THE OSS INFLUENCE ON SPECIAL FORCES

by Troy J. Sacquety
Veterans of World War II airborne and special operations units (Philippine guerillas, Merrill’s Marauders [5307th Composite Unit (Provisional)], Office of Strategic Services [OSS], 1st Special Service Force [FSSF], Alamo Scouts), and Korean War guerrillas contributed to the creation, organization, doctrine, and training of Special Forces (SF).

However, a grossly disproportionate share of the ‘pioneering’ influence has been incorrectly attributed to the OSS veterans who joined early SF. According to popular misconception, multitudes of former OSS veterans joined early SF and shaped the force into becoming a continuation of the disbanded WWII organization.1 Evidence reveals this was not the case. This article examines that fallacy with a simple analysis that details the number of former OSS personnel who joined SF from 1952 to 1954 and the disparate experiences those veterans brought to the force. Finally, the article explains that of the few OSS veterans who joined SF in the first two years, those that served as instructors in the SF Department at the Psychological Warfare Center and School (PWCS); the 10th Special Forces Group (SFG); the 77th SFG; and orders for the 99 SF-trained personnel sent to serve in Korea. The result was concrete evidence of disinformation and exaggeration perpetuated by the active force and veterans associations. The rosters reveal that only fourteen former OSS members joined SF from 1952-1954. Thus, the total number of former OSS veterans in SF was less than one percent of the total 1,169 SF soldiers.2

Secondly, a deeper inspection was made on the few OSS veterans to see what skills they brought to the new force. A comparison of their WWII OSS assignments and locations with their subsequent duty position in SF revealed little commonality, other than most of the OSS veterans served in either the OSS Special Operations (SO) or Operational Groups (OG) Branches. These OSS veterans did not uniformly influence SF. While soldiers underwent early SF training within their units, field grade officers in these formations performed little instruction during team level exercises, thereby minimizing the lessons they passed on to younger soldiers. This left the instructors in the SF Department of the PWCS as those tasked with creating lesson plans and programs of instruction (POI) for SF training. Therefore, the five former OSS instructors in the SF Department, constituting approximately one-third of the instructor cadre from 1952-1954, are the ones who provided the most influence from their OSS experiences on the developing force.3 Because the five interacted with or impacted every soldier trained in the SF program at the school, they gave students undergoing instruction an exaggerated impression about the overall presence of former OSS veterans in SF. Regardless, as USASOC Command Historian Dr. Charles H. Briscoe’s prior Veritas article “The Good ‘Ole’ Days of Special Forces: Marginalized Before JFK” demonstrated, the early POIs impacted the instruction for years to come.4 Because these instructors provided the OSS influence to the SF POI, a brief look at their operational backgrounds shows what they offered to the budding force.
COL Aaron Bank
Commander, 10th SFG; Jedburgh (SO) Team PACKARD (France), SO Team RAVEN (Laos)

LTC Winston W. EhrGott
Instructor, SF Department; SO Greece/Saudi Arabia

LTC James M. Goodwin
Instructor, SF Department; SO Team FLOTSAM (Yugoslavia), OSS Special Project JAVAMAN

LTC Jack T. Shannon
Deputy Commander, 10th SFG/Commander, 77th SFG; SO Interallied Mission BERGAMOTTE (France), SO Detachment 101 (Burma)

LTC Reginald Thorlin
TDY to 77th SFG; SO Detachment 101 (Burma)

Captain (CPT) Leif Bangsboll
Instructor, SF Department; SO Team (Denmark)

CPT Herbert R. Brucker
Assistant S-2, 10th SFG; SO HERMIT circuit (France); SO Team IBEX/LION (China)

CPT Arthur N. Foster
SF to Korea; OG CHRISTOPHER (France), SO Team BABOON (China)

CPT John H.N. Hemingway
Instructor, SF Department; SO Team France, Secret Intelligence Strategic Services Section (France)

CPT Solon H. Tate
B Team Leader, 77th SFG, Special Funds Finance Officer (Yugoslavia, Italy, Austria)

1LT Andre J. Bouchardon
SF to Korea; Two missions with the SO SACRISTAN Circuit (France), Special Allied Airborne Reconnaissance Force (SAARF)

1LT Caesar J. Civitella
Instructor, SF Department; OG LAFAYETTE (France), OG SEWANEE (Italy)

1LT Bartine H. Coady
HQ and HQ Company, 77th SFG; recruited into OSS August 1945, Washington DC; no operational OSS assignment

