

**O**n Christmas night 1943 Marine Corps 2nd Lt. “John Hamilton”—the nom de guerre of American film actor Sterling Hayden—landed on the Yugoslav island of Korcula aboard a broken-down motorboat in the midst of a German attack. An operative with the Office of Strategic Services, he had crossed the Adriatic Sea from Allied-held southern Italy to make contact with Marshal Josip Broz Tito’s communist rebels, drop supplies and recon the Dalmatian islands to learn the strength of German landing forces. Hamilton was surveilling Korcula by jeep with a partisan officer and two rebels when the men ran straight into an ambush. German gunfire killed the driver, while Hamilton and the remaining two men shot their way out.

The partisans abandoned Korcula, and Hamilton joined them over the next several days on the islands of Hvar, Brac and Vis, shuttling through waters patrolled at night by German fast-attack E-boats and in daylight by Bf 109 fighters. On Hvar the young OSS agent made his way to partisan headquarters. As the buildings were under constant attack by Ju 87 Stuka dive-bombers, Hamilton conducted a six-hour conference outdoors with partisan officers to collect intelligence on German positions in the islands and on the Yugoslav mainland before returning to Italy.

Hamilton received the Silver Star for that mission. The medal recommendation from his OSS detachment chief praised his ability to provide “complete information concerning the situation in the Dalmatian coastal areas” and described Hamilton’s harrowing New Year’s Eve return trip, dodging German naval patrols while crossing the Adriatic amid “a severe winter storm.” In his own after-action report Hamilton stressed a detail the medal recommendation omitted: He and his crew had ferried refugees to Vis, where some 6,000 other Yugoslavs had holed up, believing Allied troops would soon come to their relief. He made no mention of the storm. In a letter to a friend three weeks after the action he wrote, “I know now that my entire life before this was one endless search for pleasure. Well, maybe it isn’t too late to make up for the wasted years.” He was 27 at the time.

World War II deeply affected Sterling Hayden. It perpetuated his marriage to, and ultimate divorce from, British actress Madeleine Carroll. It solidified his belief in pacifism and his identification with poor, oppressed people. And it briefly made him a communist.

**Hayden was born** Sterling Relyea Walter in Upper Montclair, N.J., on March 26, 1916. He grew up worshipping World

**Opposite top: OSS agent Hayden aided Yugoslav communist partisans under Josip Broz Tito, posing at right with officers in his Alps hideout. Opposite, bottom left: Hayden met wife Madeleine Carroll on the set of his first film, *Virginia*. Opposite, bottom right: Hayden’s OSS mentor, William J. Donovan, was known as the “Father of American Intelligence.”**

