

Thanks for this lovely introduction!

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to thank the World War II Legacy Memorial for having me speak this evening. I am honored to share with you small samplings of my wartime experiences. Especially I would like to thank Art Fishman and Debi Hollis who made this event possible.

Before I tell you about my outfit's and my wartime experiences, a sentence or two about my life as an adolescent and immigrant to the US would appear to be in order. I grew up in a medium-sized town in northern Germany, Hildesheim, and went through a Jewish elementary school and a public high school. At the age of 15, I escaped the Nazis with the help of an uncle living in St. Louis. After leaving Germany, I never saw my family again—they all became victims of the Holocaust.

In St. Louis, I finished high school, and found a job as a busboy at a hotel. I was also able to study for two years at a Catholic university.

December 7th, 1941, changed all of our lives. The bombing of Pearl Harbor convinced me to volunteer for naval intelligence but ultimately, after basic training, I ended up with army intelligence; but at that point, I didn't feel all that intelligent...

Getting serious, since today is a day to honor our victory in the Second World War, I was asked to present the contributions of my intelligence specialty unit. I will intersperse some of my personal efforts, those which had a part in getting me decorated by General Courtney H. Hodges with a Bronze Star. And as recently as 2017 with a delay of over 60 years, I received the Order of the National Legion of Honor by the French government. I might add that my title is Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur, but the gift that should have come along with the title "chevalier," meaning horseman, has never reached me, I don't own a horse yet.

I was first stationed in Texas for basic training, but eventually was transferred to Camp Ritchie, Maryland, where we studied skills like reading aerial maps, drawing contour maps, messaging in Morse Code, intercepting telephone conversations, interpreting a prisoner's attire and equipment. We also learned to quickly extract vital information from documents. We memorized whole passages of the *German Order of Battle*. Learning these skills was practice for the real test: Interrogating German prisoners of war or POWs. We had been taught interrogation skills, and then our first group of POWs of the German Africa Corps were brought in. They became our guinea pigs.

We were sent on onerous maneuvers in Louisiana, I was attached to the blue army. While there, our superiors excused all Jewish soldiers from participating in maneuvers during Passover service. The Jewish private citizens of Shreveport invited us into their homes to enjoy the *seder* ceremonies and a delicious home-cooked meal.

Eventually we were assigned to an interrogation team and by December 1943 my unit was ready to depart for Europe. Upon our arrival in England, having avoided the German U-boats prowling the Atlantic, we were billeted with private British families in the lovely small town of Broadway (near Birmingham). Our first and difficult assignment directed us to the larger town of Bristol. We had to assist the teams under the command of General Hodges in regard to the planned invasion.

As you all know, the first US Army troops gained a foothold on the Normandy beaches on June 6th, 1944. My team arrived three days later on Omaha Beach which was still littered with the carnage of the first days of fighting. More than

once, I had to fight back my feelings of squeamishness. One of us Ritchie Boys came ashore much earlier, landing by parachute behind enemy lines. He was captured. Being captured by the Germans was a fate I feared most as a German-born Jew.

My nascent interrogation skills were immediately put to the test after getting off the PT boat. From somewhere in the distance, my teammate, Kurt Jasen, already two days on French soil, was hollering at me: "Get the hell over here, Stern! We got too many [frigging] prisoners!" Five minutes later, I was confronting a tough-looking German non-com from an artillery unit. Abandoned crates had to do as interrogation chairs and tables. Like the makeshift furniture, I, too, must have looked improvisational. My first prisoner responded to none of my questions. I felt like an utter failure. Then a German shell came over; we both ducked. I got up before him, and by that random circumstance, which was born on my part out of inexperience, he must have attributed it to uncommon courage. I regained all my Ritchie resoluteness. My questions became more menacing. He answered, dammit, he answered—and in detail. I had won my first battle. From this victory, I was put in charge of screening POWs. I gained a new skill: Separating unpromising prisoners from those who might be willing to cooperate or simply possess useful information. Frankly, I soon got jaded with that assignment, but - you never ask your superiors for a change.

A completely unforeseen incident placed me into a job that kept me busy from the Normandy beaches until we met our Russian allies at the Elbe River.

We came across three Spanish engineers who had escaped Franco's fascist regime from serving hard labor in the Channel Islands. They didn't speak German or English, but I was the most apt candidate to conduct an interrogation in Spanish which I had studied in high school and at university. It was the easiest interrogation I ever had. On a map, they drew in every machinegun emplacement, grenade launcher, and underwater obstacle. I brought this map to my commanding officer, Capt. Rust, who commended ME for my efforts.

Because of this highly successful interrogation, Capt. Rust put me in charge of a special "survey" section that would target specific prisoners with questions forwarded to us by various headquarters. For example, the Air Force wanted to know "How much damage did our last aerial attack inflict?" Even the dumbest or densest German soldier would gather from this line of questioning that we were planning another attack; he would simply clam up or invoke the Geneva Convention, protecting him from revealing nothing more than his name, rank, and serial number.

Our most successful and rarely used weapon during interrogations was to play on their fears. German POWs were more fearful of being in Russian captivity than anything else. Enter our Russian spokesman: Commissar Krukov a.k.a. Master Sergeant Guy Stern.

I teamed up with Sergeant Fred Howard. He played the soft-hearted American and I played the mean and cold-blooded Russian officer, with the help of Russian uniform parts traded from liberated Russian POWs and medals taken from trophy-seeking German soldiers. I also put a Russian accent in my otherwise flawless German, borrowed from a supporting actor of the Eddie Cantor radio show who played the role of a mad Russian.

