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Final Edition

To Your Stealth: Honoring the OSS

BYLINE: Adam Bernstein, Washington Post Staff Writer

It's so nice when espionage can bring a son closer to his father.

Charles Pinck, 39, has been obsessed with spies since childhood. During World War II, his father, Dan, spent 18 months in China for the U.S. Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency, and their home was full of his mementos: Japanese swords, U.S. code books, a Siberian tiger skin and "one-time pads" for secret communications.

As an adult, Charles Pinck became a private eye specializing in corporate skulduggery, but his father's war is still vivid and alive for him. Inside his bright workspace at Global Options Inc. on L Street NW, he preserves the OSS legacy with posters, stickers, lapel pins, distinguished service medals and an agency flag emblazoned with a spearhead design.

On a wall hangs a large picture of his father as a young OSS man. His arms hang around his two Chinese assistants; a holster with a .45 is strapped to his waist.

The son stares at the black-and-white picture. "It just speaks to me. . . . I imagine myself at 19, trying to do what he did," he says, his voice trailing off. Pinck is the youngest president of the OSS Society, an organization that celebrates the achievements of its increasingly elderly membership. He gets good-natured grief from co-workers amused by the "mini-museum." (There are larger OSS collections at the CIA and the National Archives.)

Go ahead and call it an obsession, he says. "Shared interest, shared obsession, shared fascination. So much of what they did was secret. My dad is still learning, 60 years after he left China, stuff he never knew that was going on there.

"I was the one who got him to go to the OSS reunion in 1986," he says. "It was a turning point for us both."

That reunion, held at Washington's Mayflower Hotel, was one of the first OSS gatherings not intended solely as a social occasion. It focused on the historical significance of the agency and included speeches by OSS veterans and CIA directors William J. Casey, William E. Colby and Richard Helms.

Afterward, father and son started work on a self-published, comprehensive guide to books about the OSS. Most recently Charles was his dad's literary agent, helping persuade the Naval Institute Press in Annapolis to publish his

father's war memoirs last month. The book, "Journey to Peking," is filled with tales of luck and pluck.

There is the raw romance of it all, being sent to a foreign land and performing clandestine activities in wartime. The men and women of the OSS were considered a breed apart, "glorious amateurs" in the words of founder William J. "Wild Bill" Donovan.

Donovan, a World War I hero and Republican lawyer, was sent by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to observe the turmoil in Europe in the late 1930s. He persuaded the president to create a central repository of intelligence information, the OSS, in 1942. During its three-year existence, the OSS helped scout enemy troop movements, promote Allied propaganda and perform sabotage and guerrilla missions the world over.

Its agents were selected not for formal military expertise, but because they could use their wits and find innovative ways, in dodgy situations, to win the war.

In 1942, Dan Pinck was a recent graduate from Sidwell Friends School and in his first year at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Va. To him, the war seemed a great excuse to get out of a college math class and he enlisted in the Army.

Bored with military routine in the regular Army, he volunteered for the OSS. The fledgling outfit sent him to China, although he did not know the language. His only familiarity with the country was having read an English-language children's book, "Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze," at age 12.

"What headquarters decided, ingeniously, is to find someone who is neither old enough or smart enough to be fearful," Dan Pinck, now 79, recounted last month at a speech at the International Spy Museum. "I suited those qualifications."

The OSS sent him to a small village in southeast China called Hotien to report intelligence about enemy troop movements, weather patterns and possible bombing targets along the Japanese-held coastline 19 miles away.

He carried with him a curious array of tools, including \$ 1 million in cash to pay his Nationalist army assistants and boxes of condoms that he was told would greatly please Nationalist military officers. At a friend's suggestion, he also brought along his Boy Scout manual. As it turned out, the manual was handy for many survival needs -- including outwitting a female spy.

One of his top aides had a flirtatious Chinese girlfriend who expressed unusual interest in the manual's maps and codes. His suspicions raised that she might be a Japanese spy, he pretended the contents were top-secret.

When she disappeared later that day, Pinck and his associates chased her to a tea shop, where she was crouching in a corner. She rushed them, and they threw her to the floor. The boyfriend searched her. Sure enough, Pinck wrote in his memoir, they found a page from the Boy Scout manual and an incriminating scroll with information about Pinck and his associates. He also said he started a relief program -- using poker as a novel way of dispensing the \$ 1 million. His

intentional losses allowed the Nationalists to save face while winning the money they needed for arms and food.

He calls the war the most liberating time of his life. "I ran my own war and did what I wanted to do," he says.

He later finished college, was a leg man for writer A.J. Liebling at the New Yorker magazine, held administrative and research jobs at Boston-area universities and did consulting work in marketing and education. He lives now in Cambridge, Mass. He said the CIA once asked him to return to China, but he declined because he was married and had four children.

Charles Pinck, who lives in Georgetown, is the only one of the four to have a lasting fascination with his father's war tales.

The father exposed his son early on to OSS friends who had lively war careers and maintained a sense of derring-do later in life. One man went on to work for the CIA in North Africa and made his final parachute jump at age 86.

Dan Pinck also said the OSS had a greater impact on his son than even the son knows. "I was always raising the question of, 'How do you know you know?' Which means, doubt everything unless you see it yourself," he said. "Even then you have to doubt it. It's not a charade, it's a real exercise on my part: What's inference, what's assumption, what's plain wrong?" The son's OSS interest accelerated when he began doing political opposition research for Democratic candidates nationwide in the 1980s. He saw the connection between his own work and his father's wartime responsibilities, even if it is less dangerous to pore over public records than foil spies.

"People aren't trying to kill me, at least not that I'm aware of. But I use lots of the same skills and attributes as folks in the intelligence field use," says Charles Pinck, who does only corporate work now.

Since becoming president of the 1,000-member OSS Society last year, he has been working on an oral history project with the Smithsonian Institution, publishing quarterly newsletters and overseeing an e-mail discussion group with requests from the descendants of OSS agents asking for information about their relatives. They are often sons and grandsons seeking tales of danger from six decades ago.

He said the best part of his job is when he can get OSS veterans to share those stories. It's an extension of the connection he has made with his own father.

"For a lot of people, including my father, if it wasn't the best part of their lives," he says, "it was certainly the most interesting part of their lives."