

## ***Operation Greif* and the Trial of the “Most Dangerous Man in Europe.”**

A disheveled George S. Patton reported to Dwight Eisenhower with unsettling news from the front. “Ike, I’ve never seen such a goddamn foul-up! The Krauts are infiltrating behind our lines, raising hell, cutting wires and turning around road signs!”<sup>1</sup> Such was the characteristic response in the aftermath of *Operation Greif*, orchestrated by Germany’s top commando, Otto Skorzeny. Through his actions during the Ardennes Offensive of 1944, and his acquittal while on trial, Skorzeny effectively utilized disinformation and covert operations to both earn his credibility and infamous reputation.

Born in Vienna in 1908, Skorzeny led a mundane life during the years of the First World War. Despite his inability to concentrate on his studies, he managed to graduate in 1931 from the *Technischen Hochschule in Wien* with an engineering degree.<sup>2</sup> His participation in the *Schlagende Verbindungen* (dueling societies) during his academic career gave Skorzeny the reputation of being a fierce fighter and resulted in his characteristic scars that covered both sides of his face. With the unification of Austria into Germany in 1938, Skorzeny had his first contact with the Nazi party. While visiting Vienna, he came upon Austrian President Miklas in the midst of an attempt on his life by Nazi roughnecks. Skorzeny, always a man of action, blocked the way of the would-be assassins and ended the confrontation. Word spread across the Germany of the bold Austrian who had saved the President’s life on a whim.

---

<sup>1</sup> Glenn B Infield, *Skorzeny* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981), 78.

<sup>2</sup> Infield, *Skorzeny*, 12.

When war broke out in 1939, Skorzeny attempted to join the *Luftwaffe* but due to his age of thirty-one, he was deemed too old for service as a pilot. Instead, he was transferred to the *Waffen SS* and eventually to *Division Reich* as an artillery specialist. He served with distinction in both France and the Soviet Union, receiving significant wounds on the Eastern Front in late 1942. It was while he was recovering in Berlin that his superiors began to take into consideration the tall Austrian's future within the German military.

As the war progressed, Nazi military leaders were on the constant lookout for daring, skilled men who would meet the ideal of the German soldier on the battlefield.<sup>3</sup> When Heinrich Himmler ordered Walter Schellenberg, head of the foreign intelligence, to form an elite commando team based off the British model, one name sprang to mind. Ernst Kaltenbrunner of the Reich Central Security Office remembered how Skorzeny had rescued the Austrian President's life so suddenly and recommended him to Schellenberg. Schellenberg read detailed reports of Skorzeny's military career, and was particularly surprised by Skorzeny's refusal to accept medical treatment when hit in the head by shrapnel. Others within the Nazi leadership, such as Albert Speer, saw Skorzeny as a loose cannon that would steal weapons and equipment from other units.<sup>4</sup> Despite this, Schellenberg was convinced Skorzeny was just the man to lead the commando teams.

In April of 1943, Skorzeny was ordered to report to the Reich Central Security Office, where he met with Schellenberg. The intelligence officer was immediately impressed with Skorzeny, who stood well over six feet tall and donned grisly scars on both cheeks. During the meeting, Skorzeny's abrasive personality shined as he constantly interrupted his prospective

---

<sup>3</sup> Sereny Gitta, *Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 385.

<sup>4</sup> Gitta, *Battle with Truth*, 311.

superior.<sup>5</sup> As the meeting concluded, Schellenberg had made up his mind. Skorzeny was promoted to captain and ordered to form a commando unit that would specialize in operations behind enemy lines.

Skorzeny immediately took up the challenge, recruiting numerous college acquaintances and veterans from the Eastern Front. He took his new task to heart, personally interrogating captured British commandos, using his findings to train his teams. Skorzeny worked alongside his men, day and night, until he had created a toughened and skilled commando unit. They got their chance to prove themselves when the unit was given the task of rescuing the deposed Benito Mussolini. In his typical fashion, Skorzeny spent months collecting intelligence until he determined that Mussolini was being held at the Campo Imperatore Hotel on a jagged cliffside atop the mountain of Grand Sasso. On September 12, 1943, Skorzeny and his men landed their gliders on a clearing atop the mountain and stormed the hotel, capturing Mussolini without firing a shot. Upon his return to Germany with Mussolini, Hitler personally thanked Skorzeny, saying: “Today, you have carried out a mission that will go down in history.”<sup>6</sup> The *Führer* bestowed upon Skorzeny the Knight’s Cross and the rank of major. The news of Mussolini’s rescue spread across the world and Skorzeny’s reputation within German military was solidified. For the first time, the Allies began to take notice of the Austrian commando and dubbed him “The most dangerous man in Europe.”<sup>7</sup>

By October 1944, the Germany’s military situation was looking hopeless. Since the landings at Normandy, the Allies had recaptured Paris and advanced to Aachen, on the border with Belgium. The British captured Italy and the Americans were now poised to strike Germany

---

<sup>5</sup> Rupert Butler, *Black Angels: History of the Waffen SS* (New York: St. Martin’s Press. 1979), 202

<sup>6</sup> Infield, *Skorzeny*, 45.

