

As the last WWII spies die off, a private eye hopes to build a museum to keep their legacy alive

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By Katie Sanders
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“I’m head of a very dangerous group of senior citizens,” says OSS Society president Charles Pinck, slouched across from me at a table in Le Pain Quotidien’s Georgetown outpost. The 54-year-old is dressed in khakis and a plaid shirt, and perched atop his tousled silver-blond hair is a black cap emblazoned with the initials of the organization his life revolves around.

That would be the Office of Strategic Services, the spy agency founded by Gen. William “Wild Bill” Donovan during World War II. OSS, which at its peak in 1944 employed 13,000 men and women who carried out unprecedented acts of espionage and sabotage against the Axis powers, was the forerunner of today’s CIA. It’s estimated that fewer than 100 of these original operatives are still alive, and Pinck, a private investigator by day, devotes more hours than he’s willing to quantify to ensuring that they are remembered. His latest undertaking? Raising \$93 million to erect the National Museum of Intelligence and Special Operations. The 56,000-square-foot institution he plans to open by 2021 will honor the OSS legacy while also highlighting the ongoing importance of intelligence-gathering and special operations.

As we chat, Pinck rattles off OSS trivia that may be of interest to me, the journalist granddaughter of an OSS pilot: Of the personnel in the service’s 11 branches, one-third were women. Recruits came from college campuses, Wall Street, professional sports teams and the military. The Research and Analysis Branch worked out of Washington’s Navy Hill and New York, breaking enemy code, psychoanalyzing Hitler and mapping invasion trajectories for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. From secret training facilities at Camp David, the multilingual commandos of the Special Operations Branch learned to spy, subvert and kill. Mostly lacking experience in diplomacy or government, they were known as Donovan’s “Glorious Amateurs” and “PhDs who can win a bar fight” (phrases that Pinck has trademarked).

They included such luminaries as Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg, four CIA directors, film director John Ford, actress Marlene Dietrich and, perhaps the biggest celebrity of the lot, Julia Child. There was also Pinck’s father, Dan, who was stationed in China during the war as a 19-year-old.

Dan Pinck was supposed to destroy the memorabilia from his OSS stint. Instead, he kept Chinese nationalist money, maps and a gun disguised as a pen in his Boston home. Eventually, he told his four children about the most thrilling chapter of his life. In the 1980s, as the government began declassifying OSS files, he attended a reunion. Charles, his youngest, soon joined him at these gatherings. Smitten with the underground network, Charles took the helm of Donovan’s alumni club in 2002, transforming it into a 21st-century nonprofit.



Illustration by Valero Doval/For The Washington Post

“Charles is very single-minded in his complete, unambiguous devotion to sustaining the OSS memory,” says David Cohen, who joined the OSS Society board following posts as deputy commissioner for intelligence at the New York Police Department and No. 2 at the CIA. Pinck has helped veterans earn recognition at the White House and the CIA, and on CNN and the “Today” show. He updates the society’s social platforms daily and scoffs when I ask if he has ever sought professional public relations support. No, the voice of the OSS Society, including the frequent, sometimes snarky tweets, is all Pinck. He’s also chief party planner for the society’s annual gala; in October, CIA Director Gina Haspel accepted the 2018 William J. Donovan Award before 650 members of the intelligence and special ops communities packed into a Ritz-Carlton ballroom.

A major coup came in March 2018 as a five-year effort resulted in OSS veterans being recognized with a Congressional Gold Medal, tied with the Medal of Freedom as the nation’s highest civilian honor. After Speaker Paul Ryan lauded OSS members as American heroes “who struck a decisive blow to fascism,” Pinck and OSS and CIA veteran William Clarke accepted the medal on behalf of the group. Later, Pinck mailed bronze replicas to other OSS members — and delivered one to his father at his nursing home. (Dan Pinck died this month at 94 and was to be buried with his medal on Martha’s Vineyard.)

“Fundraising is a minefield,” Pinck’s mother warned him after learning how much funding his proposed museum required. “You’ll get an ulcer.” She died last year, but Pinck believes she’d be pleased to see him at the \$11.4 million mark, ulcer-free. Thanks to some six- and seven-figure gifts from Greatest Generation veterans and descendants, the society has signed a lease on an eight-acre site a few miles north of Dulles International Airport. Per architect Curtis Fentress’s design, if you fly over Northern Virginia on a clear day, you’ll be able to spot the “tip of the spear” shape — the OSS insignia — baked into the site’s aerial view.

Pinck likens the push to build a museum to climbing Mount Everest. It helps to remember Donovan’s words (“You can’t succeed without taking chances”) and channel the spirit of fictional OSS recruit Indiana Jones. In “Raiders of the Lost Ark,” Pinck notes, “he says, ‘I’m makin’ this up as I go.’ That’s me. But I’m surrounded by people who know how to do this. I want to see it built. And,” he adds, “I want to have a martini at the bar.” He’s referring to the museum bar inspired by the wood-paneled one in the Hotel Ritz in Paris, where Ernest Hemingway, whose son was OSS, celebrated the city’s liberation from the Nazis by ordering up 51 dry martinis.

We wrap up with a game of “who’d play who”; Pinck matches A-list celebrities like Benedict Cumberbatch with OSS legends he thinks are movie-worthy. Then he shows me a photo of him with actor Paul Rudd at Fenway Park last year. They’re in matching OSS caps, celebrating the release of “The Catcher Was a Spy,” about ballplayer-turned-OSS agent Moe Berg. It was a proud moment for Pinck.

He rises, grasping a pair of envelopes stuffed with museum brochures and a letter welcoming tax-deductible donations to honor the quiet professionals defending America and “inspire future generations to serve at the ‘tip of the spear.’” Soon, he is heading out of the cafe toward the post office to put another stamp on his quest.



OSS Society President Charles Pinck speaks at the Congressional Gold Medal ceremony honoring the OSS in March 2018. (Greg E. Mathieson Sr./Mai/REX/Shutterstock)