

SERGEANTS GAETANO ROSSI AND CAESAR J. DARAIO

COMPANY A, 2677TH REGIMENT (PROVISIONAL) - "DONOVAN'S DEVILS"

Sergeants Gaetano "Tom" Rossi and Caesar J. Daraio were born to Italian immigrant parents and were raised in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, respectively. They were drafted into the United States Army in early 1942, just a few weeks after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Their first months in the Army were spent in basic training.

At the same time, General Donovan was formulating a plan for recruiting, training, and inserting guerrilla units into hostile territory. Donovan saw the ethnic diversity of our country as a unique asset in its fight against the Axis powers. He understood that no country in the world had more citizens with knowledge of other countries. The key ingredient for the success of his plan were first- and second-generation Americans of Italian, French, Norwegian, Greek, Yugoslav, German, Austrian, and other ethnic backgrounds who would form the nucleus of indigenous resistance units.

They were organized in small fighting units known as Operational Groups (OGs). They were similar in structure and style to today's US Army Special Forces. The OGs operated deep in enemy territory wearing their uniforms like regular soldiers. They dropped by air or sea, often blind and in the dead of night, and then proceeded to operate for days, weeks, and even months, hundreds of miles away from the closest Allied troops. They were men of action who created havoc in the enemy's rear, disrupted communication and supply lines, organized resistance, and rescued Allied prisoners of war, downed air crews and nurses stranded in German-held territory.

The Allied landings in Italy planned for 1943 made the recruiting of Italian-speaking OGs a top priority. OSS recruiters canvased divisions of the Second and Third Armies for volunteers willing to perform hazardous duty overseas. Rossi and Daraio were among two thousand applicants who answered the call. They went through a rigorous screening process that assessed the candidates' physical abilities and military skills. Candidates were evaluated based on their emotional and mental stability, as well as good judgement, which were considered paramount for the success of operations behind enemy lines. This multi-faceted screening, which included psychological profiling, remains the foundation for the selection of Special Forces operators today.

Rossi and Daraio were among the seventeen officers and 127 enlisted men who passed the screening process successfully – about seven percent of the initial pool of applicants. They reported to an OSS training facility (Area F) located on the grounds of the Congressional Country Club outside Washington, D.C. On May 14, 1943, they were formally activated as Company A, 2677th Regiment (Provisional). The Italian OGs spend several weeks training in advanced infantry techniques and small unit operations. Around this time, the men began calling themselves "Donovan's Devils," a name that stuck within the OSS and became synonymous with the OGs.

The Italian OGs arrived in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations in September 1943 and engaged immediately in a number of operations supporting the Allied landings in Salerno and the broader campaign in Italy. The OGs sustained their first casualties in pitched battles against the Sturmbrigade Reichsführer-SS and the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division in Cor-

sica, which resulted in the liberation of the island on October 4, 1943. Corsica was the first French department to be freed from German occupation eight months before D-Day.

Rossi and Daraio settled in Bastia and L'ile-Rousse in Corsica with the rest of the OGs. From these outposts hundreds of miles north of the Allied frontlines at Monte Cassino and Anzio, the OGs organized and conducted reconnaissance, intelligence collection, and raiding operations against German positions along the Ligurian coast. They embarked in the uncharted waters of unconventional warfare eager to prove themselves worthy of the trust that Donovan had placed in them. Along with successes came failures, the most painful of which was the loss of fifteen men of the GINNY mission. They were captured at the end of March 1944 in their attempt to blow up a railway tunnel on the Genoa-La Spezia line. The German commander in the area invoked Hitler's directive to execute all captured saboteurs without trial. The OGs were shot summarily and buried in a common grave. To this day, Rossi and Daraio recall with trepidation the gloom that fell on the OGs upon hearing "Axis Sally" on German radio read the names of their friends. After the war, the German general was tried, convicted, and executed in the first war crimes trial, setting an important precedent for the subsequent Nuremberg Trials.