<sup>7</sup> John Clearwater, “The Manhunt for Yugoslavia’s Tito frustrated by Axis Divisions, SS Paratroopers and Germany’s Commando Extraordinaire,” *World War Two*, 13 (February 1999):60.

from the south. In the east, Romanian and Bulgarian divisions previously under German command began surrendering and defecting to the steadily advancing Red Army. Skorzeny had participated in *Operation Panzerfaust*, which had captured the Hungarian President's son and brought about an end to the country's negotiations with the Soviets. Although the operation had secured Hungarian cooperation with Germany, it was negated by two Romanian armies that had defected to the Soviet Red Army. Within the Nazi high command, it became apparent that something needed to be done to reverse Germany's fortunes. In September of 1944, during a meeting with his generals, Hitler finally decided on what needed to be done. "I shall go on the counterattack, that is to say, here, out of the Ardennes with the objective of Antwerp."<sup>8</sup> Hitler's bold move shocked those present at the meeting, who immediately contested it. He claimed that the Allies' rapid advance from Normandy had stretched their supply lines to the breaking point. He estimated that a massive armored assault would break through the weakened Allied lines, allowing German forces to take the vital port of Antwerp and gain much needed fuel to continue the war effort. At the same time, Skorzeny, on his way back from Hungary, was summoned yet again to report to the Wolf's Lair for a private meeting with Hitler.

Upon his arrival, Skorzeny was immediately ushered to his meeting with Hitler. The *Führer*, still impressed with the SS officer's rescue of Mussolini, designated a crucial role for Skorzeny in the coming offensive. Skorzeny's commandos were to slip behind American lines during the opening hours of the German offensive. Utilizing captured enemy uniforms and vehicles, they were to secure several bridges on the Meuse River between the cities of Liege and Namur, in anticipation of the breakthrough by the Panzer divisions. Hitler was surprised at the success of an American commando unit in Aachen that successfully infiltrated German lines

---

<sup>8</sup> Clearwater, "Manhunt," 60.

with captured Panzers and decided for Skorzeny to perform a similar feat.<sup>9</sup> By using German commandos in American uniforms, dissention and fear could be spread in the ranks of the retreating Allied forces. Skorzeny was initially shocked at his orders, mainly due to the fact that Hitler had previously issued the infamous “Commando Order,” which ordered the immediate execution of any enemy soldiers disguised as Germans.<sup>10</sup> Despite this apparent contradiction, Skorzeny realized the futility in arguing with his leader. The *Führer* bestowed a lasting word of encouragement on Skorzeny. “I know that the time given you is very short, but I can count on you to do the impossible.”<sup>11</sup> With orders in hand, Skorzeny began immediate preparations for the coming mission.

Skorzeny’s planning was immediately hampered due to the time constraints placed upon both his mission and the entire German offensive. Skorzeny requested additional men from General Burgdorf and managed to obtain two parachute battalions, and both a tank and communications company. The units formed the core of Skorzeny’s operation, now christened *Greif*, after a mythical bird. Each commando team consisted of a demolition group, whose job was to destroy American fuel and ammunition dumps; a reconnaissance group responsible for reporting enemy movement to the German command, and a lead commando group who would be in charge of cutting telephone wires, disrupting enemy communications and reversing road signs.<sup>12</sup>

Within these groups there was a need for German soldiers fluent in English. If Skorzeny’s men were expected to pose as Americans, they needed not only to look the part, but had to be able to explain themselves if approached by other U.S. soldiers. Skorzeny sent out a

---

<sup>9</sup> Infield, *Skorzeny*, 84.

<sup>10</sup> Clearwater, “Manhunt,” 60.

<sup>11</sup> Otto Skorzeny, *Skorzeny’s Special Missions: the Memoirs of the Most Dangerous Man in Europe* (St. Paul: Greenhill Books, 2006), 153.

