

During World War II the U.S. War Department accredited some 500 correspondents to cover American military forces in the field. Among the reporters were such names as Scripps-Howard's Ernie Pyle; UPI's Walter Cronkite; Hal Boyle, Larry Allen and Lynn Heinzerling of the Associated Press; the *New York Herald Tribune's* Marguerite Higgins; and *Time* magazine's John Hersey.

Sadly, 54 correspondents—including Pyle—were killed in action, falling to enemy fire on land and sea and in the air. Each of these deaths was tragic, but one stands out for its unique circumstances: Joe Morton of the Associated Press holds the dubious double distinction of being the first American war correspondent executed by a foreign enemy in wartime and the only Allied correspondent executed by the Axis during World War II.

Joseph Morton Jr. was born in St. Joseph, Mo., in 1911. The son of an attorney, Morton attended the University of Nebraska and the University of Iowa, where his skill as a wordsmith eventually led to a career in journalism. He wrote for the *St. Joseph News-Press* and the *Gazette*, *The Des Moines Register* and *The Omaha Bee-News*. Two years after marrying Letty Miller in 1935, Morton joined the Associated Press in Lincoln, Neb.



Members of a black Army engineer task force pose in their ship bunks while en route to Liberia in 1942 to build an Allied military base. The War Department, citing security, embargoed Morton's reports for months.

Morton earned quick promotion from Lincoln to AP's bureau in Omaha and later Cleveland. In 1940 he moved up to the agency's New York office, working as an editor. He had long wanted to be a foreign correspondent, however, and in May 1942 he jumped at the chance to go abroad.

His initial wartime assignment did not go as well as he had hoped. Boarding a troopship bound for Liberia, Morton was to cover the embarked task force of black U.S. soldiers whose secret mission was to build an Allied military base in the heart of West Africa. But due to the classified nature of the mission the War Department embargoed Morton's stories for months. Not until early December, when the department officially disclosed the presence of Allied forces in Liberia, was he permitted to file.

Meanwhile, after German forces capitulated in French West Africa and American troops headed for Dakar, Morton traveled overland and reached the French colonial capital 20 days before any other correspondent. He contracted dysentery but was released from the hospital in time to talk his way aboard the formerly Vichy French battleship *Richelieu*, which left Dakar for refitting in New York in late January 1943. He was the only reporter aboard.

On July 19, 1943, Morton became one of the first Allied correspondents to see Rome since the start of the war. He achieved that feat aboard a Martin B-26 Marauder bomber participating in the first American air raid on the Italian capital and reported in vivid firsthand detail the aerial assault on the city's rail yards. Later that summer, during the invasion of Sicily, Morton talked the U.S. Army Air Forces into flying his jeep to the island, enabling him to run circles around his fellow journalists.

Soon after returning stateside in September 1943 for treatment of his persistent dysentery, Morton learned he was to become a father. Family members and friends quietly hoped impending parenthood on the home front would give him pause about taking risks on the war front, but apparently that was not in his professional nature.

Morton returned to Europe, and after the June 1944 fall of Rome he expanded his coverage into the Balkans. In August he accompanied Major Walter Ross, chief of operations for the Office of Strategic Services, to Romania, where Morton became the first American correspondent to report on the entry of Soviet troops into Bucharest. He returned to the Romanian capital in early September to cover Operation Reunion, the evacuation of newly liberated American airmen, held as POWs since being shot down in August 1943 while



The July 19, 1943, air raid on Rome targeted its rail yards. Morton, who observed from a B-26 Marauder, was among the first Allied correspondents to see Rome since the start of the war.

raiding the Ploiești oil fields. The wily Morton had flown there aboard a Fifteenth Air Force bomber and was again the only Allied reporter present.

As soon as he landed in Bucharest, Morton raced off to the royal palace to get the scoop on how Romania's 22-year-old monarch, King Michael I, had recently summoned the fascist Prime Minister Ion Antonescu to the royal palace, had him seized by guards and then proclaimed Romania's allegiance to the Allies.

In the late afternoon Morton met the young king, Queen Mother Helen and various aides and advisers. Throughout that evening and the next day the American correspondent and the Romanian royals swapped stories about politics, the war, rationing, sports and Hollywood. They played table tennis and toured the estate by car. Morton left the following day, wrapping all the details of his visit into a widely published story, the first to explain events leading to the ouster of Antonescu.

Expressing a particular interest in clandestine operations, Morton was allowed to cover missions undertaken by the OSS and the Fifteenth Air Force in the Balkans to rescue downed American airmen and support anti-Nazi partisans. The OSS, established by President Franklin Roosevelt's military order in 1942, had teamed up with the British Special Operations Executive to send agents in support of the Slovak National Uprising, a resistance movement launched against the Nazis in August 1944. The Fifteenth Air Force, based at Bari Airfield, Italy, transported the agents into Slovakia. On Sept. 17, 1944, a six-member team departed Bari in two B-17G Flying Fortresses, landing the huge bombers behind enemy lines for the first time. In the successful mission they rescued 14 American and two Australian airmen.

