

OPERATION **EICHE**

The Rescue of Benito Mussolini



By the United States Army Special Operations Command History Office

Even after the war ended, Skorzeny and his wartime operations continued to be a topic of interest as he waited to appear before a denazification court. This was captured in a 9 August 1948 article in *Time* magazine:

“Token from Der Fuhrer

He had been a lieutenant colonel in Hitler’s Elite Guard. He was intelligent, cunning, courageous. His face—ice-blue eyes, sabre-scarred chin, thin contemptuous smile—was a symbol of Nazi fanaticism. He denied most of the legends that had grown around his name (one: that he had been assigned to assassinate General Dwight D. Eisenhower. Said he: “Only a rumor. You can be sure that if any attempt had been made it would have succeeded”). But the truth about Otto Skorzeny was impressive enough.

In the summer of 1943, after Mussolini had become the prisoner of Italy’s Badoglio Government, it was Skorzeny whom Hitler personally assigned to rescue the Duce. After weeks of dime-thriller spy work he located Mussolini in a remote hotel on the 5,560-ft. peak of the Gran Sasso in the Abruzzo Mountains northeast of Rome. He led an assault which reached the hotel by crashlanding gliders against the mountainside. Skorzeny reported: “Duce, the Führer has sent me as a token of his loyal friendship.” They flew out together in a tiny plane which had to take off by dropping 1,000 feet over a precipice.

Skorzeny surrendered to U.S. troops at Salzburg, in 1945. Since then, he had been in prison, first at Dachau, then at Darmstadt. His war-crimes trial, on charges of torturing U.S. prisoners, resulted in acquittal; but he was held in custody because a denazification court had not yet gotten around to his case. Last week he escaped. Somewhere in Germany, Otto Skorzeny had gone underground.”



Article: *Time* magazine, August 9, 1948.
Photo: U.S. Army Signal Corps.

Introduction

In November 1946, a U.S. Army combat infantry battalion commander, somewhat bored with postwar Occupation duty, volunteered for the 7734th Historical Detachment. Charged with interviewing captured German senior officers, Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Theodore C. Mataxis, a National Guard officer from Seattle, Washington, formed a lifelong professional relationship with SS Major (MAJ) Otto Skorzeny. It was he who located and rescued the Italian *Il Duce*, Benito Mussolini, from his captivity on the Gran Sasso. LTC Mataxis, personally fascinated by this special operations mission, assisted in the debriefing of the “Commando Extraordinary” and his adjutant, MAJ Karl Radl.¹ The two were among the many senior officers being held in the Oberursel POW Camp in 1947, after being exonerated of war crimes by the Allied tribunal at Nurnberg. An inveterate professional ‘pack rat,’ LTC Mataxis kept a carbon paper copy of the original Gran Sasso interview. His son, LTC (ret) Theodore C. Mataxis Jr, shared that copy with the USASOC History Office.

The purpose of this collective essay is to graphically illustrate the Adolf Hitler-dictated rescue using period *Bundesarkive* photographs of the operation and rescue aircraft. It required considerable ‘manhunting’ to find *Il Duce* after he was secreted away on 25 July 1943 by the Italian national police. These Carabinieri were acting under orders from the Italian King Victor Emmanuel III. With Rome under Allied attack, King Victor Emmanuel was anxious to break ties with Germany and gain an armistice. Disinformation masked Mussolini’s disposition. Germany scrambled to reinforce Italy after the Allied invasion at Salerno on 3 September 1943. Allied air superiority complicated the secret rescue operation. Mussolini was positively located on the Gran Sasso days before the Italian king announced an armistice. A fortnight later MAJ Skorzeny’s airborne commandos swept down upon the alpine ‘prison.’ The surprise rescue of *Il Duce* proved to be a major Nazi Psywar coup that boosted military and civilian morale. It was true to the motto of Britain’s 22nd Special Air Service (22 SAS), “*Who dares, wins*”—the critical element of success in special operations.

