

FOREWORD BY
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HITLER'S WINTER

THE GERMAN BATTLE OF THE BULGE



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OSPREY

I

Scarface

Otto Skorzeny was feeling rather pleased with himself as he stood before Adolf Hitler in Berlin on 21 October 1944. He had been granted a private audience with the Führer. His right arm shot out as he conducted the required Nazi salute. Skorzeny's jaw was firmly clenched but a small smile flickered at the side of his mouth. He was a chancer who had just pulled off another propaganda coup for the beleaguered Third Reich. Through a combination of willpower and bravado he had made himself into Hitler's indispensable 'Mr Fixit'.¹

His slicked-back hair almost made him look like some sort of Austrian matinee idol. However, the most striking thing about him was the appalling scar on the left side of Skorzeny's face. It ran from his chin up to his ear. The scar tissue showed that at some point a flap of skin had been almost completely severed from the jaw bone. Skorzeny wore this disfigurement with pride because it was a duelling scar from his student days in Vienna. Such a mark was considered the height of fashion. His self-confidence in the presence of the Führer was well founded. Hitler had grandly dubbed him 'the most dangerous man in Europe'.² In truth Skorzeny's achievements were nowhere near as dashing as Nazi propaganda claimed. However, Skorzeny did have the luck of the Devil.

Hitler's Nazi 'fixer' had served the early part of the war with the 2nd SS and then the 1st SS Panzer Divisions. In April 1943 he had been appointed to command the Waffen-SS special forces, known as the Amt VI-S, which were designed to rival the army's covert

Brandenburg regiment. Skorzeny, setting up base in Friedenthal Castle near Oranienburg, found himself in charge of the SS-Jagdverbände and the 500th SS Parachute Battalion supported by the Luftwaffe's Kampfgeschwader 200. From then on there had been no looking back for the Führer's wunderkind.

Hitler smiled and stretched out his arms. 'Well done, Skorzeny! I've promoted you to SS-Lieutenant-Colonel with effect from the 16th October,' said the Führer with genuine gratitude, 'and awarded you the German Cross in gold. ... Now tell me all about it.'³ In his role as Hitler's special operations fixer over the last two years, Skorzeny had pulled off two remarkable feats that had greatly helped slow the war against Germany. He was fresh from the beautiful city of Budapest on the Danube where he had conducted an audacious coup to prevent the Hungarians from defecting to the Russians. At the head of a column of massive Tiger tanks, he had seized Castle Hill and brow beat the wavering Hungarian government back into line. Budapest's garrison, confused by the action of their ally, had simply laid down their arms.

The Hungarian fascist party took power and the crisis was averted, at least for the time being. The irony was that the Hungarian leader, Admiral Horthy, had acquiesced to Hitler's demands 30 minutes before Skorzeny's show of brute force. Luckily for Skorzeny and the SS division that had followed him into the city, the Hungarians chose not to resist, otherwise a bloodbath would have ensued. The SS did not realize Budapest would soon become their prison once the Red Army encircled it at the end of the year.

Skorzeny's other great success was that the previous year he had taken part in the rescue of deposed Italian dictator Benito Mussolini on 12 September 1944. Mussolini was under house arrest after his country defected to the Western Allies. Although it had been a Luftwaffe-run operation, Skorzeny shanghaied the mission and brazenly grabbed all the glory. Skorzeny was not supposed to join Mussolini, but he squeezed into the plane to German-occupied Rome anyway. He safely delivered Mussolini, leaving Luftwaffe General Kurt Student fuming. Skorzeny then flew Mussolini to Vienna and a few days later the fallen Italian dictator arrived at Rastenburg to see Hitler. This had enabled Hitler to put Mussolini in charge of the German puppet state established in northern Italy.

Hitler chose to have a selective memory, ignoring the failure of the 500th SS Parachute Battalion's attempts to kill Josip Tito, the Yugoslav resistance leader. This airborne operation on 24 May 1944 led by SS-Lieutenant Rybka had cost 1,138 German casualties and Tito had escaped. The few survivors were sent back to Skorzeny. He had sought to avoid being blamed for this debacle, which had witnessed the first wave of men jumping from their gliders massacred by alerted Yugoslav partisans. By the time the ground forces had reached them the battalion had almost been wiped out. Now, though, Skorzeny was firmly in favour with the Führer.

