



SUMMER/FALL 2010

THE OSS SOCIETY JOURNAL



OSS IN MANCHURIA

OSS IN MANCHURIA: OPERATION CARDINAL

BY BILL STREIFER

“...in the flush of victory over Japan, the OSS men foretold the problems the United States was already having in Asia with a resurgent Soviet Union whose ambitions were far different from those of America.”

Peter Clemens

Author of *Operation Cardinal*

On the evening of August 9, 1945, after atomic bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the President of the United States addressed the nation. “The military arrangements made at [Potsdam] were of course secret,” the President said. “One of those secrets was revealed yesterday when the Soviet Union declared war on Japan.” Three days later, the London *Sunday Observer* reported that the Soviet invasion of Manchuria and northern Korea was part of a five-point secret agreement between President Roosevelt and Premier Stalin prior to the Yalta Conference. The plan called for Manchuria to become an independent republic within the Soviet zone of occupation, and the Portsmouth Treaty of 1905 would be annulled, ending Japan’s 40-year domination of Korea. American historians refer to the Soviet invasion of Manchuria as August Storm while Russian historians refer to it simply as the Manchurian Strategic Offensive.

In anticipation of a sudden collapse or surrender, General George C. Marshall, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, issued a basic outline plan, designated “Blacklist,” for the “progressive and orderly” U.S. occupation of Japan and Korea, as well as the “care and evacuation of Allied prisoners of war and civilian internees.” Shortly after Japan surrendered, General Wedemeyer requested that the Office of Strategic Services organize POW rescue missions behind Japanese lines. Each OSS team was assigned an area, and each intelligence operation was named after a bird: Duck (Weihhsien), Magpie (Peking), Flamingo (Harbin), Sparrow (Shanghai), Pigeon (Hainan), Seagull (Hankow), Albatross (Canton), Quail (Hanoi), Raven (Vientiane, Laos), Eagle (Keijo), and Cardinal (Mukden).

Operation Cardinal’s area of operation included the Hoten POW camp and two smaller camps in the area: the Hoten North Camp and Mukden Club, which, by



Hal Leith sitting between two Russian soldiers.

late August, were squarely in the Soviet Army’s zone of operation. Operation Cardinal drew OSS personnel from Special Operations and Special Intelligence with skills in “clandestine operations, communications, medicine and language training in Japanese, Chinese and Russian.” The team comprised 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 an interpreter.

On August 15th at 0430 hours, a B-24 with extra fuel tanks departed Hsian, China, for Mukden, the former capital of Manchuria. At 1030 hours, with Soviet troops 120 miles away and Japanese aircraft in the area, six men and 17 cargo parachutes were deployed including 1,300 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, the team was 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 45 minutes after the Cardinal team set foot on 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 1,600 British, Australian, Dutch, and American prisoners—malnourished and emaciated—survived nearly three and a half years of internment. When it was discovered that General Wainwright, the commander of Allied forces in the Philippines who had been taken prisoner following the surrender to the Japanese, 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 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 the following morning at 0300. After a brief rest, the OSS team met Generals King and Moore, Governor Tjar-da Von Starckenbergh, General Wainwright, and Arthur E. Percival, Governor General during the fall of Singapore—a defeat that Winston 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 wrote in his diary. In his autobiography, *Reminiscences*, 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 baggard 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.”

The Russians Are Coming

When the Soviet Army began occupying Mukden, they issued passes to the Operation Cardinal team that 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



OSS Majors Robert Lamar (l) and James Hennessey (r) with two Russian soldiers in Manchuria during August 1945 as part of Operation Cardinal.

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 Pei-ling airport, north of the city, where a C-47 and B-24 awaited their arrival. Days later, the 19-man POW Recovery Team No. 1 under the command of Lieutenant Colonel James F. Donovan arrived in Mukden to “reinforce and assist” the initial OSS contact team. Although 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.

POW Supply Missions

On August 27th, over one thousand B-29s began flying POW supply missions to 157 camps throughout the Far East. Each plane carried 10,000 pounds of much-needed food and medical supplies. However, the planned altitude of 500 to 1,000 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,” although OSS headquarters received a message from “Cardinal” which read, “Unless dropping can be improved, recommend it cease as it has done more harm than good.” For instance, a Korean woman in Seoul was killed; in Inchon, barrels crashed through the roof of a hospital, broke the leg of a prisoner, killed a Korean, and injured eight Japanese.

