

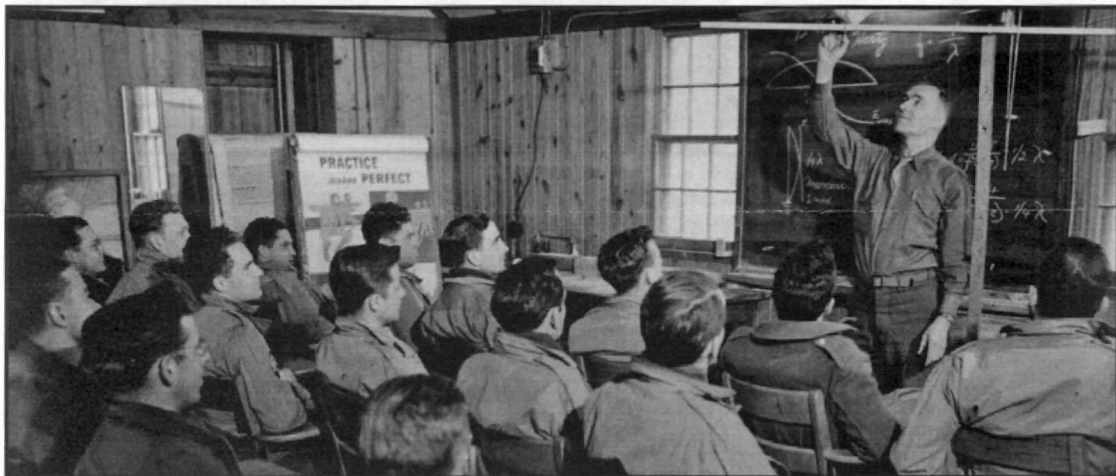
Prince William Forest Park

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

18100 Park Headquarters Road
Triangle, VA 22172
www.nps.gov/prwi



Spies in the Park: The Office of Strategic Services



OSS recruits learn to use radio equipment at "Area C", the communications training camp located at today's cabin camps 1 and 4. Photo courtesy: National Archives and Records Administration.

Overview

From 1936 to 1942, underprivileged youth of metropolitan Washington, D.C. enjoyed the natural beauty and health benefits of summer camp at Chopawamsic Recreational Demonstration Area (now Prince William Forest Park). But World War II changed this quiet retreat built for children into a secret military installation with guard towers, patrol dogs, and nameless recruits on their last stop toward making history. It was not until after the war was over in 1945 that childhood laughter was again heard echoing in this forest.

The OSS is Born

Before 1941, the United States had no single agency responsible for intelligence. Instead, diplomats, soldiers, and others gathered information on sensitive topics during their normal activities. When World War II broke out in Europe in 1939, U.S. intelligence operations were splintered among nearly a dozen different federal agencies, many of which were suspicious bureaucratic rivals accustomed to competing with each other for the past two decades between the wars.

In July of 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Coordinator of Information, which was soon after renamed the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). OSS Director Colonel Bill Donovan quickly faced the daunting task of training America's first non-military intelligence operation. Using British models, his own highly decorated military background, and his strong personality, Donovan and his staff searched for the perfect locations to train their new recruits.

Spies in the Woods

In early in 1942, Colonel Donovan's scouting staff determined that Catoctin Mountain Park in southern Maryland and Chopawamsic Park (now Prince William Forest Park) would make excellent sites for the paramilitary training camps of the OSS's Special Operations Branch. The hilly 15,000 acre Chopawamsic Park with its 5 cabin camps was selected. The cabin camps were broken up into two training areas - "Area A" for Advanced Paramilitary Training and "Area C" for Communications Branch training.

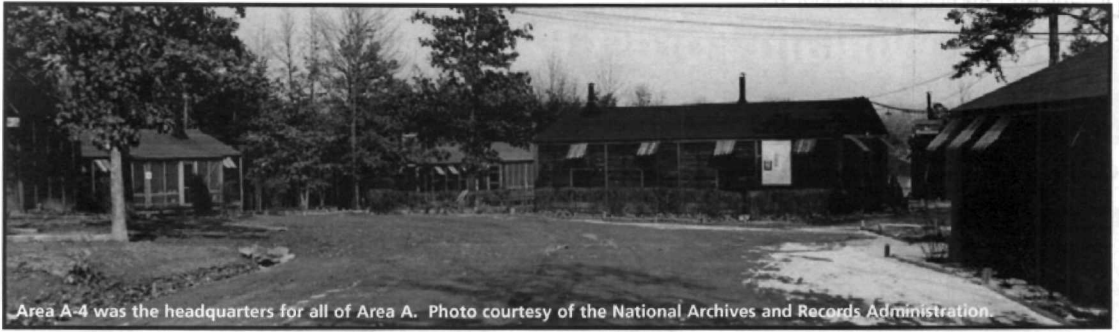
As barbed wire and guard dogs appeared, rumors began flying of camps for conscientious objectors or German POWs. Ira Lykes, the park manager who lived on the Chopawamsic grounds, was given strict instructions to remain silent regarding this new use of the park. During the half century that followed World War II, it was the common knowledge of park staff and area residents that the "military" or the "army" occupied the park during the war. The use of the park by the OSS, and the important role Chopawamsic played in America's victory during World War II was only recently re-discovered.

A Note About Safety

Varying levels of evidence were left behind from the days of the OSS training camps. Many of the OSS training exercises used live ammunition and their detonation training was conducted on farm houses that were left standing from the early days of the park. There have been many surveys of the park land that have removed undetonated bullets or shells left behind by the OSS to create a safe environment for off trail hikers.