The contribution of the Italian OGs to the war effort reached its pinnacle during the dogged battles of the Italian Resistance with the Germans in Northern Italy between 1944 and 1945. In October 1944, the Allied troops halted their advance north at the heavily fortified Gothic Line and were not able to resume the offensive until the end of April 1945. During those months, several OG units were deployed in the Apennines and the Alpine mountains of Northern Italy to coordinate the supply, training, and equipment of thousands of Italian partisans from all political affiliations who were determined to harass the Germans, despite the harsh weather conditions and the barbarous reprisals against the civilian population. During this campaign, Rossi and Daraio scheduled drops and packed thousands of tons of weapons, ammunition, food, clothes, and other supplies that ensured the survival and maintained the fighting spirit of the Italian partisans and their forward-deployed OG comrades.

Many statistics are available to quantify the impact of the OGs during World War II. Perhaps the most telling one is high ratio of the OGs killed in action. Although the OGs accounted for less than five percent of OSS personnel, they sustained over twenty percent of its casualties. Often overlooked is the role of the OGs in securing the peace after the war. Their knowledge of the local language, culture, and customs allowed OGs like Rossi and Daraio to create an initial buffer among the antagonist political forces after the cessation of hostilities. The OGs took active steps to disarm the partisan units, which prevented a civil war from erupting in the aftermath of the German surrender.

By Albert Lulushi, author of *Donovan's Devils: OSS Commandos Behind Enemy Lines-Europe, World War II*



Tom Rossi



Caesar Daraio (I)

It was late January 1944 and Tech Sergeant Gaetano "Tom" Rossi of Newark, NJ listened intently to the man now addressing his outfit. There may have been some word that General Donovan was in the area but none of the enlisted men knew anything about it and it was a real surprise when he took the time to speak with them. Standing in the small dining hall the legendary "Wild Bill" Donovan, the originator of the Office of Strategic Service (OSS), gave them a small brief on the current situation in Anzio and acknowledged their contribution in the early phases of the Italian campaign.

Designated the 2671st Special Reconnaissance Battalion, Unit A, OSS Italian Operational Group (OG), these volunteers, all of Italian heritage, were part of a unit that would be the forerunners to the modern day US Army Special Forces. Specifically selected and trained to be dropped deep behind enemy lines to organize and lead Italian partisans on the most hazardous of missions these men were anxious to prove their worth. Now headquartered in a small hotel in Ile Rousse, Corsica, the Italian OGs, nicknamed "Donovan's Devils" had executed an array of special operations to include the liberation of Corsica and the continued harassment of the German 90th Panzer Division. There had also been daring missions like Operation Simcol. A Joint OSS and British Special Air Service (SAS) team that parachuted into the southeast of the peninsula to recover allied prisoners released by the Italians upon their surrender.

But now, Donovan was talking about Anzio, and rightfully so. Used only sparingly in Sicily and Salerno, it was during the Anzio landing that the Italian OGs of the OSS were able to truly demonstrate their strategic value by providing vital intelligence to allied command about German troop movements. This crucial information allowed the allies' time to organize and resist a Wehrmacht counter-attack on the beachhead. As the General continued to speak, few in the room realized that plans were already being formulated for one of the most audacious missions of the war. In just a few short months many in that very room would have paid the ultimate sacrifice.

As the war in Italy progressed, one of the OSS's most important tasks was to cut vital German supply lines that reinforced the Gustav and later the Gothic Line. The railway that constituted the main German supply line to the Anzio beachhead and Cassino fronts was in a very mountainous region. In many places, long sections of rail were covered by tunnels and the curving track made high altitude bombing attempts by the Army Air Force ineffective. The solution would be the OSS mission code named Ginny. The Ginny

mission, the first to use an entire OG unit of 15 men, was to infiltrate 250 miles behind enemy lines and use explosives to destroy critical points of the rail tunnel complex 15 miles northwest of La Spezia harbor.

Ginny II was launched on the night of March 22, 1944. The men, dressed in field uniforms, were again transported by PT boats to a debarkation point where they transferred to three rubber boats. As the team paddled toward shore, they struggled to ascertain their position relative to the objective which was south and east of Framura Station. Their starting point was determined from the radar carried on one of the PT boats with a secondary means of communication being radio transmission. As it turned out, German torpedo boats aggressively patrolling the coast forced the PT boats out of the area and radio transmission was lost. The team was forced to execute a visual approach with no way to calculate the ocean current.

