

Otto Skorzeny, Head of Hitler Force

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Otto Skorzeny, an SS officer who melded politics and guerrilla operations as Adolf Hitler's Chief of Special Forces in the last two years of World War II, died Saturday in Madrid, according to members of his family.

The man who had rescued Benito Mussolini from a mountaintop prison after Italy's capitulation and later kidnaped Adm. von Horthy, the Hungarian regent, from his Budapest castle, was 67 years old. He had been hospitalized with a lung ailment for months.

Mr. Skorzeny, who became a legendary adventurer at the close of the war, had been living in the Spanish capital for less than a year, an engineering consultant since 1949.

However, the 4-foot-4-inch former Austrian officer, easily recognizable by the duelling scars that etched his face from left cheekbone to the square point of his large jaw, traveled extensively in Africa and South America.

Rumor in Europe, and among pro-Nazi Germans in Argentina, connected Mr. Skorzeny first with an escape organization for former SS officers, and later with recruiting organizations dealing with European mercenaries on hire to African governments.

Mr. Skorzeny became a favorite example for military analysts fascinated with the political use of force as international political terrorism spread in the late 1960s. But in his war memoirs and in two sympathetic biographies, Mr. Skorzeny was portrayed as an honorable officer, faithful to the Prussian military code.

The factual details of Mr. Skorzeny's life before and after his wartime career as an officer in the Waffen SS are dim. Born in Vienna on June 12, 1908, he joined the Austrian Nazi party while an engineering student in 1930.

Even some of his wartime exploits are shrouded in a murk that sometimes smells of collusion or cooperation by Allied intelligence agencies.

For example, the Austrian command of the 1st SS Panzer Division, which fought in the Ardennes Forest offensive in 1944. Some were dressed in American or British uniforms. It was widely rumored that Mr. Skorzeny's aim was to assassinate Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, and the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, was hospitalized in a Paris headquarters for a week while MPs combed the streets for soldiers without passes.

When he was captured by the Seventh U. S. Army in Austria on May 12, 1945, newspaper reports recalled the king's assassination. It was more at the time of the Battle of the Bulge.

One day later, V. S. Jitski, Soviet colonel, was quoted as saying Mr. Skorzeny had never planned to kill Gen. Eisenhower, that the rumors were part of a propaganda campaign.



OTTO SKORZENY

and that Mr. Skorzeny had not even accompanied his troops in the Ardennes infiltration.

In 1947, Otto Skorzeny was arraigned before a U. S. military court at Dachau along with former fellow officers, and charged with torturing and murdering American soldiers whose uniforms were later used in the Ardennes. The charges of torture and murder were dropped by the prosecution.

Mr. Skorzeny was acquitted of any wrongdoing in ordering his men to wear American uniforms behind the lines. IAP Wing Commander Forrest Yeo-Thomas, a British irregular warfare specialist known to the French Resistance, he testified in the Austrian defense, saying he had done that same thing against German regular forces.

Released to German authority, his pending denazification trial at Darmstadt, Mr. Skorzeny escaped in 1948. Years later he told a biographer he had done so on Yeo-Thomas' advice.

Mr. Skorzeny next turned up in public in Argentina, one of the South American clearing houses for escaping Nazi officers. Germans living there told reporters in Buenos Aires years later that he was an independent but unsophisticated man in political belief and still an adventurer by temperament.

It was the Austrian and his taste for adventure that lured him from garrison life as an ill-health-weakened officer stationed in Berlin after service in Yugoslavia and Russia. He was attached, as a captain, to SS Special Forces in 1943 and in July met Hitler for the first time.

"I had to use great self-control not to take a step forward (from) the rank of fellow officers for I was tending to take in his every gesture," Mr. Skorzeny wrote of that meeting. He led on the basis of two private motorcycle tours of Italy. Mr. Skorzeny was assigned the task of tracking down Mussolini, who had been smuggled into secret confinement by Marshal Badoglio's Italian government, and rescuing him.

He found the Italian Fascist leader on a plateau 6,000 feet

up the side of Gran Sasso, a mountain in the Abruzzi province of the Apennine range that runs like a spine along the eastern edge of central Italy.

Flying from a base just north of Rome that had been partially destroyed by Allied bombers as part of the preparation for the Salerno landings on Sept. 8, 1943, Mr. Skorzeny landed his troops on Sept. 12 in gliders on a triangular patch of grass and rock outside the circular cement hotel.

The German overpowered Italian police guards and Mr. Skorzeny stuffed the ailing Duce between his knees in a tiny glider's cockpit. Plans for the pilot and two passengers were aborted by dropping over a cliff edge.

Decorated and promoted by Hitler, Mr. Skorzeny is shown in a contemporary photo standing head and shoulders above his small, stooped leader, but cultivating a wispy copy of Hitler's famous square mustache.

Most postwar reconstructions of the closing months of Hitler's Third Reich have held out Mr. Skorzeny among the ablest supporters who advocated leading Germany and Austria into a guerrilla fight against the Allies.

He directed the program of sabotage that blew away spans from the Symonau bridges over the lower Rhine and at the last commanded a platoon

of volunteers west of Berlin.

Whatever he did after the war, other than tending real estate and business interests in Madrid, that were never clearly defined, he did not become an undisputed part of the public record.

He accompanied a mission from the Krupp business empire to Argentina in 1955 because of his "local knowledge." He traveled to South Africa in the mid-1960s, his defending Belgian attorney in Kalanga and to France.

In March 1967, Mr. Skorzeny's marriage to Hilma Schacht's niece, the Francis Schacht, was announced. He had married in the past to the sister of Hitler's civilian economic minister, was married to Mrs. Skorzeny a second time.

Although he was known to visit West Germany and was spotted in Hamburg, he currently resides in the protection of agents. He might have been an operative of the SS office that returned to the Argentine. He was tried and acquitted of murder in a Yugoslav court in 1953 for a 1944 assassination attempt on a Yugoslav leader. He was also tried and acquitted of murder in a Yugoslav court in 1953 for a 1944 assassination attempt on a Yugoslav leader. He was also tried and acquitted of murder in a Yugoslav court in 1953 for a 1944 assassination attempt on a Yugoslav leader.

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