“However, as soldiers and optimists we believed in our mission and knew that, should even the merest possibility offer itself, we should take hold of it and do our duties as true soldiers.”²

— SS Sturmbannführer Otto Skorzeny



Prime Minister Benito Mussolini



Prime Minister Pietro Badoglio

25 July 1943 Italian Prime Minister Benito Mussolini was dismissed by King Victor Emmanuel III, arrested and kept in custody by the government of the new Prime Minister of Italy, Pietro Badoglio.

26 July 1943 Hitler gave SS *Hauptsturmfuehrer* Skorzeny the mission to locate and rescue Mussolini in Italy.

“Adolf Hitler outlined in a few precise words his train of ideas.... The thought of his [Mussolini] imprisonment was unbearable and he [Hitler] regarded his rescue as an absolute duty as his friend.... He placed me under the command of Gen. Oberst Student. Details I was to discuss with Gen. Oberst Student. With these instructions I was discharged.”

Note: Gen. Oberst Student was the architect of the German airborne assault on Crete in May 1941.



Skorzeny's Adjutant
Oberleutnant Karl Radl



Skorzeny ordered his deputy (Karl Radl) to select 50 of his *Jagdverbände* 502 commandos for the mission.

“50 men of my Jaeger Btl. Among these 10 officers and all men with a fair knowledge of Italian were to assemble the next morning on the Berlin airfield.”

27 July 1943 Skorzeny and General Kurt Student flew to Rome and met with Field Marshall Albert Kesselring.

"No one had the faintest idea that Generaloberst Student and I were entrusted with locating the whereabouts of the Duce and with effecting his rescue."

29 July 1943 Skorzeny's commandos and elements of the Luftwaffe XI Air Corps established a base camp close to Rome's Pratica di Mare Airport.

"Most of my men were trained parachutists."



Feldmarschall
Albert Kesselring



Generaloberst Kurt Student

July – August 1943 Skorzeny and Radl discovered Mussolini had been moved from the island of Ponza, to La Spezia, and then the naval fortress on Maddalena Island off Sardinia.

18 August 1943
Radl developed the plan for Mussolini's rescue from Maddalena Island.

28 August 1943
Flown by seaplane from Maddalena to the Gran Sasso, Mussolini was confined in the Hotel Campo Imperatore.



Italian CANT Z 506



7 September 1943

U. S. Major General Maxwell D. Taylor secretly arrived in Italy to discuss the pending armistice with the Badoglio government.



