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LIFE | FIVE BEST | :

Neal Bascomb

on wartime secret missions

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Seven Men at Daybreak

By Alan Burgess (1960)

1. Reinhard Heydrich, SS general and Reichsprotektor of Bohemia and Moravia, was one of the most powerful and feared of the Third Reich's leaders. A main planner of the Final Solution, he controlled the secret police and all its apparatus of terror. For the job of assassinating him, the Allies chose two young Czech resistance fighters, Jan Kubiš and Jozef Gabčík. Kubiš supposedly carried a particularly strong reminder of the German invaders of his country—seven small black swastikas they had a few years earlier burned into his skin with a red hot iron. Alan Burgess brings a novelist's eye to this history, a work of nearly unbearable suspense. Czech military intelligence officers exiled in England understood what they were doing in picking the assassins, he writes: "They knew you do not fashion assassins by appealing only to their patriotic instincts.... You pick the man who will persevere in spite of the dangers and difficulties.... You pick a man with seven swastikas branded on his buttocks." Riveting preparations precede the fateful moment when a "bursting grenade exploded fine splinters of steel... into the spleen and lumbar region of Heydrich's back." The tension ratchets up from there, as do the tests of conscience. Who among the Czechs will be willing to help the fleeing assassins? Heydrich's killers are ultimately trapped in a church's dark crypt, where they die, but not before killing scores of the SS in a heroic last stand that remains one of the most remarkable battles in World War II special-operations history.

The Auschwitz Volunteer

By Witold Pilecki (2000)

2. In 1940, Polish cavalry officer Witold Pilecki volunteered for an almost



Mr. Bascomb is the author, most recently, of 'The Winter Fortress: The Epic Mission to Sabotage Hitler's Bomb.'

PHOTO: MERYL SCHENKER

unimaginably brave mission—namely, to get himself arrested by the Nazis, be delivered to Auschwitz, and, once there, build a resistance group and collect intelligence on the camp. On his arrival, he failed to hold his prison number properly; as punishment, Pilecki recounts, “I was hit on the chin with a heavy club. I spat out the two [front] teeth. I bled a little. . . . Par for the course. From that moment on we were just numbers.” Much of his nearly three-year odyssey of survival is documented in this understated way—the brutality and horrors he records need no embellishment. Of the effects of Auschwitz, he writes: “We were cut with a sharp instrument. Its blade bit painfully into our bodies, yet, in our souls, it found fields to till.” This posthumously published report, and those Pilecki smuggled out before his daring escape, were some of the first to reveal the horrors of the Final Solution.

Operation Mincemeat

By Ben Macintyre (2010)

3. According to Winston Churchill, Sicily was the “soft underbelly of the Axis.” If the Allies could take it, they would have an open door into Italy, then onward to Berlin. To trick the Nazis into believing that they had no need to defend Sicily, two British naval officers concocted a plan to plant false intelligence on a dead body that would wash ashore in Spain. To succeed in getting the Germans to believe this intelligence would be no easy matter. Still, succeed Operation Mincemeat did, and in this delectably entertaining account Ben Macintyre hashes out the hows and the whys, including a few details about Glyndwr Michael, the homeless man whose body was retrieved from a London morgue and pressed into service as a dead Royal Marines captain. The overall operation that saved countless lives was a bargain, as one of the planners later recalled: “one specially made canister, one battledress uniform, some dry ice, the time of a few officers, a van drive to Scotland and back.”

At Dawn We Slept

By Gordon W. Prange (1981)

4. This magisterial study of the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor is enriched by its character portraits. Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, the commander in chief of Japan’s combined fleet and the architect of the attack, was, we learn, an inveterate gambler who treasured maxims to live by, among them: “An efficient hawk hides his claws.” Before the mission, one Japanese sub-lieutenant “donned clean clothing so that he would go into battle spotless, like the samurai of old.” The description of the havoc that followed the attack is gripping in color and intensity. All told, a work that paints an enthralling canvas of this most pivotal moment in World War II.

Ghost Soldiers

By Hampton Sides (2001)

5. In 1945, hundreds of Allied soldiers were wasting away in a Japanese-run prison camp outside the Philippine town of Cabanatuan. Already these POWs had survived the Bataan Death March, then years of starvation and punishment. Hampton Sides chronicles their suffering in memorable detail: “People lost their voices. People lost their hair. They lost eyes, they lost hearing. . . . Their teeth fell out.” The book describes the operation by the U.S. Army’s Sixth Ranger Battalion and Filipino guerrillas to rescue the POWs, who American commanders believed

might soon be executed. With a seductive narrative voice, Mr. Sides brings readers to the heart of this camp and into the lives of these prisoners, including some unforgettably selfless and heroic ones, and into the lives of the Rangers who came to save them.

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