However, if you should come across any visible evidence of OSS activities here in the park, please contact a park ranger and do not attempt to collect the item. Not only is it illegal to collect any artifacts found in Prince William Forest Park, but your safety is of our utmost concern.





Area A-4 was the headquarters for all of Area A. Photo courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

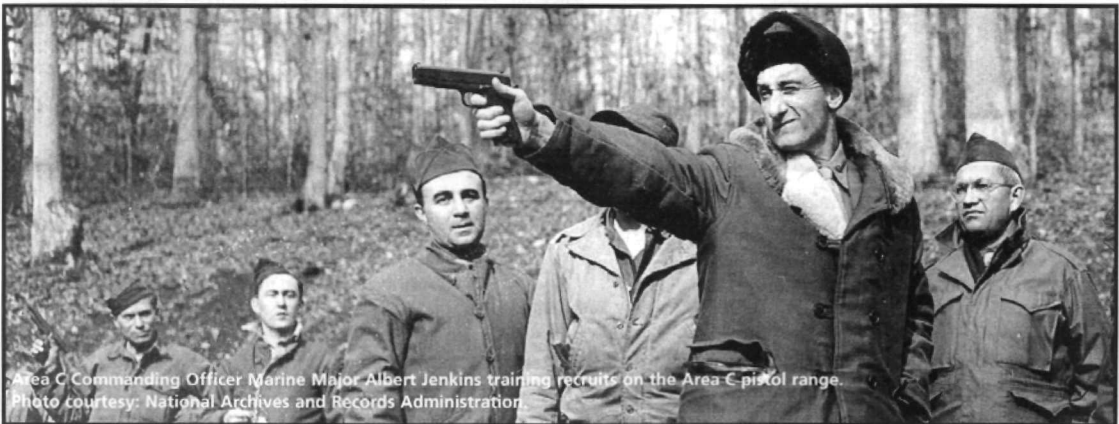
Area A

Area A consisted of the current day Cabin Camps 2, 5, and 3 and the park maintenance yard. Area A-4 (shown below) was the command and maintenance center for all four subcamps, and it sometimes also served as a training camp for advanced Special Operations. A-4 had two large classrooms, holding 50 students each as they learned from lectures and training films about fieldcraft, weaponry, and demolitions, plus a smaller classroom for 25, where recruits learned code.

Area A-2 (current day Cabin Camp 2) was first opened in April 1942 for advanced training in Special Operations. Later, a course was offered there in basic military training beginning in spring 1944. A-2 was also used as a training area for Operational Groups (OG) in 1943-44 or for a holding area for personnel awaiting their assignment overseas. The kinds of military training facilities at A-2 included a structure built specifically for the OSS, a 20 by 40-foot indoor pistol range (call the pistol house). Nearby, engineers also constructed an outdoor pistol range, a submachine gun range, and a 150-yard, jogging-type obstacle course. Nearby, there was also a map and fieldcraft training area. In the first part of 1944, A-2 was being used as a basic training camp for all OSS military personnel who had not had basic training (the Army required that any army personnel sent into overseas war theaters have had basic training including familiarity with weapons).

Cabin Camp 3 became OSS Area A-3 in late 1943 to provide trainees from the Special Operations and Morale Operations (psychological warfare). The several of the camp craft lodges were turned into classrooms holding 40 men and the men also enjoyed a recreational hall and post exchange, a dining hall and infirmary. One small building was converted to a code room.

Area A-5 served as a "finishing school," basically a holding area for OSS personnel finished with their training and awaiting assignment overseas. The purpose of the finishing school was largely to keep them in top physical and mental condition, and consequently, much of the activity was in physical exercise, weapons use, and field exercises. There were a number of military facilities erected near Area A-5. These included an extensive firing range for rifles and submachine guns (a 275 yard range with 20 silhouette targets of the advanced, pop-up type), convenient crater and wood demolition ranges, a demolition area for using charges on steel objects; and east of Area A-5, a map and fieldcraft training area. For outdoor and indoor pistol practice, students from A-5 had access to the pistol house and outdoor pistol range and other firing ranges at A-2 only half a mile away. For the Special Operations trainees, the lake was used for practice in clandestine water crossings and boat landings.



Area C Commanding Officer Marine Major Albert Jenkins training recruits on the Area C pistol range. Photo courtesy: National Archives and Records Administration.

Area C

In 1942, Cabin Camp 1 and 4 were selected to become the Communications Branch training camp, or "Area C." With a total capacity of 357 officers and enlisted men, each cabin camp had an administrative building, a lodge, and a dining hall as well as groups of cabins each clustered around an open area and a washroom/toilet house. At that time, communications was part of the Special Operations Branch. They would receive nine to thirteen weeks of fundamentals of electricity and radio, Morse code, cipher, radio set maintenance, under cover procedures, field security, weapons, close combat, and field problems.

Area C-1 (or cabin camp 1) appears to have served as the headquarters, accommodations, and maintenance facilities. However, C-1 was also used for a variety of training purposes from brief communications training for agents in

operational branches such as SO, SI, or MO, to a basic army training course, to a lecture series on the Far East, to service as holding area for men awaiting further assignment, whether returning from abroad or awaiting shipment overseas.

Camp C-4 was the main training facility at Area C. It was known as the Communication School, and its students were men who had shown a definite aptitude for radio work. At Area C, SO agent learned Morse code, secret ciphers, and clandestine radio techniques that they would use when they were sent behind enemy lines to facilitate the work of espionage, sabotage, and guerrilla leadership that Donovan envisioned.