Major General Maxwell D. Taylor



MG Taylor and Prime Minister Badoglio

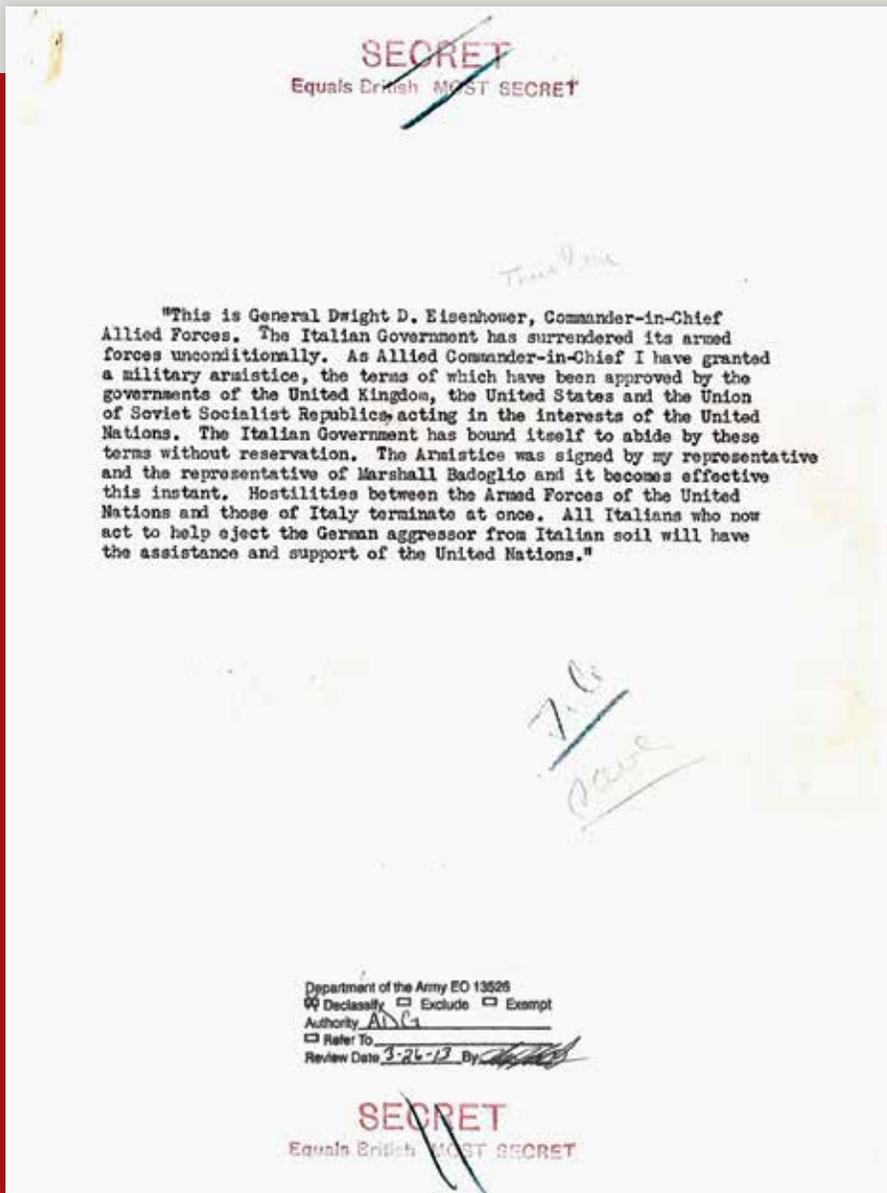
*"Badoglio was far more deathly afraid of the Germans than of the Allies. The preservation of Rome from German reprisals was much more important than participation in any military operation that might facilitate the Allied landing, but would endanger the city."*³

"In the meantime the general position on the front had deteriorated rapidly. The allies had made successful landings in Sicily, and we had to send off one of our parachute divisions, to strengthen the front there."

8 September 1943

Skorzeny and Radl conducted an aerial reconnaissance of Gran Sasso at the same time the Italians signed the armistice and isolated the Germans in Rome. Undeterred, Skorzeny continued to search for Mussolini. This included a cover story whereby military doctors would visit Gran Sasso to determine its suitability as a malaria clinic.

"Carefully weighing our chances my adjutant and I came to a disheartening result. We could only even give ourselves a very slight chance of success. But the order was there and we soldiers must carry it out. I went to my men and lined them up. I told them I was expecting in the next few days an order to undertake a most dangerous mission, and that we stood a damned small chance of 'pulling it off' and of surviving."



Dwight D. Eisenhower

"This is General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Commander-in-Chief Allied Forces. The Italian Government has surrendered its armed forces unconditionally. As Allied Commander-in-Chief I have granted a military armistice, the terms of which have been approved by the governments of the United Kingdom, the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, acting in the interests of the United Nations. The Italian Government has bound itself to abide by these terms without reservation. The Armistice was signed by my representative and the representative of Marshall Badoglio and it becomes effective this instant. Hostilities between the Armed Forces of the United Nations and those of Italy terminate at once. All Italians who now act to help eject the German aggressor from Italian soil will have the assistance and support of the United Nations."

