Catoctin Mountain Park

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Catoctin Mountain Park

The OSS on Catoctin Mountain

With the entrance of the United States into the Second World War in December 1941, the face of Catoctin Mountain changed drastically. What was once a recreational destination for the public had become the US Government's tool for clandestine warfare. Starting in the Spring of 1942 the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) established a training camp on the mountain and was tasked with preparing operatives for secret missions behind enemy lines – from intelligence gathering to sabotage, and armed combat to aiding allied resistance.

Creation of the OSS

Following the December 7, 1941 attack on the US Navy's base of operations at Pearl Harbor, the United States declared war on the Empire of Japan. As the nation entered the Second World War, the US Government worked to establish what would become the country's first centralized intelligence agency, known as the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). The OSS was created with the sole purpose of disrupting military operations conducted by Japan, Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, and the Axis powers at large, and placed under the purview of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Through the acts of sabotage, propaganda creation and distribution, intelligence gathering, and guidance of resistance and guerrilla forces, the OSS prepared to wage a secret war overseas. With the highly decorated Colonel William Donovan heading the agency, the eventual 13,000 operatives of the OSS led a secret war against enemies of the Allied forces.



William "Wild Bill" Donovan (LOC)

Area B

As the Second World War moved into 1942 the OSS began recruitment in earnest. Training grounds needed to be established in remote forested areas to maintain the secret operations. Sites such as the 10,000-acre Catoctin Mountain Recreational Demonstration Area (RDA), now Catoctin Mountain Park, and Chopawamsic RDA, now Prince William Forest, were chosen for this purpose, in addition to these lands being federally owned and operated by the National Park Service. While Chopawamsic was designated as Areas "A" and "C," Catoctin RDA was dubbed "Area B."

In April 1942 the first of the OSS operatives began to arrive, with their main camp, known as "Area B-2," established at Camp Greentop. The wartime expansion of the camp and its facilities allowed for the accommodation of 149 officers and enlisted men. Camp headquarters were located at "Area B-5," also known as Camp Round Meadow. The camp, which had been built and occupied by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression, would serve as a home base for the OSS until 1945.



Camp Greentop Cabin (NPS Photo/R. Condon)

Catoctin at War

During their training at Area B, OSS recruits were trained in the art of survival, foreign languages, hand-to-hand combat, demolitions, and navigating dangerous enemy terrain. One of the earlier training programs on Catoctin Mountain consisted of an obstacle course near Owens Creek, along which recruits had to suspend themselves from a rope and wire while carrying their full packs. Additionally, a demolition course had been established between Areas B-2 and B-5. Recruits would move through this course, situated in a wooded terrain, amidst the detonation of small explosive charges. At least one recruit, Frank Gleason, sustained injuries from these dangerous exercises. Before the construction of a small arms range at B-5, recruits were sent to nearby Fort Ritchie for rifle and machine gun training.

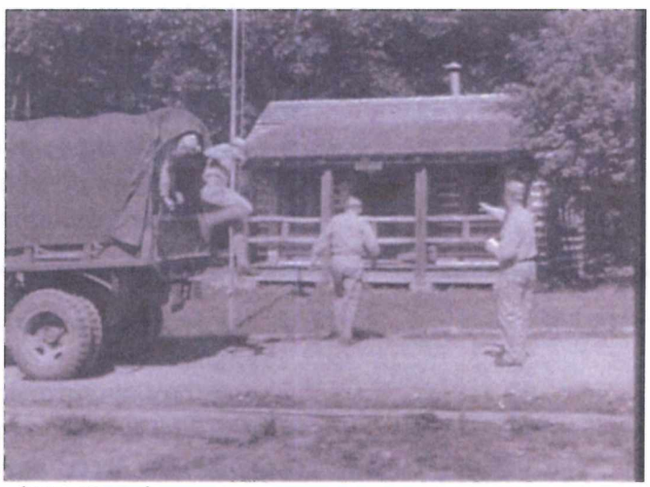
Among the most notorious, and expensive, training facilities at Catoctin Mountain was the "House of Horrors." This close-quarters combat zone was meant to portray realistic combat conditions and consisted of trap doors, unstable flooring, fellow trainees portraying enemy soldiers, and often disorienting darkness. The stress-inducing scenario manufactured within the "House of Horrors" gave recruits a realistic sense of what they would experience overseas. One veteran recalled his experience with a "masked instructor at his elbow, he would move with drawn revolver through a cleverly designed scare house that rivaled any Coney Island Chamber of Horrors... a concealed phonograph would grind out the rumble of guttural German voices around a poker table, the clink of glasses and slap of cards. A turn of the corridor would reveal a suddenly lighted dummy dressed in the uniform of a Nazi storm trooper, confronting him...Burst open the door [and] fire; fire again."

Armed with the training and tools they received at Catoctin Mountain, OSS agents moved on to serve in Japanese-controlled India, the jungles of Burma, French North Africa, Italy, and Nazi-occupied Europe. Among their many accolades was the support their provided Allied troops during the June 1944 invasion of Normandy.

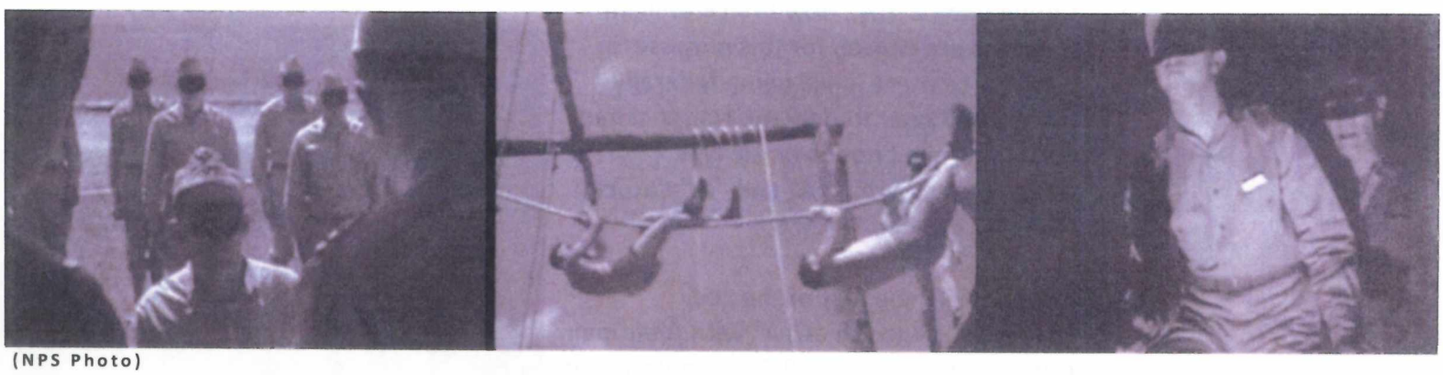
An estimated 20,000 OSS agents served overseas, while the exact amount who had infiltrated behind enemy lines is unknown. Although research into the OSS and their clandestine campaigns is ongoing, their legacy is carried on through the persistence of democracy, through veterans and their descendants, and even through the creation of their successor, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).



(NPS Photo)



(NPS Photo)



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