

Colonel Aaron Bank

Founder of US Army Special Forces

Aaron Bank (November 23, 1902-April 1, 2004) was the founder of the US Army Special Forces, commonly called Green Berets.

Before the Depression, young Bank was a bon vivant, traveling the world and serving, ultimately, as chief life guard at an upscale resort in Biarritz. But in 1939, he joined the military. When the United States entered World War II, Bank, by then an officer, was inevitably drawn to intelligence and special operations work (in his forties, he was "too old" for combat). He spoke good French and fair German, and he was athletic.

He served in the U.S. Army as a Captain in the Office of Strategic Services (which would be disbanded by Harry Truman in 1946 but in less than a year provide much of the cadre and expertise for the new CIA). The OSS conducted both espionage operations (SI Branch) and "special operations": sabotage and guerrilla warfare (SO Branch). Bank was assigned to SO Branch, and led one of the OSS's operations, Operation Jedburgh, into France.

In that operation, Bank and two Frenchmen, an officer and a radio operator, parachuted into southern France in July 1944, and linked up with French guerillas of the Gaullist FFI. They liberated a number of towns, despite tense relations with the Communist Francs Tireurs et Partisans. In September, Bank left, mission accomplished, and reported back in to London.

In late 1944 and early 1945, Bank led "Operation Iron Cross", which evolved into a plan to capture or kill Adolf Hitler. The original plan was for a company of men disguised as German soldiers to jump in near Innsbruck in present-day Austria. There they would conduct sabotage and induce German soldiers to desert. The leaders of the unit were OSS men: Bank, a lieutenant, and two sergeants. The rank and file were prisoners of war from Nazi Germany who volunteered to fight against the Nazis. Many of them were Communists; in the end, Bank had weeded out 75 of his original 175 volunteers. They were paid sixty cents an hour, and a promise of a death benefit if they were killed.

Bank could not pass as a German, so his cover called him "Henri Marchand," a French Nazi from Martinique. The hope was that any Gestapo men asking questions wouldn't recognize a Martinique accent.

When General William Donovan, head of the OSS, was briefed on the progress of Iron Cross, he changed the mission. Hitler had been threatening that the Nazi leaders and armies would withdraw into the National Redoubt -- the mountainous area on today's German-Austrian border. This was exactly the target of Iron

Cross, and Donovan ordered a new mission: "Tell Bank to get Hitler." The men of Iron Cross began training in raid and snatch techniques -- their goal was to capture Hitler alive and deliver him to a war crimes tribunal.

Iron Cross was canceled almost on the eve of execution: intelligence showed that the National Redoubt was a figment of Hitler's imagination, that Hitler was not in the target area, and that Nazi resistance was collapsing across Europe. A disappointed Bank had to thank his men for trying -- and send them back to their POW cages. Bank thought that one problem with Iron Cross was State Department aversion to setting so many armed Communists loose in an area destined for Allied occupation.

From Europe, Bank traveled to China, where he trained for an abortive mission into Indochina, and later, in September 1945, did parachute into Laos with a combined SI/SO team. During these postwar mopping-up operations, he met Ho Chi Minh, for whom he always retained great respect.

After the war Bank remained in the Army. In the period after the war, there was a debate about whether the Army needed an organization for guerilla warfare and sabotage, like the SO branch of OSS (it was understood that the duties of SI branch were covered by the CIA). Officers like Russ Volckmann, who had been a guerilla in the Philippines, and Bank were instrumental in convincing the Army it needed such a force. The primary place such elements would be deployed, they thought, was Europe -- this time, behind Soviet lines, in the event of a new war.

Then-Colonel Aaron Bank became the first commander of the Army's first Special Forces unit, called the 10th Special Forces Group (hoping to confound the Russians with suspicions of nine more), in 1952. In establishing the 10th, he was as flexible as he had been with Iron Cross, drawing upon former members of the "1st Special Service Force" known as the Devil's Brigade, as well as veterans of the OSS, the Parachute Infantry units, and guerilla elements in the Pacific.

Using the training and strategies and the lessons learned during World War II, Bank created an elite unit of men skilled in the art of hand-to-hand combat, stealth tactics, the use of explosives for demolition, amphibious warfare, rock climbing and mountain fighting, and as ski troops.

Special Forces today are still organized into teams, as Aaron Bank organized his men in the 10th Special Forces group in 1952, with two experts in every specialty. They still must volunteer and undergo a difficult training process in which large numbers of men fail or quit, as Aaron Bank required of the men of Operation Iron Cross. Special Forces today acknowledges the paternity of Col. Bank.