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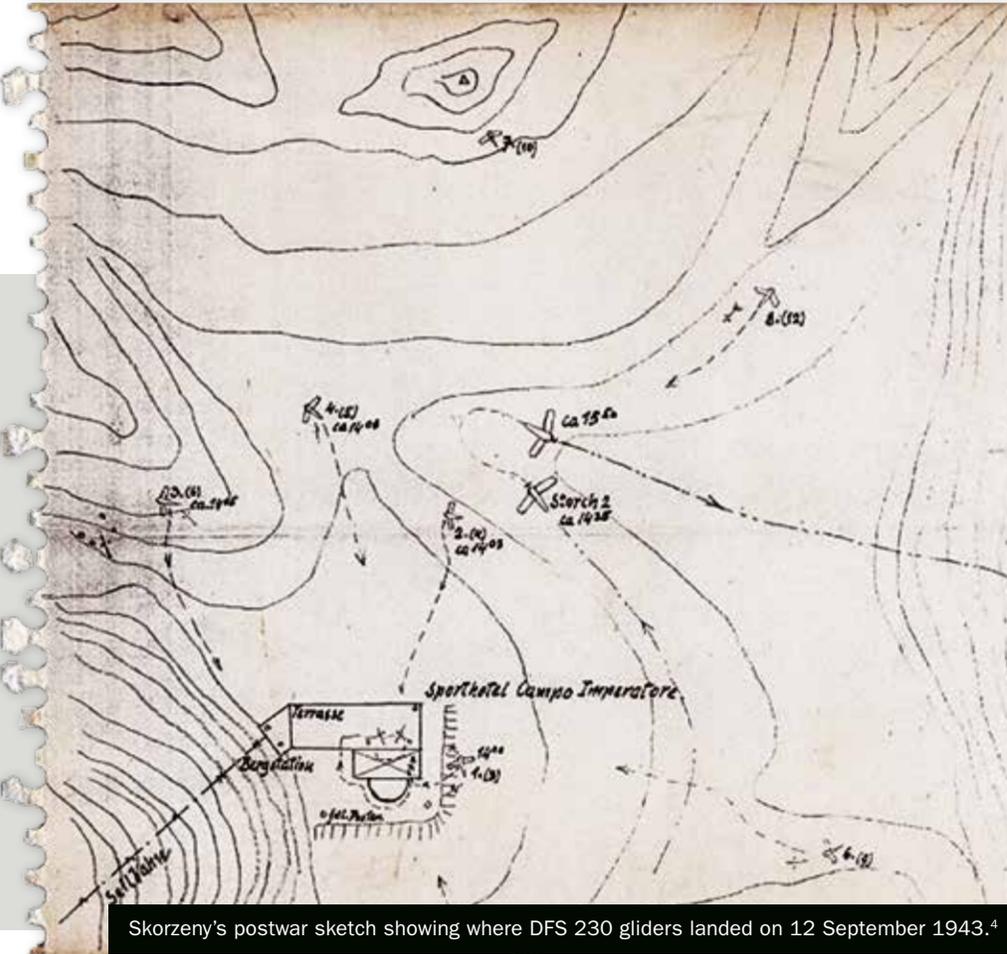
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10-11 September 1943 Skorzeny refined the rescue plan to use twelve DFS 230 gliders, assault Gran Sasso by air, and be supported by Major Otto-Harald Mors and a parachute battalion whose vehicle convoy would secure the lower end of the funicular railway between the village and Gran Sasso.



Major Otto-Harald Mors

"I outlined together with Radl our plan of action and presented it to Gen. Oberst Student. We wanted to land with gliders near the hotel and to overpower its garrison in a surprise attack. A strong detachment was simultaneously to creep up the valley (Avessano), to seize the Telphar-li-ne station, and to cover our retreat."



Skorzeny's postwar sketch showing where DFS 230 gliders landed on 12 September 1943.⁴



Hotel Campo Imperatore



German airborne ground assault force



Loading DFS 230 glider for the assault



Position of gliders at Gran Sasso



Skorzeny's glider

➤ **12 September 1943** After several delays, the attack force was airborne shortly before 1300 hours. Skorzeny in the third glider took the lead when the first two disappeared in the clouds.

"I expressly gave orders that come what may, no person was to open fire before I myself fired the opening shot. Should I be wounded or killed, then the first shot was to be given by one of the officers accompanying me."

"It was certain that no one expected an attack from the air and this was our one and only chance to 'pull it off.'"



Four minutes after landing, Skorzeny bluffed the 200-man Italian guard force into surrendering, and had Mussolini under German control. Then the Italian *Carabinieri* joined in the photo shoot.