<sup>12</sup> Skorzeny, *Memoirs*, 158.

memorandum to all branches of the military stating: "Report until October 10, 1944 all English-speaking officers and soldiers available for special missions...in view of their incorporation in the commando units of Lieutenant-Colonel Skorzeny."<sup>13</sup> Despite petitioning all of the German armed forces, the men who responded to Skorzeny's request were a severe disappointment. As he wrote many years later in his memoirs: "When the first hundred volunteers reported at Friedenthal, the future of *Greif* looked bleaker than ever."<sup>14</sup> Upon being divided up by language experts, there were a mere ten soldiers who spoke English fluently and had a firm understanding of American slang and culture. Of the remaining men, approximately 100-150 spoke English adequately, but the vast majority of those present spoke little or no English. To circumvent this, many of the soldiers were ordered to exclaim "Sorry" and run off feigning an attack of diarrhea if approached by American soldiers.<sup>15</sup> Because of the thousands of men and the hundreds of tanks being committed to the general offensive, Skorzeny was forced to make do with the men he had. He selected 150 of those who could speak English the best and assigned the rest to the 150<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division. Skorzeny would have preferred twice the number, but was forced to cope with the restrictions placed upon him.

Yet another problem facing Skorzeny and his command was the acquisition of Allied vehicles. On his original requisition form, he had requested twenty Sherman tanks and at least thirty British or American scout cars.<sup>16</sup> However, increased Allied air raids on railroads made transporting enemy vehicles to Skorzeny's headquarters at Friedenthal increasingly difficult. At the onset of *Greif*, according to Skorzeny, "We were the proud owners of exactly two Sherman

---

<sup>13</sup> Infield, *Skorzeny*, 85.

<sup>14</sup> Skorzeny, *Memoirs*, 156.

<sup>15</sup> Tony Paterson, "Farce of the Plot to kidnap Eisenhower," *London Telegraph*, (February 4, 2004), 15.

<sup>16</sup> Paterson, "Farce of Plot," 15.

tanks, one of which became useless through transmission troubles when we were assembling.”<sup>17</sup> Instead of the designated number of Shermans, the Inspector of Armored Forces in Berlin gave Skorzeny twelve German Panther tanks which were required to be fitted with cardboard frames so that they resembled American tanks.<sup>18</sup> Of the fifteen British and American jeeps provided, several broke down on the training grounds and were forced to be substituted with *Kübelwagens*. In terms of trucks, Skorzeny obtained twelve genuine American trucks and was forced to fill the difference with German ones.<sup>19</sup> Had Skorzeny more time, perhaps he could have doubled the number of Allied vehicles for the operation, but such was not the case.

Skorzeny also attempted to gather as many American small arms as possible. Yet again, he was met with meager results. Skorzeny explained, years later, in his memoirs: “In the matter of weapons we were worse off yet. We had only 50% of the U.S. rifles we needed. There was no ammunition for American anti-tank guns or motors.”<sup>20</sup> Skorzeny and his subordinates decided that such weapons should be reserved for those fluent English-speakers who were designated to pose as American Military Police and redirect traffic. Once again, much as with the vehicles, Skorzeny was forced to fill in the differences with German weapons and ammunition. Little did Skorzeny know, but this would be one of the aspects of the commandos’ appearance that would reveal their true identity to suspicious American soldiers.

But of all the logistics that Skorzeny needed to concern himself with, that of American uniforms was the most pressing predicament. The uniforms that were sent to Friedenthal were mainly British and American overcoats, which served no use to Skorzeny’s men due to the fact

---

<sup>17</sup> Skorzeny, *Memoirs*, 156.

<sup>18</sup> Clearwater, “Manhunt,” 61.

<sup>19</sup> Infield, *Skorzeny*, 79.

<sup>20</sup> Skorzeny, *Memoirs*, 163.

that American soldiers usually wore “field jackets” while fighting.<sup>21</sup> The appearance of one of Skorzeny’s commandos in an overcoat would be an instant giveaway to any American soldier encountered. As Skorzeny sent out messages to numerous officers requesting American uniforms, he began to receive uniforms from several German prisoner-of-war camps. When these shipments arrived at Friedenthal, Skorzeny noted: “When the head of the Prisoner of War Section sent us a supply of these jackets, it was observed that they were adorned with the triangle peculiar to prisoners and the consignment had to be returned.”<sup>22</sup> Unbeknownst to Skorzeny at the time, his temporary possession of stolen prisoner-of-war clothing would be one of the more serious charges brought against him during his trial after the war. For the time being, Skorzeny outfitted his lead commando units with the American uniforms and had the members of the 150<sup>th</sup> Panzers retain their traditional field grey attire.