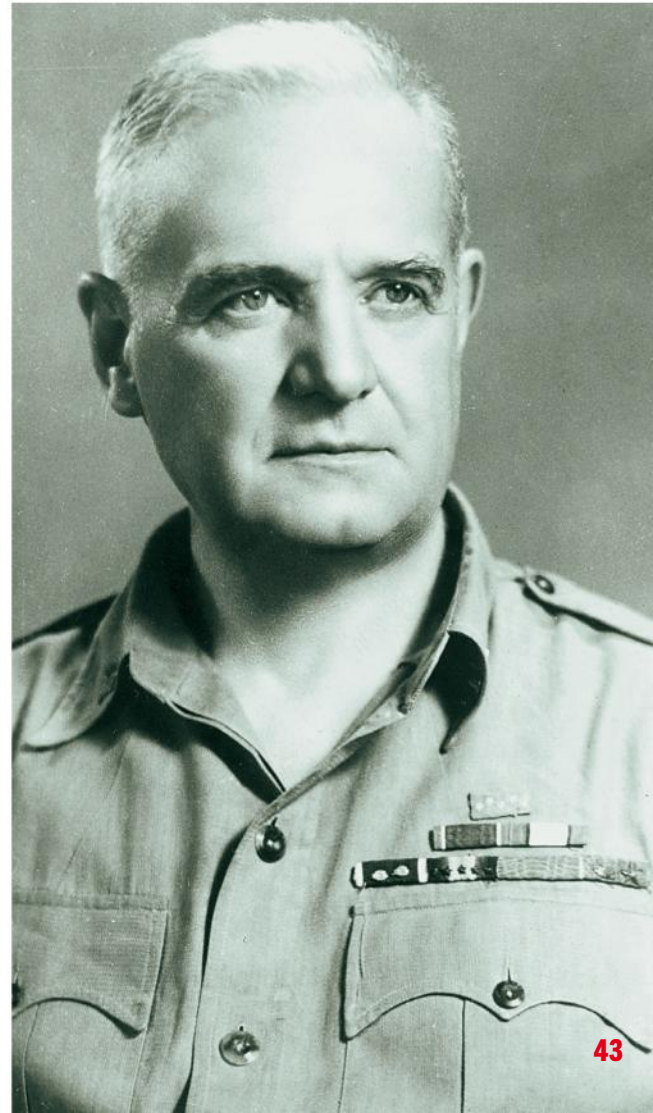
War I fighter ace Eddie Rickenbacker and playing “Yankees and Huns” with neighbor kids while an elderly veteran they called Colonel MacNair drilled them with wooden rifles. Hayden flunked third grade and at age 9 lost his father after a long illness. When his mother remarried, he took his stepfather’s name, becoming Sterling Walter Hayden. As the Depression hit, the family drifted up and down the East Coast, staying in fancy hotels while his stepfather pursued big business opportunities that never materialized. In Maine young Sterling fell in love with the world of light-houses, schooners, fishermen and solitude. He read everything he could about seafaring.

In early 1933 the 16-year-old dreamer dropped out of high school to become a sailor. For the next five years he served aboard various vessels, from schooners to steamers, first as a seaman, then fisherman, fireman, first mate and ultimately navigator, while circling the globe and sailing in the occasional race. He skippered his first ship, the square-rigger *Florence C. Robinson*, at age 22 on a delivery voyage from Gloucester, Mass., to Tahiti. His escapades drew some press, and after the collapse of a business partnership to purchase his own boat, he leveraged that attention to court Hollywood.

In 1940 Paramount Pictures signed Hayden to a contract starting at \$600 a month. The studio promoted the 6-foot-4, 220-pound youngster with the rapid-fire baritone as “The Most Beautiful Man in the Movies” and “The Beautiful Blond Viking God,” while critics panned his wooden on-screen presence. In his first film, *Virginia* (1941), he starred opposite Carroll, a decade his senior, whose film career had peaked a few years earlier. They bonded over their mutual annoyance with the shallow movie business and a wish to help the nascent war effort before the U.S. officially joined the fight. Carroll began doing relief work with the Red Cross in Europe after her sister was killed in the London Blitz. Hayden had two films under his belt when he walked out on his contract and crossed the Atlantic via convoy in November 1941 to train as a secret agent.

**Hayden’s path to the OSS** and eventual action with Tito’s forces was filled with twists. Colonel William J. “Wild Bill” Donovan—soon to head up the OSS, wartime precursor to the CIA—gave him the chance to train as a commando in Britain. As the only American and only military novice in the group, Hayden learned the latest infiltration and sabotage techniques alongside hardened combat veterans from France, Poland, Belgium and Denmark who itched to parachute into their home countries and hurt the Nazis. But a mishap meant Hayden wouldn’t join them.

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On landing the last jump he needed to earn his British parachute badge, Hayden broke his ankle, tore cartilage in his knee and sustained lingering spinal injuries. While recuperating stateside, he married Carroll at a New Hampshire lodge on Valentine's Day 1942. Donovan encouraged Hayden to apply for an officer's slot in the Navy. His commission as an ensign was all but assured when Hayden's pride scuttled

Hamilton reported to Parris Island, S.C., for boot camp. After being singled out as an officer candidate, he contacted Donovan, asking to join the OSS. Donovan gladly pulled the necessary strings, and in October 1943 newly commissioned 2nd Lt. Hamilton shipped out for Cairo. A few weeks later Hamilton was ordered to southern Italy, where he would put his extensive sailing skills to work in a whole new capacity.

