

# SPIES IN THE CLUBHOUSE

THE INTELLIGENCE THAT WON  
WORLD WAR II MAY NOT HAVE BEEN  
ACCUMULATED IN THE HALLWAYS OF  
POWER BUT ALONG THE FAIRWAYS OF  
CONGRESSIONAL. | By JEFF SILVERMAN

THE GOLF WIDOW IS GENERALLY LAST TO KNOW. FIRST LADIES to be are no exception. Back from her 1905 honeymoon, Eleanor Roosevelt resolved to take a shot at her husband's passion. A dedicated golfer — he had already won a club championship — FDR played widely on their post-nuptial European swing. Eleanor felt largely abandoned. “I made a valiant effort . . . to learn how to play,” she would reveal in her memoir, but the game defeated her. She gave up after one try. Her husband would, of course, give up playing, too, and he hated that he had to. “After he was stricken with polio,” Eleanor remembered, “the one word that he never said again was *golf*.” Perhaps she wasn’t listening. Or looking in the right places.

As the 32nd president of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt more than said the word; he spread it. In the pit of the Great Depression, the signature stimulus program in FDR’s New Deal — the Works

**Donovan marched before the troops and refitted the clubhouse. A rifle range (far left) was set up on 80 acres across River Road.**

Progress Administration — effectively put men back to work building and refurbishing about 600 golf courses, including Southern Hills Country Club and

the courses at Bethpage State Park, where the Black Course has hosted two U.S. Opens.

Circumstances change, however, and with the onset of World War II, FDR wasn’t building golf courses anymore. But he found an intriguing use for one particularly fine future Open site not far from the White House. In April 1943, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) — the forerunner of the CIA that FDR created through an executive order in 1942 — commandeered Congressional Country Club, turning its clubhouse, fairways and 400 surrounding acres into

TOP SECRET



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a spawning ground for a new breed of American spies, propagandists, saboteurs, infiltrators and commandos. Thousands would be assessed and tested, then receive instruction at Congressional in everything from map-reading to mayhem. They would then go off behind enemy lines to radio back intelligence, organize local resistance and otherwise gum up the Axis.

For the next 2½ years, a billeting at what became known as Area F was no country-club assignment. One trainee dubbed the place “Malice in Wonderland,” for in this enclave of privilege he had learned to “lie, steal, kill, maim ... the Ten Commandments in reverse.”

**C**ONCEIVED in 1921, Congressional opened to great fanfare in 1924 as a place for America’s business and political pooh-bahs to mingle. Despite an A-list of founders — two Rockefellers, a Hearst, a DuPont and Charlie Chaplin, with Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover (a non-golfer) installed as president — membership was slow to grow. The onset of the Great Depression didn’t help, nor did FDR’s 1932 election, which put a scare into Republican politicians and the business community. Roosevelt’s ascension rocked Congressional to its core; one entire page of the club’s minutes overflows with the names of members who resigned.

The club’s prospects darkened further once war was declared and gas-rationing imposed. Though barely 10 miles from

the White House, Congressional might as well have been in Timbuktu. By 1943, active membership, which hit a high of 680 in 1931, had plummeted to 216. The club’s finances were in disarray, and its pride and joy, the lovely 18-hole journey laid out by Devereux Emmet and reworked in 1930 by Donald Ross, devolved into the worst-conditioned course in the area. Debts soared. Foreclosure loomed. Desperate, the board sought someone to bail them out.

Enter Wild Bill.

The most decorated U.S. officer of World War I, the charismatic William Donovan was a national hero, a Medal of Honor winner and an enormously successful lawyer. In 1932 he was the Republican candidate for governor of New York — running unsuccessfully against the record of the out-

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going governor, FDR. “These two guys were bitter political enemies,” said Douglas Waller, author of the new biography *Wild Bill Donovan: The Spymaster Who Created the OSS and Modern American Espionage*. “With Roosevelt [as president], Donovan was sure that communism was coming.”

Communism didn’t come, but when the war did the two men — devoted internationalists intent on pushing America into the fray — found themselves allied. “Each saw something useful in the other,” Waller said. Roosevelt, a lifelong cloak-and-dagger buff, wanted eyes and ears on the ground to report back to him what was going on around the globe. Donovan, a world traveler, sought to do exactly that. He delivered all kinds of impressive scuttlebutt. FDR referred to him appreciatively as “my secret legs.”

When Donovan proposed the creation of a new American intelligence service akin to Britain’s swashbuckling MI6, Roosevelt gave those secret legs an official one to stand on, anointing Donovan his coordinator of information in 1941. A year later he upgraded Donovan’s operation into the OSS. By the end of the war, the OSS’s roll, comprised largely of civilians and citizen-soldiers — “glorious amateurs” as Donovan dubbed them — had swelled to 13,000 volunteers. Among them were four future CIA chiefs: Allen Dulles, William Colby, Richard Helms, and William Casey; Nobel Peace

Prize winner Ralph Bunche; Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg; historian Arthur Schlesinger; writer John O’Hara; director John Ford; socialite Serge Obolensky; baseball catcher Moe Berg; and 6-foot-2-inch Julia McWilliams, better known as the towering French chef Julia Child.