"Not a rifle was lifted against us." "I reported to him [Mussolini] with the words: 'Duce, the Fuehrer has sent me as a token of his loyal friendship.'"

Lack of radio contact with Rome removed the planned aircraft extraction of Mussolini from the L'Aquila airfield. The last option was for General Student's personal pilot, Captain Heinrich Gerlach, to land his Fieseler 156C-3 *Storch* next to the hotel, pick-up Skorzeny and Mussolini, take off, and land at Rome's Pratica di Mare Airport.

"Our radio communications with Rome had broken down. I therefore had to take recourse to the second possibility."

"Now the last and most dangerous course was only left open to us. This 'storch,' piloted by a Captain who was the personal pilot of Generaloberst Student, was already circling the Hotel." →



Hauptmann Heinrich Gerlach



Assault force salutes Mussolini and Skorzeny

"On the other hand, I could not risk letting Mussolini start off alone, since all the responsibility would rest upon my shoulders should a mishap occur."



Fieseler Fi 156C-3 Storch

Thirty minutes after take-off Skorzeny and Mussolini landed at Practica di Mare, transferred to a *Heinkel He 111* medium bomber, and flew to Vienna, Austria.



"Shortly before midnight I was decorated by a General Staff Colonel of the Army in the name of Adolf Hitler with the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross... . The next day we continued our flight to the Fuehrer HQ in East Prussia... . I had to report and give a detailed account of our enterprise from beginning to end. Two days later I returned by air to Italy to fetch my men. As a reward we were given permission to cross Italy and the beautiful southern Tyrol in a motorized march to Innsbruck... . From Innsbruck we continued our journey by train to Friedenthal. Finally we were all given our well-earned leave."

13 September 1943 Hitler called and congratulated Skorzeny, awarded him the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross, and promoted him to *Sturmbannführer* (Major). ♣



Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross



Analysis from: **SPEC OPS** by ADM William H. McRaven

The mission was well worth the risk for the following reasons:

1. Hitler demonstrated that he was prepared to take extraordinary steps to save his friends and allies.
2. The raid showed the continued professionalism of the German armed forces.
3. The mission may have actually forestalled some Italian resistance in the last two years of the war.
4. Nazi propaganda minister, Josef Goebbels, used the operation to promote the image of German superiority and instill fear among the Allies.
5. The mission established a precedent for future commando operations.⁵

Endnotes

- 1 Charles Foley, *Commando Extraordinary* (Reprinted [1957]; Ballantine Books, New York, 1957), *passim*.
- 2 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations used throughout this article were obtained from the manuscript: Skorzeny, Otto, "My Rescue of Mussolini, 12 September 1943," (obtained by the Historical Division EUCOM, 27 July 1947), Maxis Collection, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 3 Maxwell D. Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1972), 58.
- 4 Otto Skorzeny, "Skorzeny's postwar sketch showing where DFS 230 gliders landed on 12 September 1943," National Archives Records Administration, Washington, DC, on internet at: http://hitlersraid.com/images/Sketch_hotel_02.JPG. Accessed on 6 October 2014.
- 5 William H. McRaven, *SPEC OPS: Case Studies in Special Operations Theory and Practice* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1995), 188.

The Mataxis Legacy

BG Theodore C. Mataxis (Retired)