In Konan, Korea (now Hungnam, North Korea), an aberrant parachute drop caused an international incident and nearly resulted in the death of a B-29 crew. On the morning of August 29, 1945, a pair of B-29s dropped supplies in the vicinity of the Konan POW camp. Unfortunately, the parachutes failed to open properly and some of the barrels crashed to the ground and were retrieved by Japanese and Korean villagers; a British POW noted in his diary, “Some came away from the parachutes and fell into swamps and were buried.” Later that day, as a third B-29, nicknamed the *Hog Wild*, began circling the Konan POW camp suspiciously. Soviet Major Savchenko, the commander of the 14th Fighter Bomber Regiment, convened a “war council” to determine how best to respond. According to Ivan Tsapov, Savchenko’s vice commander, “Being in charge of the zone, we demanded that our rules be obeyed. Even Russian transport and bomber plane pilots kept order. They



General Wainwright (second from left) with Colonel Gustav Krause, OSS station chief in Xian, China.

gave notice on flights in our zone a day earlier. Americans did not want to do so.”

Two pairs of Russian Yak fighters were sent up, “boxed in” the American bomber, and demanded that Lieutenant Joseph W. Queen, the *Hog Wild*’s airplane commander, immediately land the B-29 on a small airdrome. When he refused, and the B-29 instead was flown out to sea, one of the Yaks fired on the Superfortress, setting an engine on fire. When Queen realized that the number 1 engine was “about to explode,” he ordered the crew to bail out; six parachuted into the turbulent and cold Sea of Japan, and the remaining crew braced for a crash-landing on the Soviet airdrome. When the bomber came to rest, the crew of the *Hog Wild* jumped out and Russians threw dirt on the engine to extinguish the fire. Staff Sergeant Arthur Strilky, the *Hog Wild*’s radio operator, later said, “The chances of living through that crash are so remote that I still feel that Joe saved all of us.”

After the crew was interrogated, the Russians apologized for downing a B-29 in “error.” Soviet Lieutenant General of Aviation Preobrazhenskii informed Queen that “two B-29s had been over the camp earlier in the morning and dropped supplies. Some of the drums came loose from the parachutes and crashed through buildings, almost hitting a Russian colonel.” When General MacArthur learned of the incident, he fired off a cable to General Antonov of the Soviet Supreme High Command that 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 that 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.”

According to Gavrillov, “Without informing the Soviet side, 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. Meanwhile, the Soviet front received an order from General 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,” Gavrillov said, and to prevent another “willful act,” like that which had been committed by the commander of the *Hog Wild*. “Besides, by rail was also safer.” On September 10, 750 POWs left by train for Dalian, and the remaining prisoners departed the following day. “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.

Operation 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 members of the Cardinal team survived the encounter “relatively unscathed,” others were forced to suffer various forms of indignity including being stripped naked and having their face slapped. At some point, increasing Soviet hostilities prompted General Donovan to request that American personnel withdraw from the area immediately, and on October 5, Major General Kovtun Stankevich, the Soviet commander, 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 his family, departed Mukden for Beijing on a C-46 the next 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. ♦

The information in “Operation Cardinal” is based on conversations with Ivan Tsapov, Arthur Strilky, Hal Leith, and John Brunner. The Flight of the Hog Wild by Bill Streifer and Irek Sabitov, a Russian journalist, contains a discussion of Operation Cardinal and Operation Eagle. Bill Streifer may be contacted at photograf7@yahoo.com.

SUGGESTED READING

- *Rescued: POWs of Japanese* by Hal Leith
- *OSS in China: Prelude to Cold War* by Maochun Yu
- *Operation Cardinal: the OSS in Manchuria, August 1945* by Peter Clemens
- *1992-1996 Findings of the WWII Working Group, U.S.-Russia Joint Commission on POW/MIAs*
- *Saving General Wainwright* by Colonel Viktor Gavrillov

Dear General Singlaub:

I served our great nation as a parachute infantryman in the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions. As an avid student of intelligence and military history, I have tremendous respect for the veterans of the Office of Strategic Services for blazing the trail that current intelligence professionals follow today.

I recently discovered that I have another reason to appreciate the OSS. My great uncle, SSG Paul H. Bruce, was a member of the 792nd Tank Battalion stationed in the Philippines in 1941. He fought the withdrawal to Bataan and was ordered to surrender. My great uncle survived the Bataan Death March, Camp O’Donnell, the Hell Ships to Korea, and imprisonment in Manchuria. He was finally liberated from Mukden, Manchuria, in 1945 by an OSS team that parachuted to their aid. Unfortunately, I never knew my great uncle. He died the year that I was born. While visiting my grandmother, she gave me some information regarding him. After some investigation, I discovered what the OSS had done for him.

On behalf of my family and myself, please accept my deepest gratitude for what you proud veterans of the OSS did for my great uncle and many other POWs in World War II.

With Deepest Regards,
Carl R. Bruce Jr.
Woodbridge, VA