

Book review of No Bugles for Spies by Robert Hayden Alcorn

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CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM

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NO BUGLES FOR SPIES: Tales of the OSS. By Robert Hayden Alcorn. (New York: David McKay. 1962. 209 pp. \$3.95.)

No facet of the human psyche is more strange and wonderful than the one associated with remembering. What things does it record sharply and durably? What things distortedly? What things not at all? What years of one's life does it store in discrete stacks? What in a disorderly jumble? What things that happened to someone else and what things that never happened at all does it come to register, vividly and in great detail, as one's very own? If you happen to have served in OSS and if you now read Mr. Alcorn's putative memoir, you too will find yourself ruminating about the mysteries of memory. You, even as I, will conclude that the book is a good part fiction and the rest a highly inaccurate reminiscence-which, incidentally, is contrived to do no harm whatever to the reputation of the reminiscencer.

Mr. Alcorn's account of his being hired by the Coordinator of Information in November 1941 is a case in point. It seems that General Donovan, hearing of his availability, sent him to be interviewed by a number of the branch chiefs. The interviews took place as ordered, and when Mr. Alcorn returned and told of the secrets that he had inadvertently picked up in their course, the General was mightily impressed. He turned to James Murphy, one of his personal aides, and said, ". . . 'And Jimmy this is what I want. I want all potential agent personnel [sic] channeled through Alcorn until further notice. No more passing prospects around the organization, from man to man. Alcorn can get all the basic information, clear the spot security checks and then, if OK, send them on.' He held out his hand to me. `We need fellows like you. I'll see you tomorrow.'"

To be sure, there are only a few stories of General Donovan that are incredible. But this is one. In the first place I cannot conceive his having used the words, "agent personnel." In the second, even if the word "agent" is something that Mr. Alcorn's memory produced well after the fact, I cannot believe the General would give such screening authority to a man of 32 whose post-college experience in gainful employment was limited to one year's teaching of English in a boys' school and two years of staff work in a congressman's office. My credulity snapped when I realized that Mr. Alcorn left General Donovan's office to take up (not the

next day, by the way, but some two months later) the most junior sort of clerkship way down the line in the Personnel Division. To Mr. Alcorn's credit, be it said, he was rapidly promoted and before the year's end relieved of interviewing "agent personnel." In the autumn of 1942 he moved to the Research and Analysis Branch as the administrative officer for that rather substantial operation.

It is Mr. Alcorn's reminiscences of life in the R&A Branch that soured this reviewer on the general credibility of the book. Here he and I served at the same time, and the discrepancy between our respective memories is all but limitless. He could not have enjoyed his six months' tour much, as the following passage will show:

Vanity seemed to rule the whole setup. In several instances, men of high standing in their particular field were given key spots as division heads. Then, when another scholar in the same field became available, it was decided that one could not be placed above the other in the chain of command. So a new board or committee would be established for the late arrival from which he could function without having to take orders from his colleague. It was essential to give such a board or committee a pompous title such as the Board of Analysts or the Board of Review but to those in the know it was only a dodge, a rather tawdry and pathetic one when you realize that it was played out against the background provided by the Battle of Midway, the Coral Sea, Okinawa and the like. [NOTE: The first two battles were fought four or five months before Mr. Alcorn joined R&A, the Okinawa campaign two years after he had left.]

As the branch grew, each doctor brought in his research assistants from his former university. Then, when they were used up, the prize pupils, the "teacher's pets," were brought in to do the work. This latter move caused the General some uneasiness lest the organization might become a haven for draft dodgers. There seemed to be an increasing number of healthy young men doing paper work that could and should be done by the older men first brought in for the purpose.

I find this not only false in tone but plain. wrong in almost every particular. And it is no less wrong than a dozen or more other statements in this chapter, including such nonsense as alleging that Professor Langer's intimates called him "Bull" (in 30 years' association with him I have never heard him so addressed or referred to), intimating an R&A Branch responsibility for the functions of Stanley Lovell's :Research and Development unit, and misstating by 180 degrees the

organization pattern of the branch he serviced as administrative officer. The funny story of the petulant professor (though left unnamed, clearly identifiable) sitting on the floor is totally untrue and a gratuitous calumny on a gifted and courageous American scholar.

Nor are all the errors confined to the passages dealing with R&A. They are generously scattered throughout. Just for example: the Ascension Island story is ruined, the tale of the courageous woman parachutist is mistold again, the source of intelligence relating to the V-weapons is wrong, the date of the creation of the COI is off by months, the steps in the dissolution of OSS and the beginnings of CIA are hopelessly confused, and so on.

These things, small in themselves, do add up. They add up to the point of pretty thoroughly discrediting the whole book. The well-told array of spy stories would in any circumstances be hard to take in their entirety. At best you would have gravely doubted the authenticity of some of their chilling details while perhaps accepting a probable core of truth. Now you might be pardoned for dismissing them as fiction from start to finish. You will feel doubly pardoned when you realize that Mr. Alcorn's position as Special Funds Officer in the European theater took him personally no closer to the spy business than it did to the clandestine trans-Adriatic supply operations he writes about. Here he disarmingly notes that his vantage point for observation of that thrilling episode was when ". . . I now found myself involved, at General Donovan's direction, with the Yugoslav court-in-exile [in London]. It was perhaps the most pleasant assignment of the war for me." How black and foreboding the Dalmatian coast as sensed from Claridges.

It is stupid in a reviewer to berate an author for not having written another kind of book. I intend the following not as berating but as bemoaning. For here and there in the book there are passages where Mr. Alcorn writes of things he really knew about. These have to do with the tasks of a special funds officer. I find them interesting and informative. They have a ring about them quite different from the rest of the book. Perhaps if he had focussed his narrative on them, at some risk to U.S. security interests and more to the sale of the book, he might have made a substantial contribution to the literature of intelligence—something that what he did produce is not.

Posted: May 08, 2007 07:54 AM