At the OSS base in Bari, Morton learned of a similar but far more dramatic mission to Slovakia in the works. It was



Eager to cover clandestine operations, Morton began reporting on OSS and Fifteenth Air Force missions from Bari, Italy, writing about rescue missions and the tense situation in Romania.

to be led by Navy Lieutenant James Holt Green and would include intelligence officers, weapons and demolition experts, translators and a radio operator. Six B-17s—escorted by 32 P-51 Mustang fighters—would transport the OSS and SOE agents and their equipment, as well as a cache of arms and ammunition for the partisans.

Meanwhile, an additional 20,000 German soldiers had entered Slovakia in an effort to quell the uprising, and by September it was clear the Slovak fighters were losing ground, the revolt nearing collapse. Green, stationed in the rebel capital of Banská Bystrica, reported to OSS headquarters that the German offensive was closing in and “would probably be successful. Situation here is considered hope-

less.” He advised against sending in more agents. However, despite Green’s warnings, his superiors in Bari decided to proceed with the larger second mission.

During the last week of September, Morton phoned the AP bureau in Rome seeking authorization to shadow a mission he said would require two to three weeks. Morton shared no specifics of the operation, but the bureau editor surmised it would be similar to earlier trips the reporter had covered—flying supplies, weapons and ammo to Slovak partisans and returning with rescued Allied flyers. Morton got his approval, provided he would return on the next available flight.

Before leaving Bari with portable typewriter in hand, Morton sent a dispatch to the AP bureau in Rome announcing

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his departure. He provided no further details on the assignment but said, "I'm off on the biggest story of my life."

The planes took off from Bari on the morning of October 7 and flew over the Allied air base at Foggia on the Adriatic coast. To avoid suspicion the aircraft continued north, joining a scheduled bombing mission. As the formation crossed the Alps and entered Austrian airspace, the B-17s carrying Morton and the OSS/SOE team dropped out and headed northeast toward Slovakia.

Hundreds of cheering Slovak partisans were on hand when the bombers landed at Tri Duby airfield. The B-17s remained on the ground about 30 minutes, the fighters circling protectively overhead while 28 Allied airmen boarded for the return flight to Italy. Major Ross, the OSS operations chief, was walking to one of the waiting planes when he spied Morton pecking away on his typewriter, set atop a box beneath a wing of one of the huge bombers. "Aren't you coming with us?" he asked the journalist.

Morton, the only Western journalist in the region and a man who knew a scoop when he saw one, said he had decided to remain in Banská Bystrica with the OSS/SOE team to cover the Slovak uprising. He asked Ross to carry his hastily written story on the latest rescue of downed airmen back to Bari. Ross did so, but military censors deemed the piece too revealing and never passed it on to the AP bureau in Rome.

No one would hear directly from Morton again.

Morton only spent a brief time in Banská Bystrica, but he made every minute count. Seeking a balanced understanding of the Slovak uprising, he interviewed its communist supporters as well as the nationalists. Cecilia Wojewoda, a Polish journalist who had fled Hungary with her husband and was working for a Slovak news service in support of the uprising, described Morton as having "a sort of recklessness" about him, "a carelessness of a fine sort" that "made only his work important for him."

The German encirclement of Banská Bystrica tightened following the departure of the U.S. aircraft. OSS headquarters in Bari put together a rescue mission, but bad weather grounded all aircraft. On October 25, as organized resistance by the Slovak forces collapsed, most of the Americans—comprising the OSS team and remaining airmen—traveled by bus to Donovaly, about 16 miles north. However, Morton and Navy Lieutenant James Gaul, an OSS team member, remained in the threatened city a further two days. With only hours to spare, they left with translator Josef Piontek and joined the column of soldiers, partisans and



The Red Army occupied Bucharest, top, after Romanian King Michael I switched his nation's allegiance to the Allies in August 1944. Morton, in the company of OSS agents, was the first American to report on the Soviets' entry. Bottom, Romanian Prime Minister Ion Antonescu (seated on left) and family meet Queen Mother Helen and King Michael (far right) in a more cordial meeting months before the royal coup.

civilians fleeing into the mountains. En route the refugees took fire from German aircraft and artillery and faced relentless pursuit by enemy ground units. All was chaos.

Morton, Gaul and Piontek eventually linked up with the Americans from Donovaly. Among the latter was 23-year-old Maria Gulovich, a multilingual Slovakian schoolteacher recruited by the OSS as a guide and translator. The consolidated group decided to withdraw farther into the Tatra Mountains and make for the Soviet lines, thought to be about a week's march away.