17 Aug 1917 - 8 Mar 2006 POB: Seattle, WA

- » H.S.: Lincoln H.S., Seattle, WA, 1936
- » 41st ID WANG BPED: 18 Oct 39, PVT to CPL, F Co, 116th QM Rgt & B Btry, 205th Coast Artillery Bn (AA), Camp Murray, Fort Lewis, WA
- » UW '40, RTC NG 2LT 8 Jun 40, PL, Co Cdr, 1st Bn S-1, 20th Inf Rgt (Fort Benning, GA) & cadre 6th Rgt, 70th ID, Fort Warren, WY, July 40-Jul 41
- » E Co Cdr & cadre HHC Cdr, Bn XO, and Bn S-3, 361st Inf Regt, 91st ID, Camp White, OR, Jul 41-Feb 43
- » USACGSC, Ft Leavenworth, KS, Feb-Apr 43
- » Asst G-3 & Bn XO & Cdr, 2/276th Inf Rgt, 70th ID, Camp Adair, OR & ETO, Apr 43-Aug 45
- » Bn XO & Cdr (1/3 Inf & 2/3 Inf) & Rgt XO, 3rd ID, Germany, Aug 45-Nov 46
- » 7734th History Det, US Forces European Theater & DCO 7808th SCU, Nov 46-Dec 47
- » G2 & G3 First Army, NY City & Strategic Intelligence School, Jan 48-Jul 50
- » Indian Staff College, New Delhi, India & UN Mil Observer India/Pakistan Border, Jul 50-Jul 52
- » XO to G-2, EUSA & Rgt XO & Cdr 17th Inf, 7th ID, Korea, July 52-Jun 53
- » Infantry Tactics Instructor, Fort Benning, GA, Jul 53-Aug 57
- » Army War College, Aug 57-Jun 58
- » Cof S, 8th ID, Dep Bde Cdr & Cdr, 1st ABG, 505th Inf, Mainz, FRG, Jul 58-Sep 61
- » Dep Chief, US Army Strategic & Tactical Analysis Gp, Bethesda, MD, Sep 61-Jul 62
- » XO, CJCS, Washington, DC, Jul 62-Jul 64
- » DLI Vietnamese & MATA Course, II Corps Sr Advisor, MACV & DCO, 1st Bde, 101st Abn Div, RVN, Jul 64-Aug 66
- » Div Chief, ODCSOPS, DA, Washington, DC, Sep 66-Apr 67
- » ADC (M), 82nd Abn Div, Fort Bragg, NC, Apr 67-Apr 68; Army Chief, MAAG-Iran, Apr 68-Jun 70, Tehran, Iran
- » ADC (M), 23rd ID, RVN, Jun 70-Feb 71
- » Chief, Military Equipment Deployment Team, Cambodia (MEDTC), Feb 71-Feb 72.

LTC Theodore C. Mataxis Jr. (Retired)

DOB: 6 Sep 1944 POB: Seattle, WA

- » H.S.: Walter Johnson H. S., Bethesda, MD, 1963
- » USAR BPED: 20 Oct 1962, 2nd, 11th, 18th, and 20th SFGs (USAR)
- » BCT: Jun 1963, Ft Knox, KY
- » AIT & Abn School: Sep 1963-Jan 1964, Ft Benning, GA
- » SFEQC, Ft Bragg, NC, May-Aug 1966
- » Gordon Military College 1967, commissioned 2LT USAR; IOBC, Rgr School & PL, A Co, 1/504 Inf, 82nd Abn Div, Ft Bragg, NC, Jan-Oct 69
- » PL, B Co, Bn S-5, S-2, D Co Cdr, 3/187th, 101st Abn Div
- » ARVN Abn Div advisor
- » G Rgr Co Cdr, 23rd ID
- » ARVN Border Rgr advisor, Nov 69-Jan 72, RVN
- » S-3 & ODA Cdr, MFF, A Co, 3/5th SFG, Ft Bragg, NC, Jan 72-Jul 74
- » IOAC 7-74 then Rgr Dept, Camp Darby & S-3 Ops, 1975-78
- » Iran FAO (Ft Bragg) & DLI Farsi, 1978-79
- » CSC Cdr & Bn S-3, 1/18th Inf, G-3 Current Ops, 1st ID, Ft Riley, KS, 1979-1981
- » AFSC, Norfolk, VA, 1982
- » JSOC J-3 Exercises & Evaluations, Ft Bragg, NC, & Grenada, 1982-87
- » XO & DCO, 7th SFG, 1987-88; Senior OPATT, El Salvador, 1988-89
- » 3rd SFG Activation Cell & USASOC Current Ops, Fort Bragg, NC, Jun 89-Jun 90
- » XO & DCO, 3rd SFG, Ft Bragg, NC, Jun 90-Jun 93

