

# Donovan's Devils

OSS Commandos behind  
Enemy Lines—  
Europe, World War II

Albert Lulushi

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## **Praise for *Operation Valuable Fiend***

“In *Operation Valuable Fiend*, Albert Lulushi has told a fascinating story well and made excellent use of untapped archival resources.”

—David Robarge, Chief Historian, Central Intelligence Agency

"[For the operation's dismal failure, h]istorians have blamed Soviet mole Kim Philby, who worked in British intelligence and knew of the operation, but Lulushi disagrees. His lively, detailed account of Hoxha's viciously efficient intelligence service, the exiles' terrible security, and CIA naïveté make a convincing case."

—*Publishers Weekly*

“An important and well-researched account of one of the Cold War's less known and often misunderstood clandestine operations . . . The book tells a lively and well-written if discouraging story. Any reader has a treat in store, and any student of the history of America's role in the Cold War will find the book indispensable.”

—Ambassador Frank G. Wisner, former ambassador to four countries, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy and Under Secretary of State for International Security Affairs

“In *Operation Valuable Fiend*, Albert Lulushi has done a splendid job in updating our knowledge of the clandestine activities that CIA and its partners conducted in Albania in the late 1940s and early 1950s.”

—Nicholas C. Pano, Professor Emeritus of History, Western Illinois University

## Contents

*List of Maps and Documents*

*Acknowledgements*

*Introduction*

*List of Acronyms*

Prologue

1 Office of Strategic Services

2 Irregular Warfare in the Early Years of World War II

3 The OSS Operational Groups

4 Special Operations in the Mediterranean Islands

5 Rescuing Escaped Prisoners of War

6 Operations from Corsica

7 The Ill-fated Ginny Mission

8 Jedburghs in France

9 Operational Groups in France

10 Mission Walla Walla in Italy

11 Mission Mangosteen-Chrysler

12 An Enduring Partnership

13 Mission Peedee-Roanoke

14 OSS Investigations into War Crimes

15 Swift Justice for the Ginny Men

16 No Justice for Major Holohan

Epilogue

*Notes*

*Bibliography*

*Index*

## Introduction

The Office of Strategic Services was a unique experiment in the history of the United States government's agencies and institutions. It came to life thanks to the unwavering efforts of William J. Donovan, its founder and director, who was convinced that the president needed a central organization to collect, coordinate, and analyze intelligence and conduct secret operations or other activities in the interest of the country before and during World War II. In fulfilling Donovan's vision, the OSS became the first central intelligence agency of the United States, the precursor to the CIA, which "has never looked more like its direct ancestor, the OSS, than it does right now," in the words of General Michael Hayden, director of the CIA between 2006 and 2009. But the OSS was much more than an intelligence organization. It engaged in commando-type actions, special and paramilitary operations, psychological warfare, covert propaganda and moral operations, science and technical development, and other activities, which today we associate with the Special Operations forces. Using today's concepts and vocabulary, the OSS of the 1940s pioneered the "convergence of intelligence and military operations" into one organization that provides "full spectrum intelligence activities."

Much has been written over the years about the "Oh, So Secret" OSS – the cloak-and-dagger organization that conducted daring spying and intelligence activities against the Axis powers and their interests in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Many authors have focused on the "Oh, So Social" OSS – home to the well-connected elites, Donovan's "PhDs who could win a bar fight," star athletes, and entertainment personalities.

When I set out to write *Donovan's Devils*, I wanted to tell the story of a different OSS, that of ordinary soldiers, first and second-generation immigrants, who volunteered for dangerous duty behind enemy lines and risked their lives in France, Italy, the Balkans, and elsewhere in Europe. They dropped in enemy territory by air or sea, often blind and in the dead of night, and then proceeded to operate for days, weeks, and even months hundreds of miles away from the closest Allied troops. They were men of action who created havoc in enemy's rear, disrupted communication lines, organized the native resistance, and rescued downed flyers, nurses, and

escaped prisoners of war. The enemy showed them no mercy and sometime even their closest friends betrayed them, but nevertheless they carried out their assignments with honor.