When Skorzeny finished briefing Hitler on the successful events in Hungary he stood ready to leave. 'Don't go Skorzeny,' said Hitler, motioning him to sit back down. 'I have perhaps the most important job in your life for you.'⁴ Skorzeny could not help himself and scowled. 'What now?' he thought. 'In December,' explained Hitler, 'Germany will start a great offensive, which may well decide her fate.'⁵ Skorzeny leant forward, intrigued, and Hitler proceeded to explain how he planned to strike the Allies just as he had done in 1940. Skorzeny struggled to follow what Hitler was proposing as the strategic scope of it all was well beyond his pay grade. 'One of the most important tasks in this offensive will be entrusted to you and the unit under your command,' said Hitler, 'which will have to go ahead and seize one or more of the bridges over the Meuse between Liège and Namur.'⁶ Skorzeny nodded and Hitler added as an afterthought, 'You will have to wear British and American uniforms.'⁷ This was to be known as Operation *Griffin*.

It was clear that Hitler was not simply boasting about his 'great offensive'. Skorzeny recalled:

He told me about the tremendous quantity of material which had been accumulated, and I recall that he stated we would have 6,000 artillery pieces in the Ardennes, and, in addition, the Luftwaffe would have about 2,000 planes, including many of the new jet planes. He then told me that I would lead a panzer brigade which would be trained to reach the Meuse bridges and capture them intact.⁸

Such an idea was nothing new. The German Army had masqueraded in foreign uniforms before, particularly in Poland, the Low Countries and Russia, but nothing had been tried on this scale. Hitler then told

Skorzeny that his preparations must be ready by 2 December. Skorzeny was not happy at the lack of time and pointed out that the attack on Fort Eben Emael in 1940 had been the culmination of six months of detailed planning. For the Ardennes operation he was being given just five weeks. Hitler sympathized and told him to do what he could. 'I am giving you unlimited power to set up your brigade,' responded Hitler. 'Use it, Colonel! Yes, I have promoted you to lieutenant-colonel.'

Skorzeny was then introduced to General Heinz Guderian, Chief of the General Staff. He was the senior German army officer; however, in light of Guderian only having responsibility for the Eastern Front there was little he could do to help Skorzeny. Furthermore, Guderian did not agree with the Ardennes offensive as he failed to understand Hitler's strategic logic. In his view the Russians posed a far greater threat than the Americans and the British.

Later Skorzeny was briefed by General Alfred Jodl, Chief of Operations for the Armed Forces, who told him the offensive was intended to recapture Antwerp. Skorzeny marvelled at the vast scale of what was going to happen:

The forces employed were to form an Army Group under Field Marshal Model, and comprise of the 6th SS Armoured Army, under the command of General Sepp Dietrich, of the Waffen-SS, on the right, the 5th Armoured Army under General von Manteuffel, in the centre, and the 7th Army on the left.⁹

Jodl explained that his brigade would be assigned to 6th Panzer Army. Skorzeny, however, was not happy at the idea of masquerading as British or American troops, as he and his men, if caught, were liable to be shot as spies. The army legal department advised him that they should wear their German uniforms under the Allied ones, which they should remove before the shooting started. 'I need hardly add that I welcomed such advice,' noted Skorzeny gratefully.¹⁰

Despite Skorzeny's mission being top secret, he was alarmed to learn that the High Command had sent out an order to the entire army calling for English speakers for a special operation. When Skorzeny saw a copy of these orders he was flabbergasted because they explicitly named him and his headquarters at Friedenthal outside Berlin. His operational security was blown before he had even started. Skorzeny

complained up the chain of command, recommending that his not-so-secret commando operation should be immediately cancelled. He even raised the matter personally with the head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler. The Reichsführer listened sympathetically to Skorzeny's concerns. 'It's idiotic, but it has been done,' said Himmler with an unhelpful shrug. 'We cannot hold up your operation now.'¹¹ When Skorzeny persisted Himmler held out his hands, adding, 'The stupidity has taken place. The action must be carried out notwithstanding.'¹² Skorzeny left with a mounting sense of doom and annoyed at Himmler's lack of backbone.

