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The Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency. By R. Harris Smith. Illustrated. 458 pp. Berkeley: University of California Press. $10.95.

By CORNELIUS RYAN

Ever since the Greeks filled a wooden horse with soldiers and presented it to the Trojans, the world has been fascinated by the deceptive methods of espionage and counter intelligence. The craft of intelligence, by its very nature, is so secret that clandestine activities are cloaked either in the ridiculous and the absurd or the sublime and the practical. In this book, R. Harris Smith, who worked briefly as a research analyst for the C.I.A. and now lectures in political science at the University of California's Extension Division, seems to have discovered only the first two. Perhaps that's all he was meant to find. It would appear that old O.S.S. men never die; their stories simply get better while their secrets remain intact.

The fault is not really Smith's. It is doubtful that anyone can write the true and authentic "Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency," the wartime Office of Strategic Services.

I have some reason to know. Back in the early sixties, as part of a research project, I was granted unusual access to the papers, files and diaries of the late Maj. Gen. William "Wild Bill" Donovan, founder of the wartime Office of Strategic Services — the country's first real intelligence agency and the forerunner of C.I.A. I was astonished at the size of the collection. To catalog Donovan's voluminous papers required the full-time services of a trained staff for over two years, and even this fascinating cache did not include the real body of still highly sensitive O.S.S. records. Stepping even briefly into Donovan's mysterious world was enough to convince me of the awesome task awaiting the historian who might, one day, write the O.S.S. official history. Indeed, because of the many secret faces of intelligence itself, to reach the truth, to separate fact from fiction, the historian might well need as many trained researchers as there were operators in the O.S.S.

Donovan's diaries were cryptic, designed to baffle. A single entry written in his neat handwriting might read: "Operation Scorpion began today" — and nothing else! To uncarth the story of Operation Scorpion might require the assimilation of papers from perhaps 100 unrelated file drawers of material. Compounding the security compartmentalization even further, each operative in those files had a code name. To understand what had occurred demanded months of frustrating reading — only to find that even then one might never learn the total truth. But Mr. Smith has clearly fallen foul of the very first law of reportage: Believe nothing unless it can be corroborated by others and substantiated by definitive background records.

Unfortunately, because the author was denied access to official papers, he was forced, for the most part, to rely on contemporary espionage and intelligence accounts — and, with the exception of perhaps half-a-dozen valuable works, there is probably no body of World War II literature so distorted and misleading. Much of it was meant to be so. Those World War II intelligence agents who wrote of their exploits after the conflict deliberately falsified names, dates and places and, often, the very nature of their assignments. To act otherwise might gravely have imperiled agents still in the field.

Mr. Smith has drawn on much of this literature, repeating in many instances old inaccuracies. One of the most prominent concerns Allen Dulles, the late director of C.I.A., who, during World War II, was undoubtedly Donovan's most brilliant agent. Before the war, Smith writes, Dulles in conjunction with his legal work at Sullivan & Cromwell "met the élite of German industry — the same men who financed and actively supported the Nazi dictatorship. He and a future O.S.S. aide, Russian emigré Valerie Lada-Mocarski, also sat on the Board of Directors of the American branch of the powerful Schroeder banking house." The German parent firm, the author added, "was headed by a scar-faced Prussian baron who served as a general in the SS, Hitler's élite guard." Smith has got the story only half right. Dulles was a director of the J. Henry Schroeder Banking Corporation in New York — which had no connection whatsoever with the German Schroeder Bank.

Elsewhere he [illegible] that, in 1941, "unaware that a top secret Naval intelligence team had broken the Japanese military code, O.S.S. men in Portugal secretly entered the Japanese Embassy and stole a copy of the enemy's code book." Discovering the theft, the Japanese, according to Smith, "promptly changed their ciphers. Washington was left without a vital source of information and the Joint Chiefs of Staff were irate." Again, Smith is only half right. The O.S.S. did not burgle the Japanese Embassy in Portugal, but in Lisbon they obtained a few pages of a "low level" Japanese cipher. This cipher was not the all-important code that the Navy cryptoanalysts had cracked. The fact is the United States continued to take advantage of the Japanese codes for the entire war.

To augment his research, the author has drawn on the reminiscences of some 200 O.S.S. veterans — of whom there are no more entertaining storytellers alive. How many of these intelligence agents, without benefit of after-action reports, operational policy directives or, indeed, their own transmitted messages, could accurately recall after 25 years what happened on any specific operation? How many would own up that their tales grow in exaggeration and importance with each yearly O.S.S. veterans' dinner? To them it is usually all good fun. The outsider must learn to take it that way, too. But did, in fact, the highly trained deceptors deliberately deceive? There are indications that the author was left short on detail of various missions, for many of the anecdotes consist of tag lines without a beginning or a middle and the reader is left frustrated, wondering what actually took place. "Every eccentric schemer," writes Smith, "with a harebrained plan for secret operations (from phosphorescent foxes to incendiary bats) would find a sympathetic ear in Donovan's office."

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Cornelius Ryan is the author of two volumes about World War II: "The Longest Day" and "The Last Battle." He is currently working on a third volume entitled, "A Bridge Too Far."