For six weeks Morton, members of the OSS team, partisans and others evaded their German pursuers in the thick forests, seeking to reach the front lines of the advancing Red Army. The



U.S. Navy Lieutenant James Gaul remained with Morton in Banská Bystrica for two tense days after other OSS members had fled the encircled city.

weather was a constant threat. Howling winds, a blizzard, crippling icy streams that froze boot leather to skin—all took their toll. Some desperate souls slaughtered packhorses for food. Scores froze to death. Others suffered frostbite and pneumonia.

Morton had tucked packets of antimicrobial sulfa powder in the hatband of his uniform cap and shared them with Gulovich and Nelson Paris, a U.S. Navy photographer. “Many times others could walk much better than we did,” Gulovich later recalled, “so we kind of stayed together. That powder helped.... Our wounds started healing after application.” All three were soon on the mend, but others were not so lucky—one group of 83 partisans who chose to sit out the storm all froze to death.

In late November, after escaping another German attack, the group headed for the central Slovakian village of Polomka, reaching it on December 14 after several close calls with German patrols. As a blizzard closed in, Morton and companions, joined by a few SOE agents, made a six-hour uphill slog to a remote mountainside retreat.

On Christmas Eve the OSS/SOE team members held a party in the hut, which they had decorated with drawings of American and British flags and a small tree adorned with stars cut from red and blue paper. On Christmas Day the group celebrated with a holiday feast—black bread and thin soup.

It was at that point Gulovich, two Americans and two Brits left for another partisan hideout some two hours away. Gulovich said Morton “walked with us half an hour or longer, and then he said, ‘Well, I have to go back,’ and we hugged.” Years later she recalled their parting. “Joe wore a hat, a green knitted cap. I turned back after he left me. I can see it even now. He was walking alone with that green hat on top of his head.”

After two more weeks of hiking in bitter temps, Gulovich and team did finally reach Soviet lines, only to face arrest and interrogation by secret police who suspected them of being spies. Taken to Bucharest, they soon secured release through diplomatic channels.

As difficult as conditions were for Morton and the others who remained in the hut, things soon got considerably worse. On the day after Christmas some 300 troops of a German anti-partisan unit, operating on a tip from a local Nazi sympathizer, stormed the cabin, captured its occupants and then burned the structure to the ground.

Their captors first took Morton and the others to Bratislava for initial questioning, after which they were transported by truck to the Mauthausen concentration camp, east of Linz, Austria. There the OSS agents faced further interrogation and torture under the direction of Gestapo officers. Postwar testimony described how interrogators placed Holt Green in a crouch, his hands tied behind his knees, then severely whipped him across the face and buttocks till his blood ran freely. They bound another agent’s hands behind his back before suspending him from the ceiling by a chain wrapped around his wrists.