But you can’t train spies just anywhere. You need privacy. You need cover. You need space. You need the conditions and terrain that agents are likely to run into.

**Only weeks before Pearl Harbor pulled the U.S. into World War II, FDR spoke at a Navy League dinner while Donovan (third from left, top) listened intently.**

The OSS already had five sites around Washington — including the future Camp David — when Donovan learned Congressional was available. He pounced, leasing the facility for \$4,000 a month and the promise to repair any damages. “The board was delighted with the arrangement,” said John Whiteclay Chambers III, a historian at Rutgers University who has written extensively on the OSS. “They could finally pay their bills.”

Donovan was delighted, too.



Surveying the property, he saw open fairways, streams, a lake and extensive woodland thick with underbrush — ideal grounds on which to teach and practice the so-called black arts. Just as important, Congressional was easily accessible from Donovan’s headquarters on Navy Hill. “Donovan wanted someplace close by to take visiting dignitaries to show off what the OSS could do,” said Chambers. And to help clarify the method of his madness to doubters.

“The regular army was suspicious,” Chambers continues. The OSS didn’t go by the book; it wrote its own. Unlinking the traditional military chain of command, Donovan insisted there was more to be gained from an enlistee who could think for himself than a colonel who blindly followed orders, especially in harm’s way. He embraced novel ideas. He encouraged creative approaches to training and mission-planning, and the outside-the-box thinking led his team to dream up a cache of creative devices and gadgets: invisible inks, lightweight sub-machine guns, pistols with silencers, miniature cameras, portable radios and all sorts of explosives in unexpected form.

“Donovan loved going out to Congress-

sional to show off this stuff,” said Waller, although not every dog-and-pony production had the intended effect. He was so excited about a new “flour” explosive that could be baked into bread for shipment that he brought Gen. George C. Marshall, the tip of America’s top brass, out for a demonstration. Ordnance officers laid the explosive beneath armor plating, but they miscalculated the kick. Metal shards flew willy-nilly. One crashed through the window of Marshall’s car. Another embedded into a tree just behind Donovan’s head. Unfazed, Donovan simply asked, “What’s next on the program?”

**C**ONGRESSIONAL’S transformation was both quick and sweeping. A tent city sprung up along the entry off River Road, obliterating the tennis courts. Inside the main clubhouse, the ornate dining room was converted to a mess hall, the ballroom into classrooms, and the bar into an officers’ lounge with pool and ping-pong tables. The indoor pool was covered over for administrative space.

Outside, an obstacle course extended

**A 22-year-old Roosevelt shows how he won the Campobello (New Brunswick) G.C. championship.**

from the outdoor pool behind the clubhouse to the first tee. A C-47 fuselage was installed a few feet above the putting green with a tumbling pit below for parachute training. And the golf course grew features that Emmet and Ross never contemplated, such as a launch pad for test missiles on what is now the 17th tee of the Blue Course; machine guns on the 16th tee of the Blue Course for firing live ammo over the heads of trainees as they crawled beneath the barbed wire that crisscrossed the landscape; and a simulated minefield studding the 17th and 18th fairways of the Gold Course. The 80 acres on the other side of River Road housed pistol and submachine gun ranges and a pillbox for observing and monitoring explosions.

Days began at sunrise with hours of physical conditioning and didn’t end until mock missions were completed well after dark, although not everyone coming through Congressional would come for the same reasons or lengths of stay.

Some, like Maj. Gen. John Singlaub — now 89, then a young second lieutenant — arrived for two weeks of psychological evaluation. There were Rorschach tests and word associations, but the most sophisticated analyses came during training missions, such as infiltrating a guard post on the edge of the woods or moving a heavy box across a stream, which demanded group cohesion. Each team contained a plant who was instructed to screw up to see how the others handled it. “Psychologists followed us around with clipboards,” said Singlaub, “to judge if we had the leadership and patience we’d need to train partisans.” Singlaub did, and he would do just that in France shortly after D-Day.

Others, like Betty McIntosh, now 95, went to Congressional before shipping out for propaganda duty in China. She took the three-day crash course in survival and weapons required of every OSSer, even file clerks, en route to overseas postings. “It was serious work, but I had fun,” she remembered. “We fired guns. We burrowed into sand traps for cover. I learned to throw grenades on one of the fairways.”