As I began sifting through OSS records at the National Archives to gather materials for the book, I quickly realized that it is impossible to provide a full accounting of these missions. Thousands of personnel planned and carried out hundreds of special operations during World War II. So, I limited the scope first by geography and focused on missions conducted in the Mediterranean and European theatres of operations. Then, I further narrowed the scope to focus primarily on missions conducted by teams of the OSS Operational Groups Command.

The OGs bear a close resemblance in structure and style to the special operations teams of today. Like the Navy SEALs or the US Army Delta Force teams, they operated deep in enemy territory, always wore their uniforms, lived off the land for extended periods, and conducted military-like actions against enemy objectives. They distinguished themselves everywhere they fought and yet their story has not received the attention it deserves. I hope *Donovan's Devils* fills the gap by tracing the evolution of the OGs through a handful of missions they conducted in Europe.

Starting with the second half of 1944 and for the duration of the war in Europe, an important part of the OGs' mission became training and supplying local bands that had taken up arms against the Germans. In this capacity, their mission was similar with that of the Jedburghs, the multi-national teams that operated mostly in France between June and August 1944. Compared to the OGs, the Jedburgh teams were smaller and operated for a much shorter duration, but they played an important role in ensuring the success of the D-Day landings and the Allied breakout from the Normandy beaches that followed. By integrating the story of a few of these multi-national teams in the narrative of the OG missions, *Donovan's Devils* completes the picture of the OSS special operations in Europe.

I expected the book would tell of the OSS coming late to the party and having to learn quickly – the Germans and the British after all had conducted special operations and irregular warfare actions for almost four years by the time the first operational groups arrived in North Africa in 1943. I expected it to be a story of zealous neophytes – “the glorious amateurs,” Donovan called them affectionately – who had to show what they were worth and earn the respect of the military hierarchy, always skeptical of unorthodox warfare. And I expected it to be

an account of baptism through the fire, sacrifice, determination to succeed, and significant accomplishments. *Donovan's Devils* is all that.

But I was surprised when the story also became one of crimes committed during war for various reasons: blind obedience to orders, political motives, revenge, and greed. *Donovan's Devils* describes such crimes as well as the attempts after the war to investigate them and bring the perpetrators to justice. The capture and execution of fifteen OGs of the Ginny team in March 1944 was the largest loss of life that OSS suffered in any of its missions. The trial of German General Anton Dostler in October 1945 for ordering the execution of these men was the first war crimes trial after World War II. It established the legal precedent that obedience to superior orders is not a valid defense against war crime prosecutions, which opened the way to holding accountable other war criminals at the Nuremberg trials and other judicial proceedings that followed. The tragic death in December 1944 of Major William V. Holohan, commander of the OSS mission Mangosteen-Chrysler, led to a twelve-year-long saga in the United States and Italy to bring justice and closure to the case. In the end, it became an example of the importance we place on rule of law and due process, even when sometime the cost is justice delayed or justice denied.

Investigating and trying these cases raised many questions at the time. How to investigate war crimes when the perpetrators destroy the evidence? How to reconstruct what truly happened when all the witnesses to the crime were also involved in it? How to determine the degree of guilt and decide who to punish and who to let go free? How to render justice in a fair and expedient way? Should military commissions try suspects? Or should they receive the wider protections of military tribunals? What if justice cannot be rendered? Should the United States extradite intelligence officers to another country to face justice?

With our military engaged around the world and intelligence operations as strong as ever overseas, questions like these come up today on a regular basis. By showing how the United States approached and answered these questions in the 1940s and 1950s, I hope that *Donovan's Devils* can also help us answer them today.