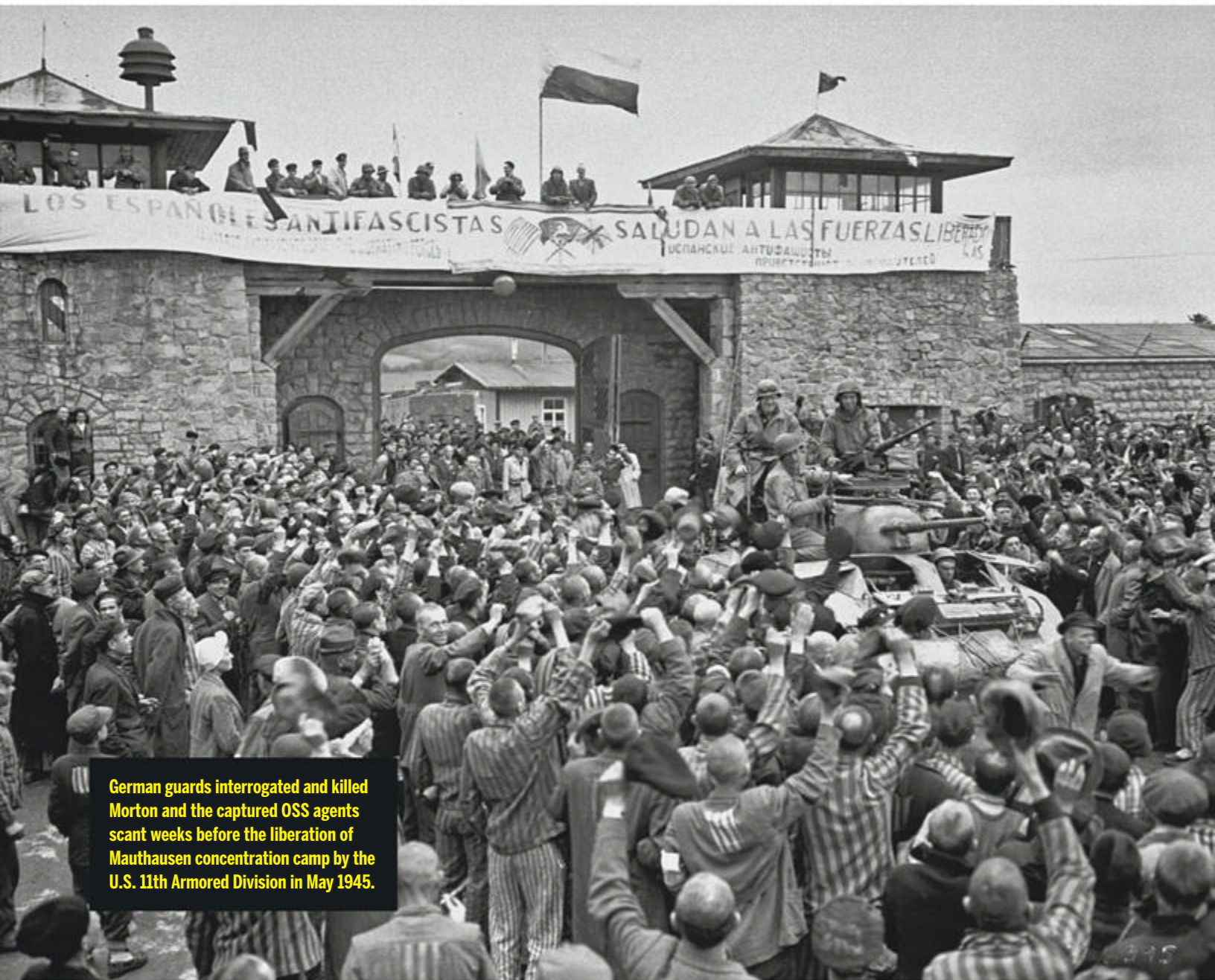
A uniformed Morton, protesting that he was not a soldier but an Associated Press reporter, pointed to his war correspondent’s insignia and even produced his ID card. But while he was not harmed during the interrogations, his status was ultimately of no help. On Jan. 24, 1945, a telegram from SS headquarters in Berlin ordered the Mauthausen commander to execute all members of the Slovak mission.

The death warrant was based on Adolf Hitler’s Oct. 18, 1942, order to ignore the Geneva Convention on the treatment of POWs and execute any Allied commandos captured behind German lines. The order, of which only 12 copies were distributed, declared, in part, “From now on all enemies on so-called commando missions in Europe or Africa challenged by German troops, even if they are to all appearances soldiers in uniform or demolition troops, whether armed or unarmed, in battle or in flight, are to be slaughtered to the last man.”

SS guards set up a camera in Mauthausen’s execution room. The prisoners, lined up in the courtyard outside, were individually escorted into the room and told they were to be photographed. As each man turned to face the camera, a guard with a pistol stepped in and shot him in the nape of the neck. Their bodies were cremated.

Allied investigators and the OSS received the first definitive information about Joe Morton’s fate in April 1945 after Allied troops captured Werner Müller, who had served as translator during the interrogations of the OSS agents at Mauthausen. He accurately recalled the names of the OSS agents and specifically mentioned “AP reporter Morton.” OSS investigators sat on the information until further proof surfaced.

The details of Morton’s fate remained a secret until war’s end, when fellow AP correspondent Lynn Heinzerling was assigned to investigate the disappearance. He and a member of the Allied War Crimes Commission visited Mauthausen, where they were provided with details from Müller’s testi-



German guards interrogated and killed Morton and the captured OSS agents scant weeks before the liberation of Mauthausen concentration camp by the U.S. 11th Armored Division in May 1945.

mony and interviewed a prisoner who removed the bodies after the executions. They also met with Wilhelm Ornstein, a Polish Jew and former prisoner, who shared the details of Morton's and the others' final moments. Heinzerling was stunned.

"This was my first visit to a concentration camp and gave me my first inkling of the scope of Hitler's madness and crimes," Heinzerling later wrote to his wife. "I had of course heard about the camps in the early days in Berlin [where he was based from 1938 to 1941], and I knew that Frenchmen were being shipped away to them during the German occupation of Paris in 1940, but I had no conception of the systematic killing in progress."

Having established the facts surrounding Morton's death, Heinzerling returned to Rome to write the first complete report on the murder of his friend and fellow war correspondent. **MH**

For further reading Norman Goldstein recommends Inappropriate Conduct, by Don North; World War II: OSS Tragedy in Slovakia, by Jim Downs; and Sisterhood of Spies: The Women of the OSS, by Elizabeth P. McIntosh. The author is grateful to Larry Heinzerling for providing access to his unpublished account "The Execution of Joe Morton" and for sharing information from the files of his father, Lynn Heinzerling.