Master Sergeant Romayo J. Bizaillon
FA Team #10, 10th SFG; OG EMILY (France), OG BLACKBERRY (China)
The son of a rear admiral who commanded the Danish submarine fleet, Bangsboll grew up sailing and learned submarine operations and diesel engine maintenance. In 1935, he volunteered for the Royal Danish Naval Air Force and trained as an observer prior to joining the merchant marine. With the outbreak of war, he joined the Norwegian Air Force (in exile) in Canada as a flight sergeant, but in the hope of seeing combat, he volunteered for the U.S. Army on 22 March 1943. In September 1943, the OSS recruited Bangsboll for his fluency in Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish. The OSS first employed Corporal Bangsboll as an instructor at RTU-11, otherwise known as ‘the Farm,’ a school on an estate in Southern Maryland that taught secret intelligence tradecraft, before assigning him to the Danish SO section. On 5 October 1944, Sergeant (SGT) Bangsboll parachuted into occupied Denmark near Allborg to be “the only American officer serving as an agent” in that country.

Until the end of the war Bangsboll lived as a civilian, being subject to execution as a spy if caught. His mission was to help arm, train, and lead the Danish resistance, engage in sabotage missions on rail and communications lines, and to report on local conditions. Because the OSS could not yet commission SGT Bangsboll, the British Army made him a first lieutenant to better engage with Danish resistance leaders. His lieutenancy in the British Army ended on 6 November 1944 when he received a commission as a Second Lieutenant (2LT) in the U.S. Army. In May 1945, as the war was drawing to a close, 1LT Bangsboll led resistance elements as they helped to liberate Copenhagen. For his service, he received the Distinguished Service Cross.

After WWII, Bangsboll attended intelligence officer’s training at Camp Holabird, Maryland, and then served in airborne units at Fort Bragg before deploying to pre-war South Korea as a Public Safety Officer with the 59th Military Government Headquarters and Headquarters Company. But it was as an Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon leader in the 187th Airborne Infantry Regiment that 1LT Bangsboll once again found himself in combat, earning the Silver Star for an action on 16 November 1950, near Pyongwon-ni, North Korea.

CPT Bangsboll arrived at the SF Department in May 1952, and served until March 1954 as an instructor of clandestine operations and guerrilla warfare. He was so well-suited for this position that the director of the SF Department, COL Francois D’Eliscu, wrote, “Bangsboll is one of the most experienced and trained officers in our specialized field of activities. He is the only man in this country, to my knowledge, who has had so many foreign assignments in the field of secret operations that fits him for his present important assignment as instructor in the Special Forces Department of the Psychological Warfare School.”
The son of Italian immigrants, Civitella began his military career in February 1943. He volunteered for the airborne and went to the 597th Airborne Engineer Company at Camp Mackall, North Carolina, where he again volunteered for the OSS OG. In April 1944, Technician Fourth Grade (T/4) Civitella deployed to North Africa. While assigned to Company B, 2671st Special Reconnaissance Battalion, Separate (Provisional), on 29 August 1944, his 14-man team LAFAYETTE parachuted into southern France in support of Operation DRAGOON, the 15 August 1944 invasion of Southern France. LAFAYETTE assisted in the capture of nearly 4,000 enemy troops and worked with elements of the French resistance until 8 September 1944.

SGT Civitella then transferred to Company A, 2671st in Italy, where he served as a ‘kicker’ to provide aerial resupply to other OSS elements. On 13 April 1945, SGT Civitella parachuted into the Valtellina valley in northern Italy with OG team SEWANEE to join OG team SPOKANE in supporting the Italian resistance, preventing enemy destruction of critical infrastructure, and to cut the road through the alpine Stelvio Pass. The two OG teams met all of their objectives, including clearing the valley and the pass of all enemy troops, and preventing the destruction of the area’s critical power plants. Until 22 May 1945, when conventional forces secured the valley, the OGS conducted Civil Affairs (CA) functions by providing local administration, arranging repair to roads and buildings, and organizing rest points and food drops for thousands of former forced laborers returning to the area. After helping with the OSS effort to document its history, Staff Sergeant (SSG) Civitella received a discharge on 17 October 1945.

