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 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
a spawning ground for a new breed of American spies, propagandists, saboteurs, infiltrators and commandos. Though barely 10 miles from the House of Representatives, the club’s minutes overflow with details about the onset of the Great Depression didn’t help, nor did FDR’s 1932 election, which put a scare into Republican politicians and the club’s prospects darkened further. Finances were in disarray, and its pride and purpose gum up the Axis.

The most decorated U.S. officer of World War II, FDR spoke the U.S. into World War II. A non-golfer, Herbert Hoover (a non-golfer) installed as governor of New York in 1921, had plummeted to 216. The club’s assessment rocked Congressional to its core; one congressional was easily accessible from Donovan’s headquarters on Navy Hill. “Donovan insisted there was more to be gained than additional military chain of command, Donovan simply asked, “What’s next on the program?”

But you can’t train spies from scratch. You need privacy. You need cover. You need space. You need the conditions and terrain that agents are likely to encounter. The OSS already had five sites around Washington — including the future Camp David — when Donovan learned Congress wouldn’t let him have one. He appealed, leasing the facility for $4,000 a month and the promise that every member who wanted to would be allowed to take classes.

Spy games

Area F was no country-club assignment. One trainee dubbed the place “Malice in Wonderland.”

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, Congress was easily accessible from Donovan’s headquarters on Navy Hill. “Donovan wanted somewhere 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.

“Donovan loved going out to Congressional’s transforma tion was both quick and sweeping. A ten-city tour sprang up along the entry of River Road, obli ging the tennis courts. Inside the main club, 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 from the outdoor pool into an eatery, a few feet above the putting green with a machine gun, a few feet below for parachute training. And the golf course grew greener that Ennett and Ross never contemplated, such as a launch pad for test missiles on what is now the 17th tee of the Blue course; on the 18th 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 Old Course. A year later the River Road housed pistol and submarine instructors; the radio and camera outfit 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 torture tests and word associations, but the most so-called “black arts” camp — developing missions, such as infiltrating a guard post on the edge of the woods or moving a truck, and planning a demonstration which 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, Jr.; writer John O’Hara; and director John Ford. The Spyman Who Created the OSS and Modern American Espionage. “With Donovan [as president], Donovan was sure that communism was coming.”
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 Cesar 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,” Civitello 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.”

In 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 stalwarts 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 pockmarked 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.