## From Chapter 12, "An Enduring Partnership"

When Colonel Kraigher of the Fifteenth Air Force's Corps Rescue Unit came asking for men with experience with the Chetniks, the OSS provided a team of three operatives, code name Halyard. Lieutenant George Musulin was the natural choice to command the team. He was born in the United States to parents who had emigrated from Yugoslavia and spoke Serbo-Croat very well. A bulky 250-pound five-foot-eleven former University of Pittsburgh tackle, steelworker, and physical education teacher, Musulin was far heavier than the 185 pounds that was the official limit for Army paratroopers. Yet he had no trouble going through the rigorous physical regimen during the OSS training. The parachute instructors at Fort Benning placed bets each time he was due to jump as to how many panels in his chute would break. But Musulin had no trouble earning his paratrooper wings either. After completing the training in the United States, Musulin arrived in Algiers in June 1943, and on October 19, 1943, he parachuted in central Serbia to assist the British liaison mission attached to Mihailovich's headquarters. At the time, he was the third American officer to parachute into Yugoslavia. Musulin remained with the chetnik forces until May 29, 1944, when the Allied mission received orders to withdraw. [27]

Musulin added to the Halyard team two fellow OSS operators who, like him, had completed missions in Chetnik territory. Master Sergeant Michael (Mike) Rajacich was his second-in-command, and Arthur (Jibby) Jibilian would handle the radio communication. Rajacich was of Serbian descent and spoke the language. Jibilian, the youngest member of the team at 21 years old, was of Armenian descent. An orphan at a young age, he was raised by cousins in Toledo, Ohio. He was drafted in the Navy in March 1943 and was training as a radioman, learning Morse code and Navy signals, when OSS recruiters came to his base looking for volunteers for extremely dangerous missions in enemy territory. Jibilian volunteered, because, as he explained later, "I was more expendable as I had no immediate family, and I might, just possibly, be more valuable with OSS than if I were on a ship." [28]

Musulin did not waste a moment in training his team for the Halyard mission. On July 3, he reported that they were ready to go and were prepared to drop blind if there was no time to prepare a proper reception. But sending a mission into the territory of resistance leader Drazha Mihailovich raised serious political concerns. [Mihailovich led the Chetnik resistance forces,

which were a detachment of the Yugoslav army and nationalist politically. In 1942, *Time* magazine had featured him on its cover and portrayed him as “the greatest guerrilla fighter in Europe,” but Churchill and Roosevelt had subsequently placed their support behind Tito, the leader of the communist resistance forces, known as the Partisans. Civil war eventually broke out between the Chetniks and the communists and divided German-occupied Yugoslavia. In early 1944, the Allies branded Mihailovich a Nazi collaborator.] ”If the Halyard team went in and rescued the airmen, could Mihailovich still be called a collaborator? The British and the Russians were vehemently opposed to anyone going into Chetnik territory on any pretext. Legend has it that when Donovan described the proposed rescue plan to President Roosevelt, the president mentioned that the British would be unhappy with it. Donovan replied, “Screw the British, let’s get our boys out.” [29]

Several attempts to parachute the team in July were not successful. Musulin was convinced the British were sabotaging his mission. On one occasion, when they were above a landing area that a reception party on the ground had supposedly arranged, bright glares suddenly illuminated the plane followed by heavy small arms fire. This was either a trap, or they had flown completely off their pinpoint and had almost dropped into the hands of Germans. [30] The failure to make the rendezvous on the night of July 31, 1944, over Pranjani raised further concerns. Musulin said later:

By that time the three of us on the team were nervous wrecks. I was very worried about getting our mission off and about the morale of the team. I kept thinking about the plight of those airmen and I knew that their danger would increase with every flight we made to the area. The terrific tension of those long dangerous flights, the strain of being constantly alerted at the airfield, the unnerving knowledge that each successive flight might mean being shot down, or a jump to death, had us all pretty groggy. We had nearly had it a dozen times, and we weren’t even inside yet. I haven’t enough praise for Mike and Jibby, who kept taking it and were still game for another trip on August 2. [31]

Musulin had no way of knowing that Lt. Oliver’s men on the ground did not light the recognition signals out of caution. He considered the failed contact as yet another British foul-up.