With an inadequate supply of English speakers, American vehicles, weapons and uniforms, Skorzeny was conflicted on exactly how he would spread distress and panic among the American and British forces. Prior to contemplating this issue, Skorzeny had only shared the details of the mission to a few close subordinates within his command. He decided to use this to his advantage, stating: “We decided to let the rumors increase and multiply, while apparently doing our best to suppress them. We calculated that the enemy intelligence would simply not know what to make of the lurid and conflicting information reaching their ears.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, Skorzeny and his subordinates secretly spread rumors about the intentions of the operation while their men were still training. This was exemplified when a private within a commando company requested to speak with Skorzeny. The private proudly declared that “The brigade is to go

---

<sup>21</sup> Infield, *Skorzeny*, 80.

<sup>22</sup> Skorzeny, *Memoirs*, 157.

<sup>23</sup> Skorzeny, *Memoirs*, 159.



straight to Paris and capture Allied Headquarters!”<sup>24</sup> Skorzeny responded by telling the private to keep quiet about what he had learned, which made the secret that much more tempting to reveal. Another prominent rumor circulating was the brigade’s probable attempt to blow up the American oil pipelines that stretched back to Normandy. By December of 1944, there were so many rumors circulating within Skorzeny’s command that it became nearly impossible to suppress them. The rumors spread by Skorzeny’s men through the American lines would prove to be more destructive than any demolition team.

The final preparations for *Operation Greif* proceeded late into November 1944. Skorzeny obtained reconnaissance photos via Hermann Göring, of the bridges at Huy and Amony, which showed little enemy preparation for a German offensive. Prior to leaving for the front, Hitler ordered Skorzeny not to proceed into enemy territory with his men. It would prove too costly if Hitler were to lose him.<sup>25</sup> On December 8<sup>th</sup>, Skorzeny’s companies were sent by train to the Wahn area. Meeting with Field Marshal Model that night, Skorzeny learned that his units were to be attached to the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Armored Corps under the command of Joachim Peiper. At the beginning of the offensive, Skorzeny’s commando units in jeeps were designated to follow Peiper’s tanks until contact with the enemy was made. Skorzeny’s men would then break off of the main formation and drive towards their designated targets.

The night before the attack, Skorzeny and his men were forced to cope with the fuel scarcity in the German ranks as they precisely calculated the amount of gas needed for each company. The men hunkered down in their camps as their officers briefed them for the last time. On the eve of the operation, Skorzeny hoped and prayed that the training and material he had

---

<sup>24</sup> Clearwater, “Manhunt,” 62.

<sup>25</sup> Paterson, “Farce of Plot,” 15.

provided for his men would be enough to complete his mission and live up to Hitler's expectations.

The attack began on the morning of December 16<sup>th</sup> with a preliminary bombardment of the American lines followed by the main offensive carried out by the 1<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division. Skorzeny divided his men into four separate commando teams and sent them behind the advancing armored columns to flank the retreating U.S. 1<sup>st</sup> Army. The commandos had no trouble in infiltrating the lines as the disorganized American forces' communication lines had been stretched to the breaking point, with numerous lengths of wire having been severed by the bombardment. By the end of the first day, six of eight teams had successfully penetrated enemy lines and were now in place between the cities of Liege and Namur, paralleling the Meuse River.<sup>26</sup> The ill-prepared Americans had been pushed back on all fronts. By that night, Skorzeny's commandos were poised to spread distress among the enemy. Their future actions would become a constant thorn in the side of the Allied command during the critical moments of the battle.

One of Skorzeny's teams, led by Fritz Büssinger, arrived at the city of Huy on the second day of the offensive, reconnoitering the bridge over the Meuse and the town itself. Büssinger spent several hours in the American-held town, writing down enemy strength and defensive preparations.<sup>27</sup> Upon seeing U.S. officers, Büssinger was quick to salute and exchange a few words with them before proceeding with his mission. During his entire time in Huy, not a single American soldier asked him for identification or questioned him about his actions. On the way back to his unit on the outskirts of town, an American convoy of tanks and supply trucks pulled up beside the disguised German. When the driver asked Büssinger the way to the town of

---

<sup>26</sup> Infield, *Skorzeny*, 88.

<sup>27</sup> Infield, *Skorzeny*, 86.