At the training ground located at Grafenwöhr, Skorzeny set about forming his brand-new unit dubbed the 150th Panzer Brigade. This was to number some 3,300 men. The key problems Skorzeny faced were to train his men and round up enough enemy uniforms, weapons and vehicles for them to pass themselves off as Allied troops. Skorzeny had less than 35 days to prepare and to equip his force. He moved swiftly to flesh out the panzer brigade with veterans from his Jagdverbände and the SS parachute battalion. Two battalions of Luftwaffe paratroops were also nominally assigned to his force, though they operated independently. Eventually his recruits comprised 1,000 men from the German Army, 500 Waffen-SS, 800 Luftwaffe and 200 personnel from the navy. This left Skorzeny some 800 men short.

To create an effective illusion that his brigade was indeed American he needed 15 Sherman tanks, 20 self-propelled guns, 20 armoured cars, 120 trucks, 100 jeeps and 40 motorcycles. This requirement should have been relatively easy to fulfil. However, despite the vast numbers of American military vehicles captured by the Germans in the preceding months, Skorzeny soon found that the hard-pressed front-line units were very reluctant to give up their precious booty. Furthermore, the Germans found it much harder to salvage captured tanks in north-west Europe than they did in North Africa because by this stage of the war their armed forces were under constant air attack by Allied fighter-bombers. By the summer of 1944 the 5th Parachute Division, 10th SS Panzer Division, 21st Panzer Division, 25th Panzergrenadier Division, 150th Panzer Brigade and 281st Captured Tank Company could muster a total of just 39 operational Shermans between them. Many other panzer units also employed individual tanks and armoured fighting vehicles. Most were swiftly lost in action or through lack of spares.

Under Operation *Raven Hill*, Commander-in-Chief West divided the requisition of equipment for Skorzeny's mission between his three army groups. Army Group G was ordered to provide eight American tanks and 20 trucks; H was to provide two tanks and 50 jeeps; and B five tanks and 30 jeeps, which were to be delivered to Skorzeny's training ground at Grafenwöhr. In the event only 74 trucks and 57 cars arrived, along with just two Sherman tanks and two American armoured cars. Skorzeny discovered he was the recipient of much worn out rubbish, as 30 per cent of the vehicles needed repairs and both the Shermans were inoperable. To make matters worse the brigade was flooded with Polish and Russian equipment, provided by units who had little idea of the role to be played by the 150th Panzer Brigade. None of the Shermans captured in the summer materialized, and the 5th Parachute Division, which committed captured Shermans to the Ardennes offensive, did not give any up either.

Despite Skorzeny's repeated complaints, he found himself being supplied with German equipment rather than American. Skorzeny grumbled that he had to make up the difference with German vehicles. 'The only common feature of these vehicles was that they were all painted green, like American military vehicles.'¹³ Initially his unit was equipped with five Panther tanks, five Sturmgeschütz or StuG assault guns, six German armoured cars and six armoured personnel carriers.

The brigade also lacked 1,500 American steel helmets, and what uniforms that had been gathered were summer issue, clearly unsuitable for winter warfare. American speakers were also found to be in short supply. When Skorzeny surveyed his linguists, he discovered he had just ten men who could convincingly pass themselves off as American and another 40 or so who spoke fluent English but had no slang. Most of the fluent English speakers were German merchant sailors. There were another 150 who could speak English reasonably well and another 200 with some schoolboy English. Short of men, Skorzeny had little choice but to scale back the brigade from three to two battalions and gather 150 of the best linguists into a commando unit called *Einheit Stielau*. This was named after the captain placed in charge. There were just enough captured American uniforms and small arms to equip them.