For their next flight, scheduled on August 2, 1944, Musulin requested and received an American plane, an American crew, and an American jumpmaster. [32]

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On the evening of August 2, Oliver and the rest of the downed American airmen were again at the airstrip in Pranjani. At 10:10 p.m., they heard airplane engines in the distance. As before, they could not be certain whether it was friend or foe, but at that point they decided to risk it. They lit up the flares in the prearranged signal and waited. The plane flew overhead and after about thirty seconds it turned around and headed for the airstrip. Everybody hid in the bushes, just in case it was a German plane coming in to strafe them. Oliver later remembered:

The plane circled for about ten minutes, then came in very low over our strip. As it zoomed over our heads, we could see the big white star of the Air Force under the wings. With one voice the men let out a yell – the most terrific cheer I have ever heard went up in those Yugoslavian mountains. It was just like Ruth hitting a homer with the bases loaded in the World Series. The sight of that American plane was the first tangible evidence of rescue that we had seen since landing, and the boys nearly went crazy. [33]

The Chetniks collected the containers and packages that had been parachuted from the plane. Musulin, Rajachich, and Jibilian arrived soon after. They had landed in a cornfield two miles from the pinpoint – Musulin crashed on a chicken coop and destroyed it, but a payment of 15,000 dinars (\$10) was sufficient to compensate the Serbian farmer for the damage. [34] The Americans immediately began distributing the cigarettes and chocolates they had brought, but found that the airmen had far greater needs. Over two dozen of them were wounded or hurt, the majority were barefoot, and many of them had peasants' clothes mixed with their worn-out uniforms. Jibilian established contact with the headquarters in Bari that very morning, reported the safe arrival in the area, and requested an immediate airdrop of clothes, shoes food, and medicine for more than 200 airmen that had assembled around Pranjani. On the night of August 5 a large supply drop improved the situation immensely.

As soon as he arrived, Musulin reviewed the condition of the airstrip where he had landed. It was nothing more than a natural plateau nestled among mountain peaks that surrounded it only a mile and a half to two miles in the distance. It was 150 feet wide and

approximately 1,800 feet long. There were woods on one side and a sheer drop on the other. At one end of the strip there were some large trees and at the opposite end, a huge depression. Lt. Oliver and other Air Corps officers doubted an airplane could use it in its condition. They knew of at least two other fields more suitable than the one in Pranjani, but they were fourteen hours walk away. It wasn't practical to move all the airmen, including the sick and the wounded, over that distance. Furthermore, these remote locations did not have the strong defenses that the Chetniks had organized around Pranjani. On Mihailovich's orders, they had set up an outer and an inner protective ring around the mountains that surrounded the airstrip. Roadblocks controlled every road that the Germans could take to attack Pranjani. Sgt. Rajacich inspected the defenses and was satisfied to find hundreds of men in the outer and inner defensive positions ready to block any German attempt toward move on them.

For these reasons, Musulin decided to stick with the airstrip at hand and improve it to meet the minimum requirements for a C-47 transport plane to land. Under the guidance of the Air Corps officers, all the able-bodied airmen and three hundred local Serbs worked for days to work on the airstrip. The villagers provided sixty ox carts, which they used to haul stones and dirt from nearby streams. Within a few days, they managed to extend the airfield by another seventy-five yards to give it the absolute minimum length for C-47 operations. On August 8, Jibilian radioed the headquarters that they were ready to receive the transports. Bari responded that the planes would arrive on the night of August 9.

Musulin set up an order of evacuation that made no distinction between officers and enlisted men. The sick and wounded had the highest priority. The rest of the airmen would board the planes based on the length of time they had been behind enemy lines. Musulin radioed Bari his concerns about the length of the airstrip. To enable the planes to take off on such a short runway, they needed to minimize the weight of the planes. They decided that only twelve men would board each plane. The flight crews stripped down the airplanes of all unnecessary materials and fueled them with only half a gasload, barely enough for the roundtrip flight from Bari to Pranjani.