As head of the survey section, an additional task was demanded of me. Several of my comrades conducted useful interrogations in answering the questionnaires reaching our commanding officers. It was also my job to consolidate all of the interrogation reports of fellow Ritchie Boys reporting to me.

I had faithfully applied the tactics learned at Camp Ritchie, but frequently now I had to circumvent them. We were told never to interrogate more than one, maximally two prisoners at the same time. They would strengthen each other's

resolve to not give up any useful information. Questionnaires were now reaching us that called for information only obtainable by putting questions to increasing numbers of POWs.

For example, we had to elicit answers about the training, or lack of training of recent German replacements. By the spring of 1945, as the Russians were making their approach to Berlin, Hitler began to forcibly recruit the very old and young, the lame and the halt. "How well were they trained?" our G-1 chief of operations wanted to know. I asked masses of prisoners with the help of a German sergeant who had deserted to us: "How many were trained on a machine gun? Hands up!" I would ask. Or, whenever I needed statistics: "Raise your hands if you have been wounded prior to coming here." At the end of the war, General Hodges lauded me that my statistics had proven vital and accurate. And an even more important question was asked by this method of mass interrogation (little mentioned in the history books): Our highest-ranking officers were concerned that the Germans would end the war as they had in World War I by using poison gas. If the Germans planned that horrible method of waging war, their own troops had to be protected. My methods stayed the same; my questions became more pointed: "How many of you carry a gas mask?" or "How many of you carry protective clothing?" and so on... From their answers, I could report that the Germans were ill-equipped for that devastating tactic.

At this point of my lecture, I am frequently asked "Didn't you interrogate German war criminals?" Actually, that was not our job until the war was coming to a close, say in the spring of 1945. And as it happened, by fortunate circumstances, we captured one of the mass murderers, a physician: Gustav Wilhelm Schübbe. As it so often happens in war, fortuitous circumstances led to the successful extraction of Schübbe's horrifying confession. The day was April 12th, 1945, the day President Roosevelt died; Fred had turned on the radio to listen to the Germans propagandize this solemn event. We also had recently acquired an Austrian non-com, Karl Laun, who had a diary which contained secret German information. Prompted by his sympathy for the Allies and his devout belief in Catholicism, Laun became a trusted informant. And in need of a reliable transcript, Fred borrowed Karl who was a speed-demon to record in German shorthand the statement of prisoners. Fred quickly realized that Schübbe, a morphine addict, had deceived himself into thinking he was in a Gestapo headquarters. Schübbe had quite obviously consumed large doses of morphine and he started a surprisingly informal conversation. "I am Dr. Schübbe, in charge of one of the euthanasia programs. You probably have all that in your files." To which Fred responded, "Well, you will have to prove what you are saying. I will have to ask you some questions." Schübbe quickly confessed the details of his program of planned murder. Karl took down every word. One of the questions Fred asked was "No doubt, you were in sympathy with the euthanasia program?" To which Schübbe answered: "Personally, I was in agreement with the annihilation of individuals unworthy to live, as long as it was not a matter of annihilating people of intelligence, as for example, with the Jews... I maintain that just as one prunes a tree—by removing old, undesirable branches in the spring—so in its own interest a certain hygienic supervision of the body of a people is necessary from time to time." From this quote, we could gather that the Germans, like Schübbe, were wholly committed to their programs of plucking the "undesirable elements" of their "pure" German society.

In a rare departure of not exposing classified information during the war, *Time Magazine* reported on Schübbe's capture, and cited that he personally had overseen the deaths of one hundred and ten thousand to one hundred and forty thousand persons deemed "unworthy to live." He had also coolly added that he personally had killed around twenty-one thousand people.

As for me, and without Fred's help, I had one dramatic encounter with a Nazi war criminal. A German captain had ordered the shooting of a U.S. pilot and his co-pilot after they had crash landed behind German lines; we were asked by the Judge Advocate's Office to find him. I questioned every German POW as they jumped off their trucks. A couple of soldiers from his unit gave us his name and a description. From these efforts, we found him and turned him over to the Judge Advocate. He was convicted and shot. Bruce Henderson who has portrayed 6 Ritchie Boys (including me) in his

successful book *Sons and Soldiers*, secured a photo of the villainous captain from the Signal Corps. In my autobiography *Invisible Ink*, I devoted two chapters to my training at Camp Ritchie and my war experience that I share with so many other brave comrades in arms.

In recent years, a U.S. Army historian assessed the contributions of the Ritchie Boys during the war and found that “About 62% of all usable intelligence was supplied by the Ritchie Boys.” Whenever I still meet some of the surviving members of this intelligence outfit, we talk of our own war and take a bit of pride. Of course, that is true of virtually all U.S. GIs, and it is certainly true of me.

The importance of learning from negative events in the past is, of course, to avoid repeating them. The mission of the World War II Legacy Memorial is to “bridge generations by honoring Michigan’s legacy of ingenuity, sacrifice, and commitment on the warfront and home front to inspire all generations.” Given these ideals that I fully agree with, I am deeply honored to receive this award tonight.

I have visited many war memorials in both Europe and in the United States. And I find that the important lesson from all of these memorials is, to never forget and honor the sacrifices made by what has been called in the U.S. by many “the Greatest Generation.” The World War II Legacy Memorial, planned to be in Memorial Park in Royal Oak, will surely inspire viewers to pay tribute to Michigan’s fallen and strive to remember the importance of not repeating the mistakes of the past. History, ladies and gentlemen, DOES matter.

Dr. Guy Stern