Marchin, he promptly led the convoy in the wrong direction. Back behind German lines, Skorzeny listened on a stolen American radio and proclaimed: “The Americans are looking for their own tank divisions!”<sup>28</sup> This fact was later confirmed by U.S. forces, who reported that several supply columns were lost for days as they followed the Germans’ contradictory directions.<sup>29</sup>

Yet another team, under the command of Wilhelm Giel, misdirected the British and American traffic that flooded the few roads between the Meuse and Bastogne. Giel’s team, wearing American Military Police uniforms, diverted the 84<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division down the wrong road, resulting in the unit being lost for over three days.<sup>30</sup> Another team reported having destroyed an ammunition dump and cleared several minefields on the road to Malmédy. The same unit commander, feeling rather arrogant, drove his team into the city itself and inspected American positions for several hours, unnoticed by the enemy.<sup>31</sup> Reports of the defenses were sent to the 1<sup>st</sup> Panzers under Peiper as they advanced on the city. During the first days of the offensive, with the Panzer Divisions and Skorzeny’s men succeeding on all fronts, it appeared that the German offensive, coupled with the commandos’ actions, might break the will of the Americans to fight.

Despite the commandos’ initial success, the Allied high command, receiving numerous reports from the front of Germans masquerading as Americans, was forced to respond. On December 23<sup>rd</sup>, a message from Allied Headquarters in Normandy reported the presence of Skorzeny’s men. It stressed the severity of the situation, stating: “They will be carrying forged

---

<sup>28</sup> Skorzeny, *Memoirs*, 172.

<sup>29</sup> Harry C. Butcher, *My Three Years with Eisenhower* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1946), 710.

<sup>30</sup> Infield, *Skorzeny*, 89.

<sup>31</sup> Skorzeny, *Memoirs*, 170.

letters of recommendation and identification papers while wearing English uniforms.”<sup>32</sup> The announcement of this memorandum to the American and British units in the Ardennes would normally spell certain doom for Skorzeny’s operations. However, it only served to escalate the situation. Checkpoints and guard stations were set up in and around every bridge and city on the front. Identification papers were required for any American or British soldier to pass a guard post. Military Police were ordered to be on the lookout for any suspicious behavior and to check for any forged documents.

As a result of their increased vigilance, numerous American soldiers were accused or even arrested for allegedly being Germans in disguise. One captain had found a German officer’s pack containing a pair of jack boots that fit him perfectly. Later that day, upon rejoining his unit, he was promptly arrested and detained for six hours by a perceptive sentry who saw the boots and was convinced that he had a spy standing before him.<sup>33</sup> Two more American soldiers reported that they had been arrested by their own men for carrying a German camouflage tunic in their packs. Yet another soldier was detained for having a German surname and had to prove his innocence by answering several questions about American baseball teams.<sup>34</sup> Unbeknownst to him until after the war, the American effort to increase security only served to help Skorzeny, rather than impede his teams’ actions. General George Marshal remarked on this odd way of identifying friend from foe by stating: “A half a million GIs played cat and mouse with each other every time they met on the road.”<sup>35</sup>

The confusion that was spread among the U.S. Army during the second half of December did not only affect the soldiers on the front. The deceptions created by Skorzeny’s men reached

---

<sup>32</sup> Butcher, *My Three Years*, 710.

<sup>33</sup> Infield, *Skorzeny*, 95.

<sup>34</sup> Butcher, *My Three Years*, 715.

<sup>35</sup> Gregory Orfalea, *Messengers of the Lost Battalion* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 200-203.

the higher levels of the American and British commands. General Bruce Clark, commander of the U.S. VIII Corps was touring American positions at St. Vith when he was arrested for not having adequate identification. He was interrogated for over five hours until several men of his Corps spoke for him.<sup>36</sup> Time and time again, commanding officers were stopped and sometimes taken into custody by overly cautious sentries. This only further compounded the problems presented to the Allies, who were in the midst of organizing a counterattack to meet the Germans.

Of all the rumors spread by Skorzeny, the most significant was that of the attempt on Supreme Allied Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower's life. The origins of this rumor dated back nearly a year and a half, to the training grounds of Friedenthal, when a private approached Skorzeny, claiming the unit's mission was to drive to Paris and capture the Allied headquarters. It seems that as a result of this private, the same rumor was carried into the Ardennes in December 1944. Those members of Skorzeny's team who were captured by the Americans claimed that Eisenhower was in mortal danger, even stating that a commando team was already on its way to Paris.<sup>37</sup> Upon learning of this, the Trianon Hotel in Versailles, which served as Eisenhower's headquarters, was turned into a fortress. Tanks and machine guns were set up along the perimeter and the security forces went even so far as to have a stand-in for Ike walk around the palace, in hopes of luring out any German assassins.<sup>38</sup>

However, the plot was never meant to be carried out. Skorzeny himself realized the impossibility of getting his commandos all the way to Paris, let alone infiltrating the Allied headquarters. The virtual imprisonment of Eisenhower served no other purpose than to infuriate the Supreme Allied Commander. Captain Harry Butcher, Eisenhower's Naval Aide, remarked

---

<sup>36</sup> Infield, *Skorzeny*, 100.