There was a scare on the afternoon of August 9, when three German fighter planes suddenly appeared in the skies and buzzed the airstrip. Fortunately, all the laborers had finished work by that time. Sheep and cattle were grazing peacefully on the airfield, and the fighters disappeared as quickly as they came. Nevertheless, Musulin was concerned that the Germans had

discovered that there was something in the works down below. Unlike B-17 and B-24 heavy bombers that had their own protective guns and crews, C-47 planes were stripped-down transport planes with no protection of their own. They would fly in on the night of August 9 without fighter escort and would be easy targets of German night fighters if discovered. The image of these planes loaded with airmen blown to bits over the skies of Yugoslavia haunted Musulin for the rest of the day. He received some reassurance when one of his Chetnik contacts reported in the evening that all was quiet in the closest town where the Germans had stationed a garrison. Afterward, Musulin described those tense hours as follows:

By ten o'clock the designated first seventy-two airmen assembled at the strip. I had a Chetnik soldier stationed at each flare, ready to light them up at my signal. The airmen were all in top spirits, but unfortunately, we of the Halyard Mission were not able to share in their exuberance. We waited there in the darkness for another hour and then in the distance we heard airplane engines. Everyone strained his ears and then the airmen began to cheer – they sounded like American planes.

Jibby was standing by me with an Aldis lamp to blink the proper identification signal. As they circled over for the first time, he blinked '*Nan*' and to our great joy received the correct reply, '*Xray*.' So far, so good – at least they had found us, and there had been no German interference. Now to get them down and off again. I gave the order to light up the ground fires and shot up a green flare, our signal that the landings were to commence.

The first plane started down with his landing lights on and headed toward our strip. The airmen were cheering and shouting, but as that plane came in the noise died down. Everyone was holding his breath and more than a few praying. Down and down he came, and then just before he put down his wheels, he gave it the gun and roared off, having overshot the field. The next plane, however, made a perfect landing and pulled at the end of the strip. The rest of them were supposed to stay aloft until I had the strip cleared, but they disregarded our signals and kept coming right in. I was afraid that there would be a pile up at the end of the strip, and had some of the Chetniks and airmen wheel the first plane down into a sloping depression off to one side at the end. This was done just in time, because the wings of the next plane just passed over the top of this first one

as it wheeled about to taxi to one side. It missed by inches, and I could see that these night landings were too dangerous. The slightest mix-up, and the whole show might be ruined. [35]

Four C-47 transports brought in fresh supplies and a medical crew that would set up a field hospital for the airmen and the local villagers. In addition, Lt. Nick Lalich, another OSS officer of the Yugoslav section, arrived to assist Musulin in the evacuation operation. It took only a few minutes to empty the cargo from the planes and to board the departing airmen. Most of them stripped off their shoes and clothes and tossed them to their Chetnik friends as they boarded the planes. No more than twenty minutes after landing, the first airplane started down the airfield to take off. Everyone watched anxiously as the plane began climbing in the air at the last possible moment. The other three planes followed, one of them brushing the trees at the end of the runway, but all were able to take off safely. Only forty minutes from the time they first noticed the engines of the approaching airplanes, Musulin and his men heard their noise fading in the horizon as the airplanes headed toward Bari.

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Musulín sent a message to Colonel Kraigher with the returning airplanes requesting that the airlift operation resume that morning and continue until all the airmen at Pranjani were evacuated. Time was of the essence, because the Germans could discover the operation at any moment, and the conditions of the airstrip made night operations extremely dangerous. Jibilian spent the entire night at his radio trying to confirm that Bari had received the message and approved the request. Although they did not receive a positive response, Musulin sent couriers around Pranjani, asking all the airmen to be ready at the airfield at 0800 hours on August 10. At just about that time, they heard a tremendous roar of engines in the distance. They thought it was a bombing party heading for Ploesti, first. Then, cries of jubilation went up when they recognized the shapes of six C-47s in the center of a protective umbrella of twenty-five P-51 Mustang fighters.