No trainees went through a more concentrated regimen at Congressional than the Operational Groups (OGs), who would come



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in 400 at a time for six to eight weeks of basic training before receiving advanced instruction elsewhere. Based on British commando units, the OGs were a crowning achievement for Donovan. "What was so brilliant," said Chambers, "was the way Donovan put them together, drawing from America's ethnic population." Italian-Americans would be trained for missions in Italy, Greeks for Greece, French for France, etc. Donovan believed that because these recruits spoke the language and understood the culture, they would be better trusted and blend in more easily.

Much of their curriculum was devised by Obolensky. A Russian prince, he had led the cavalry against the Bolsheviks in the revolution and, at 52, was the oldest paratrooper in the U.S. Army. (A famed hotelier in New York, he was so appalled by Congressional's kitchen that he reconceived it.) Classroom instruction ranged from understanding cultures (anthropologist Margaret Mead came in for a lecture) and small enemy weapons — "You needed to know how to use one in case you got one in an actual mission," says Singlaub — to guerrilla tactics and lessons on how to kill someone with a rolled-up newspaper. That was the special purview of Congressional's most colorful resident, Maj. W.E. Fairbairn, a.k.a. Dangerous Dan.

Almost 60 when the OSS borrowed him from the British, Fairbairn had spent three decades in Shanghai, much of it running the police force. A master of martial arts, he instructed the OGs in close-combat techniques — hand-to-hand, pistols and knives. Standard OG gear even included a stiletto designed by Fairbairn. Former OG Caesar Civitello, now 87, remembered his first Fairbairn encounter. "I was a kid then, in pretty good shape, and he said, 'Who's going to take me on?' I volunteered. As soon as I stepped in front of him, his big British boot ripped into my right leg. The next thing I knew I was on the ground."

After class, OGs would take what they had learned onto the golf course and beyond, honing their skills in night maneuvers designed to test their reconnaissance, orienteering, survival and commando acumen. Night after night, hundreds crawled fairways with their daggers drawn. Instructors would simulate the enemy while trainees would employ

knives and their wits in an effort to ambush or elude them while other instructors observed and coached.

Some nights, the objective would be to set explosives on the property — the caddie shack was quickly toast — or to infiltrate one of the outbuildings. "Sometimes we'd ambush the milk truck," Civitella said. This happened so often, in fact, that a signal system was developed to let the milkman know when the coast was clear.

On occasion, missions were conducted off the property. A group of French OGs became adept at raiding local farms to steal pigs, rabbits, chickens and eggs, which they

would then feast on in the woods. When syndicated columnist Drew Pearson, a Congressional neighbor, penned a series of unflattering pieces about Donovan, OGs ambushed his farm as well.

"A lot of this was designed to build confidence," said Chambers. "Parachuting behind enemy lines demanded confidence. The training made them feel that they could handle anything."

**I**N OCTOBER 1945, President Truman signed the order putting the OSS out of business. By then, Congressional had already been returned to its membership, 156 loyal stal-

warts who had held on, dues free, for the duration. Their first order of business was straightening up the mess.

At least there was money. The government made good on its promise to pay for repairs, and almost \$200,000 was spent. The furniture needed reassembling and refurbishing, the rugs needed cleaning, and the upstairs rooms had to be cleared of supplies — from lumber to bags of concrete — that the OSS had left behind. The marble steps out front were cracked, the roof was leaking, and a new kitchen had to be installed; the OSS took Obolensky's with it. The OSS also liberated a half-dozen of Congressional's lawn mowers and its sod cutter, and none of the remaining equipment required to maintain the golf course was working.

On the other hand, there was some abandoned surplus. The club sold about 50 Quonset huts for \$50 each, and a collection of forsaken shovels and wheelbarrows helped restock the equipment shed. There was no use for the fuselage still sitting on the putting green; it was hauled away.

When it was all done, Congressional was at last on solid footing financially. After paying bills and mortgage interest with the \$120,000 collected from the OSS lease, the club was \$46,000 in the black. To celebrate, Congressional staged a gala reopening in April 1946, although the golf course needed another month before it was deemed playable.

All over the property, trees were down. Grass hadn't been cut in years. Fairways were pocked by explosives, lined with trenches, and cross-hatched with barbed wire. One fairway held an abandoned car and a litter of gas cans. The halfway house was riddled with bullet holes. Bunkers and greens were in shambles.

But Congressional's golfers weren't complaining. Their club and their golf course were back. Today, Congressional has the OSS back, too. Since 2005, it has hosted an annual gathering of the OSS Society, a group comprised of OSS veterans, their families and others.

Betty McIntosh hasn't missed one. All these years later, she still recalls her sadness in looking out over the grounds during her training. "It was terrible," she said. "We ruined the golf course. It made you sort of sick if you liked playing golf."

Which she did. It was one of the many wartime secrets that she carried.



**A big personality, Fairbairn (left), known as Dangerous Dan, arrived on loan from the British and specialized in brutal hand-to-hand combat training.**