<sup>37</sup> Infield, *Skorzeny*, 91.

<sup>38</sup> Butcher, *My Three Years*, 725.

on his superior's condition when he visited him on Christmas Eve, 1944. "He is a prisoner of our security police and is thoroughly but helplessly irritated by the restriction of his moves."<sup>39</sup> In a memorandum sent to Eisenhower's security forces, utmost vigilance was required and the situation was not to be taken lightly. Butcher explained the description of Skorzeny's commandos in the contents of his memoirs many years later. "The men were described as completely ruthless and prepared to sacrifice their lives to carry out the mission. They carried cyanide capsules to be thrown in the faces of MPs in order to facilitate escape."<sup>40</sup> Eisenhower was released from confinement on December 28<sup>th</sup>, when he refused to stay isolated any longer. Distressed by his confinement, he immediately printed wanted posters for Skorzeny, calling him an "Assassin, spy and saboteur."<sup>41</sup> These posters were circulated throughout Europe and eventually led to Skorzeny's capture at the end of the war.

Upon hearing of Eisenhower's imprisonment, British Field Marshal Montgomery took off in his staff car towards Malmédy to increase his own prestige among American troops. Little did he know a rumor had been spread in the Ardennes that one of Skorzeny's commandos looked strikingly similar to Monty and had identified himself as such at several American checkpoints.<sup>42</sup> When ordered to stop at the first checkpoint encountered, Montgomery told his driver to keep going. The American guards promptly shot out the tires of the jeep and dragged the Field Marshal to a nearby barn. Montgomery was enraged and called for the court-martial of the American privates if they did not release him. Upon a demand for identification, Monty was insulted that they did not recognize him. He was only released after a British captain known to the Americans properly recognized the fuming Field Marshal. When he learned that

---

<sup>39</sup> Butcher, *My Three Years*, 727.

<sup>40</sup> Butcher, *My Three Years*, 728.

<sup>41</sup> Infield, *Skorzeny*, 165.

<sup>42</sup> James Weingartner. "Otto Skorzeny and the Laws of War," *The Journal of Military History*, 55 (April 1991): 207-224.

Montgomery had been detained for several hours, an amused Eisenhower thanked Skorzeny for “one worthwhile service.”<sup>43</sup>

With the increased security at American checkpoints and radio messages warning the Allies of Skorzeny’s men, it was only a matter of time before the disguised commandos were discovered. The problems that Skorzeny initially had in finding English-speaking Germans now came back to haunt him. Entire commando teams were captured for their misunderstanding of American culture and slang. One team in an U.S. Army jeep pulled up to an American supply depot and asked for “petrol” instead of “gas,” resulting in the entire team being arrested on the spot.<sup>44</sup> One commando leader tried to impress American MPs with his knowledge of their slang. When one of the soldiers went to relieve himself, the German yelled, “Keep your pecker up!” Puzzled by the obvious British expression, further questioning led to the team’s capture.<sup>45</sup> Another German commando was sharing a drink of coffee with an American sergeant. Upon tapping the bottom of the American’s mess tin, the German said “Up your bottom!” instead of “Bottoms up!”<sup>46</sup> Yet another arrest of Skorzeny’s men came from the German misconception of American Army regulations. A commando team drove into an American-held town with four men riding in the jeep. Skorzeny later addressed this problem in his memoirs. “We had assumed these vehicles would carry the full complement of four, and constituted the jeep forces accordingly, and only later learned that this was very unusual and suspicious.”<sup>47</sup> Yet another seemingly minor detail ignored by Skorzeny came to plague the mission.

By December 20<sup>th</sup>, it was clear to Skorzeny that the German offensive had failed in creating the breakthrough Hitler promised. With more of his commandos being captured each

---

<sup>43</sup> Infield, *Skorzeny*, 88.

<sup>44</sup> Paterson, “Farce of Plot,” 15.

<sup>45</sup> Infield, *Skorzeny*, 90.

<sup>46</sup> Skorzeny, *Memoirs*, 174.

<sup>47</sup> Skorzeny, *Memoirs*, 171.

hour by advancing American forces, Skorzeny was desperate to salvage some sort of victory out of defeat. Ignoring Hitler's orders for him to stay behind German lines, Skorzeny ordered the remainder of his men to rendezvous with him at the small town of Engelsdorf. Skorzeny, who had yet to commit his plain-clothed unit, the 150<sup>th</sup> Panzer Brigade, decided to clear the road leading to Malmédy, in anticipation of 6<sup>th</sup> Panzer's attack on the city. As Skorzeny and his men advanced down the road, they ran headlong into the 120<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry, who put up a stubborn resistance and halted the German advance.<sup>48</sup> The Americans had reinforced the area and were now supported by artillery fire, which decimated Skorzeny's men.<sup>49</sup> Realizing the attack had failed, the remnants of the commandos and Skorzeny himself fell back behind German lines, knowing their actions had withered in the face of overwhelming odds.