General Twining and Colonel Kraigher entrusted the mission of protecting the unarmed C-47s to fliers of the 332nd Fighter Group, known as the Red Tails, because of the distinctive

bright red color they used to paint the tailfin of their planes. The Red Tails had a tremendous reputation among bomber crews of the Fifteenth Air Force for not having lost a single bomber under their escort. They stuck close to the planes under their protection, unlike other escort fighters who often ventured away looking for enemy planes to add to their kill list while leaving the bombers exposed to surprise attacks. They were part of the contingent of African American fighter pilots that later became better known as the Tuskegee Airmen. [36]

As the flight formation approached the airfield, a number of the Red Tail fighters peeled off to strafe the roads leading to Pranjani and Germans installations nearby. Another group bombed the Kraljevo airfield, about thirty-five miles southwest. These diversionary actions kept the German fighters to the ground and left the impression that they were the main objective of the flights overhead. In the meanwhile, each of the six C-47s came in at a five-minute interval. Some of the pilots had to ground-loop their planes, turn them rapidly left and right after the wheels touched down, in order to slow down and stop before they ran off the end of the airstrip. Musulin described the jubilant atmosphere on the ground:

The minute each plane taxied to a stop, it was surrounded by screaming women and girls who showered the planes, their crews, and the embarking Americans with garlands of flowers. The airmen going aboard were shouting boisterously, and as each group of twenty entered their designated plane, they would peel off their shoes and most of their clothing, and toss it to the cheering Chetniks.

The pilots and crews of the evacuating planes were caught up with the excitement of the occasion. All of them wanted souvenirs – daggers, guns, Chetnik caps and *opankas*, the Serbian sandals made out of goatskin. None of them was in any hurry to leave, and I had trouble getting them to take off to clear the strip for the other planes. [37]

And yet, within minutes, all six C-47s had landed, loaded the airmen, and were back up in the air, circling slowly up the funnel of the surrounding mountains to gain altitude. Then, they formed a loose V formation, dipped the wings in salute to their friends on the ground, and headed toward Italy with the Red Tail fighters roaring around them. On the night of August 9 and the morning of August 10, the Halyard mission sent to safety 289 Allied personnel,

including 251 Americans, six British, four French, nine Italians, seven Yugoslavs, and twelve Russians.

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As soon as the planes left, the mission retreated into the mountains, fearing a German attack against the airfield. It was the first time in five weeks that Musulin, Rajcich, and Jibilian felt relaxed. Evidently, the operation had gone undetected, so, as more airmen were rescued, they mounted another evacuation. In two consecutive nights, in August 27 and 28, fifty-eight Americans came out, together with two British officers attached to Tito's partisans that the Chetniks had captured in battle.

Musulin received orders to return to Bari on the flights of August 28. Officially, the reason was that he would work with the Air Force to prepare updated escape maps and proper briefings instructing the airmen on how to evade capture over Chetnik territory. The real reason was that Musulin was too vocal a supporter of Mihailovich to suit the political line of the time, which continued to treat Mihailovich as a collaborator and Tito as the sole leader of Yugoslav resistance. Lalich took command of the Halyard team and remained in Chetnik territory until the end of December 1944, when the partisans finally overran their territory. Throughout its operations in Yugoslavia, the Halyard mission rescued 432 Americans and another 80 Allied personnel of other nationalities.

The achievements of the Halyard mission in Yugoslavia and the rescue of American nurses in Albania were examples of the networks that the OSS established to rescue thousands of airmen trapped behind enemy lines, which *New York Times* compared to the Underground Railroad that had helped slaves escape during the Civil War. The numbers were impressive and included almost 1,800 personnel rescued in Yugoslavia, Albania, and Greece; 1,350 in Rumania; 342 in Bulgaria; 275 in Switzerland; and 226 in Italy.

In a letter of commendation to Donovan, General Henry H. Arnold, commanding general of the Army Air Forces, hailed the OSS work, declaring: "The success of the rescue missions has been directly dependent upon excellent OSS cooperation. Please accept my sincere thanks for the assistance your organization has rendered to the Army Air Forces." [38]