Having reenlisted in the Air Force in 1947, SSG Civitella petitioned to transfer to the Army. On 23 February 1948, he became the regimental S-2 sergeant for the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, Fort Bragg, North Carolina. On 28 January 1951, Master Sergeant Civitella received a direct commission to Second Lieutenant, and was posted to the 508th Airborne Infantry Regiment at Fort Benning, Georgia. Newly promoted First Lieutenant (ILT) Civitella reported to the PWCS on 12 May 1952 and served as a guerrilla warfare instructor in the SF Department until August 1953. Then, he joined the 77th SFG, but remained involved with the school as an SF representative to the Psychological Warfare Board. In June 1955, he joined the 10th SFG in Germany.
LTC Goodwin enlisted in the Maryland Army National Guard briefly in 1934, but it was his civilian construction job working with explosives that influenced his military career. Drafted into the Army on 21 April 1941, Goodwin served in the cavalry until May 1942 when he joined the OSS predecessor, the Coordinator of Information. SSG Goodwin created a demolitions training course, then supervised the same program after receiving a commission as a 2LT. After parachute and field training, the OSS sent 1LT Goodwin to U.S. Army Forces in the Middle East (USAFIME) in Cairo, Egypt, where he was a Dispatching and Supply Officer with the 2677th Regiment, OSS (Provisional), managing OSS property, budgets, and inspecting agents prior to their insertion. Then, on 19 January 1944, CPT Goodwin jumped into a British-led mission in Yugoslavia (Bosnia).

Its commander, Brigadier General (BG) Fitzroy H.R. MacLean, ordered the OSS CPT to the FLOTSAM mission. For two months Goodwin walked through wintery mountains to arrive at Semic, Slovenia. Within a week, BG MacLean dismissed the Canadian officer in charge of FLOTSAM and appointed CPT Goodwin commander. As a liaison to both the partisans and the Russian mission, he requested supplies for the guerrillas, persuaded them to attack the Germans, and assisted in the rescue of more than three hundred downed American airmen. On 20 September 1944, while attacking a German stronghold at a railroad bridge over the Sava River, at Litija, Major (MAJ) Goodwin was wounded by an enemy grenade.

After recovering from his injuries, the OSS assigned MAJ Goodwin to the Special Projects Office to work on the JAVAMAN project. Never employed operationally, JAVAMAN utilized an explosives-laden watercraft steered to its target by remote control and directed by television carried aboard an airborne B-17 ‘Flying Fortress’ heavy bomber. Following WWII, he served in a number of engineer assignments in the U.S. and the Caribbean until reporting to the PWCS in July 1952. LTC Goodwin was the “Chief of Academic Committee in weapons, demolitions, and sabotage” in the SF Department and represented SF on the Psychological Warfare Board until July 1953.
LTC Winston W. Ehrgott began his military career in 1920 with the New York National Guard and was part of Lieutenant Commander Richard E. Byrd’s 1926 Arctic Expedition. Called to active duty in March 1942, he served in the Cavalry before joining the SO Branch. Assigned to USAFIME from February to May 1944, CPT Ehrgott worked in occupied Greece with Communist cavalry partisans, keeping them focused on fighting the Germans, rather than other guerrillas. From June 1944 to January 1945, he was a senior instructor and executive officer of the U.S. Military Mission in Saudi Arabia.

MAJ Ehrgott returned to the Army and fought in Italy. From October 1945 to May 1946, he commanded 2nd Battalion, 351st Infantry Regiment, 88th Infantry Division (ID), as it conducted military government duties in occupied Trieste. He then assisted counter-insurgency efforts with the U.S. Military Mission to Greece from December 1947 to March 1948 before leaving active duty.

Ehrgott returned to active duty during the Korean War and received a position in the Miscellaneous Group, 8086th Army Unit, the command for the anti-communist Korean guerrillas. He commanded Task Force LEOPARD on Paengyong Island from August until November 1951. LTC Ehrgott arrived at the PWCS on 14 June 1952, and, as the Director of Training in the SF Department until November 1952, helped to develop and approve lesson plans. He then served as a guerrilla warfare instructor and in various positions in the PWCS before leaving in December 1953.
Hemingway dropped out of Dartmouth in 1943 to enlist in the Army. After Officer Candidate School, he received a posting to the black 780th Military Police Battalion in the segregated Army of WWII. When the 780th deployed to Algiers, the French-speaking 1LT used his family connections (as the son of author Ernest M. Hemingway) to join the SO Branch. After serving as an instructor with the 2677th Regiment, he parachuted as part of an SO team into occupied France in support of Operation DRAGOON. His team was to organize and arm French resistance groups in the Hérault region and to report on enemy movements. But, having lost their radios in the drop, the operation was largely ineffectual and returned to headquarters for reassignment when bypassed by the French Army.