Even after the German counterattack was soundly defeated, the U.S. Army were still reeling from the impact of Skorzeny's actions. The search for German spies in Paris continued well into February 1945.<sup>50</sup> The Allies continued to distribute the wanted posters, in hopes that they might catch the now infamous German commando. Yet, no information was ever discovered on Skorzeny's whereabouts. It was not until May 1945 that a tall and slender Austrian appeared out of the woods near Salzburg and surrendered to a private of the U.S. 30<sup>th</sup> Regiment.<sup>51</sup>

Although not initially believed to be who he claimed, Skorzeny was sent to Wiesbaden Prison, where he was interrogated on his participation in the rescue of Mussolini and his actions in the Ardennes. Chief among the questions was Skorzeny's role in the Malmédy Massacre, where over seventy American POWs were executed under Joachim Peiper's orders. It was

---

<sup>48</sup> Peter Elstob. *Hitler's Last Offensive* (New York, Macmillan, 1971), 125.

<sup>49</sup> Infield, *Skorzeny*, 131.

<sup>50</sup> Skorzeny, *Memoirs*, 166.

<sup>51</sup> Clearwater, "Manhunt," 61.



assumed by his American interrogators that due to the fact that Skorzeny's commandos were attached to the 6<sup>th</sup> SS Armored Division, that they must have had a part in the deaths of the Americans. Although Skorzeny repeatedly denied these claims, in September of 1946 he was placed on a plane bound for Nuremberg to await judgment by the Allies.

As his court date neared, he heard of the results of the trials which ended that October. Eleven of twenty one high-ranking Nazis accused at Nuremberg were sentenced to death and hanged.<sup>52</sup> The prospects for a light sentence did not look very probable for Skorzeny, but he was determined to disprove the claims against him. The U.S. Army appointed Robert Durst as Skorzeny's lawyer. Durst was a colonel in the U.S. Army and Skorzeny did not hold out much hope of getting a fair trial. However, Durst and even Skorzeny himself managed to collect several witnesses that would help their case.

The trial opened on August 18<sup>th</sup>, 1947 with chief prosecutor Abraham Rosenberg accusing the defendant of violating both the 1907 Hague Convention and the Geneva Convention.<sup>53</sup> Karl Radl, one of Skorzeny's former commandos was called to the stand and testified that his superior had acquired the designated uniforms at Friedenthal by ordering them stolen from American prisoners in German camps. Radl claimed that Skorzeny: "Forced his way into one of the POW camps and compelled the commandant at the point of a pistol to hand over British and American uniforms."<sup>54</sup> Following Radl, a former supply officer at Friedenthal stated that Skorzeny had requisitioned him for a supply of poison bullets to be used on Allied soldiers in the Ardennes. Fortunately for Skorzeny, he was able to smuggle in the suspected poison rounds, which turned out to be waterproof ammunition. This charge for the use of the

---

<sup>52</sup> Infield, *Skorzeny*, 136.

<sup>53</sup> United Nations War Crimes Commission, *The Trial of Otto Skorzeny and Others* (New York: The Law Reports of the Trials of War Criminals: 1949), 90.

<sup>54</sup> *Skorzeny Trial*, 90.

ammunition against Allied soldiers was immediately dropped. As the trial proceeded, Durst managed to cross-examine all of Rosenberg's witnesses and invalidate their claims. The charges against Skorzeny for his supposed participation in the Malmédy Massacre were also dropped when Joachim Peiper, during his own trial, claimed that Skorzeny had nothing to do with the executions.<sup>55</sup> For the moment, it appeared that the defense would secure Skorzeny's innocence. However, the prosecution had saved the most severe charge for last.

Rosenberg accused Skorzeny and his men of violating the 1907 Hague Convention, which forbid "improper use of enemy uniforms."<sup>56</sup> Consequently, Skorzeny was also charged with "Participating in the improper use of American uniforms and treacherously firing upon and killing members of the armed forces of the United States."<sup>57</sup> Several witnesses claimed that they knew of Skorzeny's intention to steal American and British uniforms, but could not support their testimonies. There was no reliable witness that proved Skorzeny ordered his men to fire upon Americans while disguised.

