In March 1943, German U-boats sank twenty-seven merchant ships in the Atlantic. Newspapers published photographs of the doomed liners, plumes of smoke billowing out of frame as their smokestacks disappeared under water. I became obsessed with finding a way to get back into the war and found an opportunity as a war correspondent assigned to the Pacific fleet for *Life* magazine, actually seeing my share of action and narrowly escaping death a few more times. I left after getting on the bad side of General MacArthur when I asked him the wrong question at a press conference and was subsequently blackballed.

I was a navy man through and through, but there was no place for me at sea anymore. I took a brief job at *Fortune* in New York and wrote my second novel, *Limit of Darkness* (okay, so maybe I wasn't a genius with titles), about airmen based at Henderson Field in Guadal-

canal. But living a safe civilian life still rankled me. So one day, I trudged through the crowds of off-duty sailors in the streets, where I made my way to Grand Central Station and joined the army air force as a private.

But the army air force was counting my duty as a reporter in the Pacific as a second tour and notified me that I was destined to serve out my sentence in safe, lovely, boring Orlando, Florida.

It was then that I started hearing whispers of a mysterious new organization whose importance to the war effort was becoming greater every day—the Office of Strategic Services. Little was known about it, and it sounded more like a bunch of paper-pushing bureaucrats than anything else. Maybe some unit that supplied our boys with chocolate bars or got the mail delivered during battle.

I soon learned that there were three officers on base looking for volunteers for the new service. It seemed hush-hush—not everyone was even told they were there. All I could ask was, “Why are they here? Why would you want to work for them?”

An officer who knew that I was dissatisfied with my duty called me into his office and told me, “I don’t know much about it, but I think you should meet with them. They’ve got some kind of connection with General Donovan.”

If Donovan was involved, I was more interested. Although “Wild Bill” Donovan had originally earned his nickname on the football field playing for Columbia University, he had lived up to the name as a soldier, becoming a World War I legend by garnering a Medal of Honor, the Distinguished Service Cross, and three Purple Hearts.

I did a little digging and found that I was wrong about the OSS outfit. It took me some effort, but I found out that they weren’t a bunch of paper pushers. They were involved in some kind of unconventional, behind-the-lines warfare. Now I really wanted to meet with the recruiters, but they had already left the base.

My obsession with action tuned into this opportunity. It called to me in the night. I couldn’t get it out of my mind.

I knew that my father and Bill Donovan had been friends in western New York and had similar political tastes. They were both lawyers and supported the Buffalo Athletic Club.

I picked up the phone and dialed my parents’ number. “Father,” I started when he answered the phone, “I need you to get in touch with Bill Donovan for me. Find out what this outfit he’s connected with is up to, because I’m so bored here I can’t bear it anymore.”

As a lobbyist, my father had become adept at navigating the political morass. It didn't take him long to get in touch with General Donovan's office. Within twenty-four hours, I had a FAGTRANS (first available government transportation) order for Washington, D.C.

I was met at the airport by a stoic man in plainclothes who wouldn't answer any questions. He took me to an ordinary-looking apartment in a D.C. suburb, which I would later know as a safe house, and advised me that I had an appointment with General Donovan the next day.

"What's he like?" I wanted to know.

The man could have had a great career as a department store mannequin for all he had to say on the subject. That night, I ate a quick dinner out, shined my shoes, and prepared mentally for the next day's meeting.

In the morning, my taciturn driver showed up bright and early and whisked me away to an office near the Potomac, where I didn't have to wait long to meet the war hero.

Most of the generals I had known wore ties and shined shoes and generally looked like they had a twenty-four-hour crew keeping their uniforms creased. They were brusque and authoritative around subordinates. Donovan, renowned for being unpredictable and unorthodox, however, was relaxed, didn't wear a tie, and greeted me warmly. He put me at ease, saying that he remembered me as a child and recounted a funny anecdote about my father, whom he liked. He was about sixty at this time, and his hair was white and short-cropped in sharp angles to go with his square Brahman jaw. He had gotten a bit plumper than I remembered, but his remarkable blue eyes sparkled with energy and intelligence. He would live until shortly after his seventy-sixth birthday in February 1959, and, at that time, he still looked like a man you wanted next to you in a fight.

His handshake was so firm it almost hurt, and after a few minutes of cordiality, he got down to business. "So tell me why you're here," he said.

I thought it was pretty obvious why I was there. But he was doing what men in power often do. They don't just grant you what you want, no matter how obvious; they make you ask for it, state your exact intentions—earn it.

"Well, sir," I said in a strong, clear voice. "I've seen a lot of service in the North Atlantic and the Pacific and feel like I'm a Florida retiree in Orlando. I'm here to volunteer for your organization."

His eyes settled on mine for a moment, gauging my mettle, I suppose. I wasn't the first or the last young man who felt a bit withered and awed by the gaze. My heart was beating, as I thought that I might be rejected.

"Well, we've got the manpower we need in Europe right now. Things may be winding down there," he said finally. "But there's still a lot of activity in Asia. I have a billet right now in China, if you're willing to go there?"

"Yes, of course," I reacted with enthusiasm. "Absolutely, General. Wherever you want."

"Okay," he said at last. "I'll have you assigned to OSS."

So far so good.

Now he continued with the fine print. "But it's temporary, you understand. You know I'd love to have you in this organization. But this is an elite force. You're going to have to qualify for it like any other candidate."

Qualify? That was new to me. Uncle Sam would have taken a cross-eyed, one-legged man at that point. Any willing body to throw at the enemy.

"Qualify?" I repeated. "Of course. I wouldn't have it any other way."

My new orders arrived in Orlando before I did. I barely had time to pack and phone a girl for a last good-bye kiss before I had to return to Washington.

From tiny sparks a bonfire is made, I guess. Only in hindsight can you see the string of coincidences that make up a life, each step leading inexorably to the next. President Roosevelt picked Donovan to head OSS. My father happened to know Donovan; otherwise, I would probably never have joined the service. But all the connections were there. Thus began my long, tumultuous career in the U.S. clandestine services and my various—some would say nefarious—connections to historic events that have reshaped international and domestic politics.