1LT Hemingway then joined the 3rd ID Strategic Services Section (SSS). Divisional SSS elements provided tactical intelligence to combat units under the 7th U.S. Army. In late October 1944, in the Vosges Mountains in France, the Germans isolated the 1st Battalion, 141st Regiment, 36th ID. On 28 October, near Herival, 1LT Hemingway teamed with an officer from the 36th ID SSS to get a French agent through to ‘the lost battalion.' They ran into a platoon of German soldiers and all three were wounded and captured, but both officers hid their OSS affiliation. Hemingway briefly escaped captivity in late March 1945, before being recaptured after several days of evading. After repatriation CPT Hemingway waived his discharge points to go to China, but the war ended and he served his remaining time at a German POW camp at Camp Pickett, Virginia, before leaving the service.

With no civilian job prospects, Hemingway again utilized family connections to rejoin the U.S. Army in 1948, and served in intelligence billets. While with the XVIII Airborne Corps at Fort Bragg, CPT Hemingway learned of a new unit looking for volunteers. After an interview with COL Bank, Hemingway joined the first SF qualification course. He helped teach the second, and remained a guerrilla warfare instructor at the PWCS until January 1954. Although writing later that he resigned his commission in protest over a schism in the PWCS over whether SF soldiers should be trained in UW or direct action, he was actually a victim of Army downsizing after the Korean War.
Only fourteen OSS veterans joined SF from 1952 to 1954. Five served as instructors in the SF Department of the PWCS. Along with non-OSS background instructors, they pooled their collective experiences to write the qualification course POI. Four of the five OSS veterans had significant experience in unheralded elements of the SO Branch (while the last had OG experience). Significantly none were Jedburghs, a multinational project also inaccurately portrayed as providing the model for early SF to emulate. All had worked with guerrillas, some for months. They brought significant experience in UW instruction and methods to the PWCS. Thus, as the evidence in this article has shown, it was not the experiences of a large number of former OSS personnel that influenced SF for years to come, but rather that of a small core of instructors.

**Endnotes**

1 An example of this perception can be found at “Special Forces History: Early Roots of Special Forces,” found on internet at [http://specialforceshistory.info/roots.html](http://specialforceshistory.info/roots.html), accessed 12 June 2018. Another example is found in Shelby L. Stanton, Special Forces at War: An Illustrated History, Southeast Asia 1957-1975 (Charlottesville, Virginia: Howell Press, 1990), 13.

2 The list of OSS personnel is at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in College Park, MD. However, a searchable database is located at [https://catalog.archives.gov/id/1593270](https://catalog.archives.gov/id/1593270), accessed 25 October 2017; “Headquarters: The Psychological Warfare Center, Officer’s Roster,” 20 October 1953, “77th Special Forces Group Officer’s Roster,” 20 October 1953, both located in the Jack T. Shannon collection, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; “Movement Order to Commanding Officer, 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne),” 25 September 1953, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; “Deployment of the 10th Special Forces Group in 1953,” in Special Forces: The First Fifty Years (Tampa, FL: Faircount LLC for the SFA, 2002), see roster “10th Special Forces Group Deployment to Germany and Korea in 1953,” p. 94-101; “Headquarters 77th Special Forces Group Airborne,” 20 November 1954, USASOC History Support Center, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

3 Administratively, those SF soldiers in the PSYWAR Center were held on the rolls of the 10th or later 77th SEG.


5 Leif Bangsboll was the son of Rear Admiral Frederick Christian Bangsboll.

6 Leif Bangsboll, “Memorandum,” 6 January 1943, Leif Bangsboll personnel file, NPRC.


8 “Application for Employment and Personal History Statement,” [Spring 1943], Folder Bangsboll, Leif, Box 0034, Entry 224, Research Group 226, NARA; He was also able to speak French, German, and Greenlandic.


10 Charles E. Brebner to CO, Hq & Hq Detachment, OSS, European T of Operations, “SUBJECT: Job Description to Accompany Recommendation for Promotion of 2d Lieutenant Leif Bangsboll,” 15 March 1948, Folder Bangsboll, Leif, NARA.