Aaron Bank was commended by George W. Bush in 2002, the year he celebrated his hundredth birthday, for developing the unconventional warfare programs and techniques that had been used in toppling the Taliban.

Aaron Bank retired from the Army in 1958, and suffered from declining health in his last years. He lived in later years in California, with his wife Catherine, whom he married in 1948. They raised two daughters, Linda and Alexandra. He wrote the book, *From OSS to Green Berets: the Birth of Special Forces*, which describes the foundation of the Special Forces. He died April 1st 2004 at an assisted-living facility in Dana Point, California.

Obituary

Green Beret icon Bank dies

By Dennis McLellan

Los Angeles Times, April 2, 2004

Retired Army Col. Aaron Bank, who led a number of daring missions during World War II but was best known for his postwar role in organizing and serving as the first commander of the Army's elite Special Forces, has died. He was 101.

Bank, who was known as "the father of the Green Berets," died Thursday of natural causes at his home in an assisted-living facility in Dana Point, Calif., said his son-in-law, Bruce Ballantine.

During World War II, Bank was a special-operations officer for the Office of Strategic Services, the top-secret government agency formed to gather intelligence and organize resistance forces behind enemy lines.

The OSS, forerunner of the CIA, was disbanded soon after the war. But Bank and others were convinced that the Army should have a permanent unit whose mission would be to conduct unconventional operations.

In 1951, the chief of the Army's Psychological Warfare staff, who had been impressed by OSS special operations during the war, instructed Bank to staff and obtain approval for the creation of an OSS-style operational group.

In 1952, after Bank and other key staff members had made their case, the Army approved 2,300 spaces for men in a Special Forces unit - the 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) - at Fort Bragg, N.C.

"I wanted none but the best," Bank said in a 1968 interview. "First, they had to be double volunteers; that is, they had to volunteer for parachuting and behind-enemy-lines duties, which takes a special flair, a special type of personality. We had to work up all the manuals and training procedures for demolition, sabotage, new and different ways of handling weapons."

But most important, Bank said, "We had to teach them the classic aim and purpose of their service - the organizing of civilian natives into guerrilla forces in enemy-held territory."

Bank later wrote a memorandum suggesting that Special Forces soldiers be allowed to wear berets as a mark of distinction. He listed three possible colors for the berets: purple, wine-red or green. But the Army didn't allow distinctive headgear at the time and the idea was turned down.

It wasn't until 1962, four years after Bank retired from the military, that President John F. Kennedy authorized Army Special Forces to wear berets. Kennedy, Bank later said, "picked the green because he was an Irishman."

At Fort Bragg, which is still the home of the Green Berets, Bank is considered a military icon.

"Colonel Aaron Bank is a legend within the Special Forces community," Maj. Robert Gowan, spokesman for the U.S. Army Special Forces Command, said Thursday. "His commitment and service to our country is unsurpassed. He was a man far ahead of his time. ... His vision and initiative allowed the Army to create Special Forces as we know them today."

Born in New York City, Bank joined the Army in the late 1930s. By the time the United States entered the war, Bank had been commissioned a second lieutenant.

In 1943, the 40-year-old Bank was serving as a tactical training officer to a railroad battalion stationed at Camp Polk, La., when he saw a bulletin announcing that volunteers with foreign- language capabilities would be interviewed for "special assignments."

Once in the OSS, he said, he began a long training course that taught him "to do all the things that regular branches of the service frowned on" - guerrilla warfare, sabotage, espionage, escape and evasion tactics.

He also learned parachuting. As commander of one of the three-man teams that dropped into southern France before the Allied Mediterranean invasion in August 1944, he and his men posed as civilians and helped French Resistance leaders organize a guerrilla force that blew up infrastructure and ambushed German columns.

Operation Iron Cross

In December 1944, Bank received what he considered the most extraordinary assignment of his career: to recruit and train 170 anti-Nazi German prisoners of

war and defectors who would parachute with him into the Austrian Alps, where they would pose as a German mountain-infantry company.

The primary goal of the top-secret mission, dubbed Iron Cross, was to capture high-ranking Nazi leaders, including Adolf Hitler, who were expected to seek refuge in the area as the war in Europe neared an end.

But in April 1945 - after three months of training in France - the mission was scrubbed.

After the aborted mission, Bank was parachuted into the jungles of Indochina to search for Japanese POW camps. His team found 165 French internees at three locations in Laos.

Bank, who also served in the Korean War, retired from the Army in 1958.

Bank is survived by his wife, Catherine; their two daughters, Linda Ballantine of Dana Point, and Alexandra Elliott of Anaheim, Calif.; and a granddaughter.