Sergeant Heinz Rohde, who had been seriously wounded and was serving as a signals instructor in Hamburg, found himself amongst the

commando volunteers. 'We were led into the quartermaster's clothing store,' he recalled, 'which was piled high with all types of American uniform and told to kit ourselves out, from underpants on upwards.'¹⁴ Rohde was transformed into Sergeant Morris Woodahl of the US Army. The men were uncomfortable wearing these captured uniforms and quickly concealed them beneath German para-overalls and German side caps. It was very clear that the commando recruits were hardly elite, as Rohde found himself alongside Luftwaffe and naval personnel who had been drafted in. Corporal Wilhelm Schmidt recalled, 'Our training consisted of studying the organisation of the American army, identification of American insignia, American drill and linguistic exercises.'¹⁵

The commandos were to spearhead Skorzeny's attack, cause chaos and throw the Americans off the scent as his main force sped towards the vital bridges. The commandos, though, had no experience of demolition or covert operations and there was little time to train them properly. Nonetheless, they were assigned three different tasks: demolition, reconnaissance and disruption. 'In the few weeks at our disposal,' said Skorzeny, 'we could hardly hope to teach them their job properly. They knew the perils of their missions and that a man caught fighting in enemy uniform could be executed as a spy.'¹⁶ However, he was impressed by their enthusiasm, adding, 'They were clearly animated by the most glowing patriotism.'¹⁷ In the event, the Americans would be further confused by regular army and Waffen-SS units wearing captured American winter clothing gathered from the battlefield. This was prized for keeping the bitter cold out but wearing it carried the risk of being shot as a spy on capture, and this happened to German prisoners of war on several occasions.

Skorzeny's staff officers were drawn from the 108th Panzer Brigade and those for his two battalions' headquarters from the 10th and 113th Panzer Brigades. The latter had been newly raised along with five other panzer brigades and thrown into the fight against General George S. Patton Jr's US 3rd Army in the Lorraine in September and subsequently cut to pieces. The remains of the 113th had been reassigned to the 15th Panzergrenadier Division. Skorzeny's brigade was supposed to include two companies of panzers and by late November had been supplied 22 Panther tanks and 14 StuG assault guns. The tank crews were provided by the 6th Panzer Division

and the assault gun crews came from the 655th Heavy Panzerjäger Battalion. Armoured car crews were supplied by the reconnaissance battalions of the 2nd Panzer Division and 90th Panzergrenadier Division. When they finally went into battle, they only seem to have deployed ten Panthers and just five StuGs. The implication was that most of the armour supplied to Skorzeny was unwanted, broken-down cast-offs.

There was simply no way to make a Panther look like a Sherman, as its shape and size were completely different. Instead Skorzeny's men ingeniously opted to make them look like the Sherman's tank destroyer cousin, the M10 Wolverine, based on the Sherman chassis but with a much more angular hull and turret. To do this the Panthers were disguised with sheet metal, painted olive green and given prominent white five-pointed American recognition stars. These Skorzeny cynically noted were only sufficient to 'deceive very young American troops seeing them at night from very far away'.¹⁸

His American vehicles were very thin on the ground, comprising four American scout cars, 15 trucks and 30 jeeps, plus a single Sherman which was up and running on the eve of the attack. All the vehicles were likewise painted olive green and given Allied white recognition stars. To avoid friendly fire, Skorzeny's men were instructed to wear various field signs including blue or pink scarves, and the rear of each vehicle was painted with a small yellow triangle. The under-strength brigade had little choice but to become three battle groups designated rather unimaginatively X, Y and Z.

Rumours began to circulate that this odd assortment of armoured fighting and motor vehicles had been assembled to dash across France to relieve the German garrisons still holding out in some of the French ports. Perhaps they were going to Brest or Lorient. Another arose to the effect that the Einheit Stielau commandos were headed for Paris to seize the Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower. This rumour was started by an eager lieutenant in the commando company who approached Skorzeny with the idea.¹⁹ He suggested they could enter the city disguised as escorts for a prisoner of war convoy and captured German armour being taken to an Allied exhibition. Skorzeny encouraged him to work out the details and even suggested the Café de la Paix in Paris as a rendezvous for the commandos. 'We'll have a further talk,' said Skorzeny, 'but mind you, keep as silent as

the grave.²⁰ Skorzeny also considered plans for sabotaging Allied fuel pipelines running from Boulogne and Le Havre. 'We calculated that enemy intelligence would simply not know what to make of the medley of lurid and conflicting information which reached their ears,' said Skorzeny.²¹ It was only on 10 December 1944 that his men found out that their true mission was far less glamorous and did not involve quite so much travel.