12 COL James R. Forgan to Commanding General, European Theater of Operations, United States Army, “SUBJECT: Recommendation for Award of the Distinguished Service Cross,” 25 June 1945, Folder Bangsboll, Leif, NARA. Leif Bangsboll led a resistance force in an attack on Ryparken that captured German artillery pieces and machineguns, leading to the surrender of the local enemy garrison.

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13  “Efficiency Report,” 31 August 1948, Bangsboll personnel file, NPRC.

14  “Special Orders Number 149: Headquarters Fort Lawton, Washington,” 23 June 1951, Bangsboll personnel file, NPRC. Bangsboll directed a patrol that overpowered an enemy garrison at a food storage warehouse. Later ordered to destroy the building, Bangsboll’s numerically smaller force incurred no casualties as they killed the defenders and burned the building and its estimated 100 to 150 tons of supplies.

15  “Officer Efficiency Report,” 12 March 1954, Leif Bangsboll file, NPRC.


17  He also attended the Psychological Warfare Course at Georgetown University from 26 September 1953 to 23 January 1954. After working at the PWCS, Bangsboll had a number of Special Warfare assignments, including as a team leader in the 77th and 10th SFGs. Even his few conventional assignments involved special warfare. While as a Ground Liaison Officer in the 302nd Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, he taught Air Force personnel escape and evasion and psychological warfare techniques. After a final assignment as a Counterinsurgency Instructor with the Para Military Actions Department, U.S. Army School, Europe, LTC Bangsboll retired on 30 April 1963.


20  To prepare for his mission, he attended the British Mountain and Ski School at the Gran Sasso, Italy.

21  The first elements of SPOKANE parachuted into Italy on 4 March 1945.


23  Enlisted Record and Report of Separation Honorable Discharge,” October 1945, Civitella personnel file, NPRC.

24  Caesar J. Civitella, Headquarters 31st Fighter Group, Turner Field, Georgia, “Voluntary Request to Transfer to Airborne Duty,” 5 January 1948, Civitella personnel file, NPRC. After recovering from his immediate capture but also close enough to witness its destruction by heavy German tanks. Many chose not to risk escape, but 1LT Civitella returned to the 14th Airborne Training,” 20 February 1950, Winston W. Ehrgott personnel file, National Personnel Records Center (NPRC), St. Louis, MO.


26  WD Form 66, 17 May 1954, Ehrgott personnel file, NPRC.

27  WD Form 66, 17 May 1954, Ehrgott personnel file, NPRC.


31  Divisional SSS were directed by the 7th U.S. Army SSS under the 7th Army G-2.

32  John Hemingway, “Report on Activities from October 28 to May 9 While a PW,” 12 May 1945, Folder Hemingway, John, Box 0326, NARA.

33  John Hemingway, “Report on Activities from October 28 to May 9 While a PW,” 12 May 1945, Folder Hemingway, John, Box 0326, NARA. An account of this capture can be found in John H. Hemingway, Misadventures of a Fly Fisherman: My Life With and Without Papa (Dallas, TX: Taylor Publishing Company, 1986), 171-175. The French agent died of his wounds.

34  Jack Hemingway, Misadventures of a Fly Fisherman, 207. After recovering from his wounds, I/LT Hemingway went to Officer Lager XIII B at Harlemberg. He was present when Task Force (TF) Baum, a small U.S. armed element, battled fifty miles behind German lines to the camp in a rescue attempt. However, the number of POWs exceeded the carrying capacity of TF Baum’s remaining vehicles. Many chose not to risk escape, but I/LT Hemingway fled with the TF. When it stopped for the night, Hemingway opted to continue on foot, and on the morning of 28 March 1945, was far enough away from the TF to avoid immediate capture but also close enough to witness its destruction by heavy German tanks. A few days later, conscripted Hitler Youth captured the hungry and cold lieutenant. I/LT Hemingway was then force-marched along with thousands of POWs to stay ahead of the advancing Allies. On 29 April 1945, while at Stolig VII-A at Moosberg, elements of the 14th Armored Division liberated 110,000 allied prisoners including Hemingway. Ironically, the 14th AD force was led by Brigadier General Charles H. Karlstad, who was later the first commanding officer of the PWCS.


37  Jack Hemingway, Misadventures of a Fly Fisherman, 277. COL (ret) Richard M. Ripley, interview by Dr. Troy J. Sacquety, 9 August 2017, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

38  COL (ret) Richard M. Ripley, interview by Dr. Troy J. Sacquety, 2 October 2017, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.