Rosenberg's strategy was beginning to unwind. Durst argued that the Hague Convention of 1907 was no longer relevant due to the advancements in military technology and strategy in the subsequent forty years. The prosecution had nothing with which to disprove this statement. As the trial approached a climax, Durst called in his "star" witness, British Commander Forrest Yeo-Thomas, the leader of an elite commando force during the war. When questioned, he claimed knowledge of Polish, Soviet, American and French soldiers using captured German uniforms to deceive the enemy. When asked why they would disguise themselves, he claimed "to bump to other guy off!"<sup>58</sup> Durst argued that because the Allies did not prosecute their

---

<sup>55</sup> *Skorzeny Trial*, 90.

<sup>56</sup> Weingarter, "Laws of War," 212.

<sup>57</sup> *Skorzeny Trial*, 91.

<sup>58</sup> Weingarter, "Laws of War," 218.

soldiers for doing the same actions as Skorzeny, they had no right to sentence the Austrian to death. Yeo-Thomas, in his final statement to the court said: “Skorzeny and his men acted as gentlemen and I would have been proud to have them under my command.”<sup>59</sup> And it is with this statement that the court may have made up their mind on Skorzeny’s innocence.

Within a few hours, the jury came back with the verdict: acquitted on all counts. Skorzeny and his men were free to go. A disgusted Rosenberg told one reporter: “I still think Skorzeny is the most dangerous man in Europe.”<sup>60</sup> Both Durst’s and Skorzeny’s strategies had paid off. If it was not for some final insights by Skorzeny himself, the trial might have resulted in him and his men hanging from the gallows. On the trial’s conclusion, *Star and Stripes* magazine printed the following headline that seemed to realize the significance of the verdict: “The Trial- Skorzeny Case May Alter War Law.”<sup>61</sup>

Although Skorzeny was only a SS Lieutenant Colonel, his role in the Ardennes Offensive shook the Allies to the core. Through a combination of sabotage and the spreading of rumors, he succeeded in creating confusion and fear in the American lines. Coupled with the German offensive, he wreaked havoc in the mindset of the American soldier on the front. His actions were so significant that they directly led to the imprisonment of Eisenhower and Montgomery, the highest Allied commanders. Even with the ultimate failure of *Operation Greif*, Skorzeny’s name would be imprinted in the Allies’ mind until the end of the war. The tenacity of the American prosecutors during his trial only serves to prove the threat they saw in Skorzeny, even at war’s end. The severity of the charges brought against him shows the dramatic impact Skorzeny had on the Allies. The sly SS officer managed to avoid the charges on several technicalities and convinced the jury of his innocence. It appears that the Allies’ desire for

---

<sup>59</sup> Infield, *Skorzeny*, 145.

<sup>60</sup> Infield, *Skorzeny*, 143.

<sup>61</sup> Weingarther, “Laws of War,” 220.

revenge hampered their ability to bring a solid case against Skorzeny. And when Skorzeny did walk out of the courtroom in September 1947, he had secured one last victory over his foes.

Otto Skorzeny's *Operation Greif* proved how subterfuge had become an effective tool in modern warfare. By exploiting the weaknesses of his enemies, both in wartime and peace, he established himself as a cunning and masterful strategist. And in doing so, he earned his title as "The Most Dangerous Man in Europe."

Adam Bednar

**Bibliography**

Butcher, Harry C. *My Three Years with Eisenhower*. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1946.

Butler, Rupert. *Black Angels: History of the Waffen SS*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979.

Clearwater, John. "The Manhunt for Yugoslavia's Tito Frustrated by Axis Divisions, SS Paratroopers and Germany's Commando Extraordinaire." *World War Two* 13, no. 6 (February 1999): 60.

Elstob, Peter. *Hitler's Last Offensive*. New York: Macmillan, 1971.

Infield, Glen. *Skorzeny-Hitler's Commando*. New York: St. Martin's.

Orfalea, Gregory. *Messengers of the Lost Battalion*. New York: Free Press, 1997.

Paterson, Tony. "Farce of the Plot to kidnap Eisenhower." *London Telegraph* (February 4, 2004), 15.

Sereny, Gitta. *Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth*. New York: Knopf, 1995.

Skorzeny, Otto. *Skorzeny's Special Missions- The Memoirs of the Most Dangerous Man in Europe*. London: Greenhill Books, 2006.

Weingartner, James J. "Otto Skorzeny and the Laws of War." *The Journal of Military History* 55, no. 2 (April 1991): 207-224.

United Nations War Crimes Commission, *Trial of Otto Skorzeny and Others*, 1947 (Washington, DC: 1949).