Not knowing their exact position, they hit land and sent out a recon team to locate the tunnel. Because of the treacherous terrain, the recon team was unable to pin point the objective before dawn. According to plan they were to hide and attempt the mission on the following night. The rubber boats and explosives were hidden and the team found an unused barn to occupy as a hide site. The next morning the detachment commander made contact with a local farmer who supplied food and was able to help them locate the tunnel.

On the night of the 23rd the team prepared to execute the mission but was unable to make the necessary prearranged notifications to the PT boats. Unbeknownst to the commandos, the PT boats again encountered heavy enemy activity and returned to base. The team was again forced into hiding.

On the morning of March 24, an Italian fisherman found the cached rubber boats and notified the fascist authorities in the area. A mixed group of soldiers of the fascist Socialist Republic of Italy and German troops sealed off the area and located the barn. After a brief firefight all 15 OGs were captured and taken to nearby La Spezia, where the German 135th Fortress Brigade had its headquarters.

The interrogation revealed enough elements of the plan to fall under Hitler's Fuhrerbefehl Commando Order which specified immediate death without trial for anyone engaging in sabotage or other action behind enemy lines whether in uniform or not.

To execute uniformed prisoners of war was a direct violation of the Geneva Convention but any request of stay by some of the German commanders was denied. General Dostler ordered the prisoners executed, and on the morning of March 26, the 15 OGS, still in U.S. Army uniforms, were executed and buried in a mass grave.

Weeks later still operating out of Corsica, Gaetano Rossi and John Maniaci along with other members of the unit were listening to Axis Sally, the European version of Tokyo Rose. Axis Sally offered the only radio station that played American music if you could ignore the propaganda. In between her continuous request for surrender and references to their sweet hearts at home having a good time with other men she suddenly said that a group of soldiers were captured by the Germans and had been annihilated. She went on to say sarcastically that this must have been the long awaited second front. Not until she began to list the name, next of kin, address and religion of each of the men did they realize that they were all members of the ill fated Ginny mission.

The details were not to be known until after the war. Gradually the specifics were uncovered and General Dostler was captured and brought to trial before an American Military Commission in Rome on October 8, 1945. His defense of following orders was rejected. The Commission found General Dostler guilty and he was shot by a firing squad on December 1, 1945. Anton Dostler was the first German General brought to trial and executed after the war. This case was to become a precedent for the Nuremberg war crime trials of German generals, officials and Nazi leaders beginning in November, 1945.

The men of "Donovan Devils" always a tight group remain so to this day. Although their numbers are now quite small the surviving members stay in contact and up until just recently maintained yearly re-unions. One thing is certain there is none among them who would ever forget the sacrifice of the members of the Ginny mission which would always remain on their minds and in their hearts.

The fifteen men of the Ginny II mission:

1st Lt. Vincent J. Russo, Montclair, NJ
Natick, MA

Sgt Alfred L. De Flumeri,

T/5 Liberty J. Tremonte, Westport, CT
Southport, CT

T/5 Joseph M. Farrell,

T/5 Salvatore DiSclafani, Brooklyn, NY
NY

T/5 Angelo Sirico, Brooklyn,

T/5 Thomas N. Savino, Brooklyn, NY
Poughkeepsie, NY

T/5 John J. Leone,

T/5 Joseph Noia, NY, NY
NY

1st. Lt. Paul J. Traficante, NY,

Sgt. Dominick Mauro, NY, NY
Island, NY

T/5 Rosario Squatrito, Staten

T/5 Joseph A. Libardi, Stockbridge, MA
PA

T/Sgt. Livio Vieceli, Manor,

T/5 Santoro Calcara, Detroit, MI

Authors:

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Contributing interviewees by:

John Maniaci and Caesar Daraio former members of the 2671st Special Reconnaissance Battalion, Unit A, OSS Italian Operations Groups.