## The morning he arrived in New York he enlisted, later having his name legally changed to John Hamilton

the opportunity; he refused to take a commission below the rank of lieutenant. As a Hollywood celebrity, he reasoned, everything he did was news. What would the papers say about a ship's captain taking a lowly ensign's commission?

Instead Hayden put together a scheme to support the war effort by sail. Using his wife's money, he bought the 120-foot schooner *Spinney* from Paramount and secured an unlimited draft deferment in exchange for his promise to ferry cargo for the War Shipping Administration. After a shakedown cruise from California to Florida via the Panama Canal, Sterling and crew arrived in Miami to news the Navy had decided to requisition *Spinney* for its own use. Furious, Hayden sailed off in the schooner, sold off all its mechanical equipment, defaulted on his first contract with the WSA to ferry explosives and instead took a load of general cargo to Curaçao.

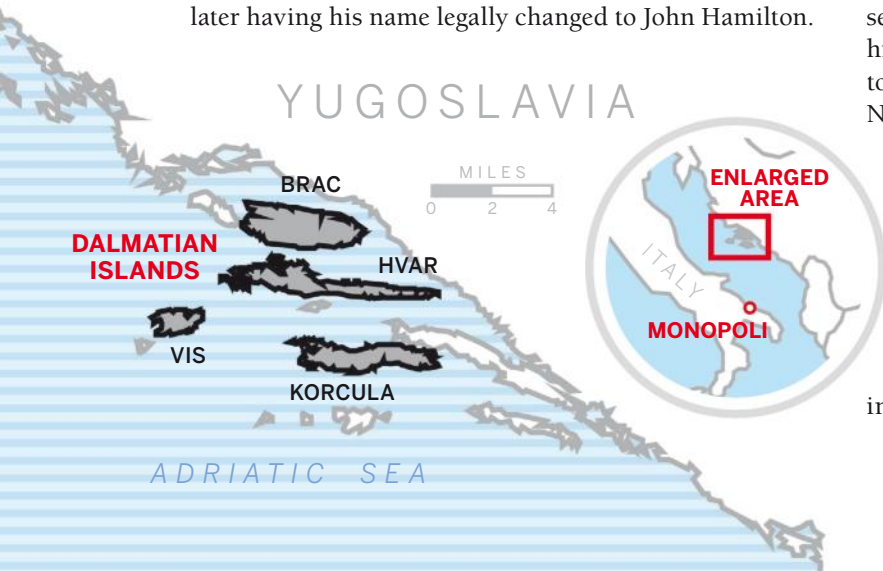
There he met members of a Marine detachment guarding U.S. oil interests on the island against potential sabotage. He was impressed with their bearing and apparent toughness. One night he and a half-dozen Marines got drunk and ended up at a Willemstad hotel. Around 3 in the morning the manager sought to evict the raucous Marines. When the exasperated manager called the police, Hayden took affront and threw the man into the street. That landed him in jail, but his Hollywood agents came to the rescue. They bailed him out, bought *Spinney* from him and flew him back to his waiting starlet wife in New York. The morning he arrived in the city he went to the local Marine recruiting station and enlisted, later having his name legally changed to John Hamilton.

**Working out of** the Adriatic port of Monopoli, Hamilton soon found himself engulfed in a civil war raging within the world war. Tito's communist partisans were vying for Yugoslav hearts and minds against the royalist Chetniks led by General Dragoljub "Draza" Mihailovic, who had organized the first resistance movement after Axis powers came storming into the region in the spring of 1941. As was common throughout Balkan history, resistance to the invader took two very different forms. Tito confronted the invaders with immediate, determined fighting, while Mihailovic sought to stockpile weapons and supplies, waiting for the moment when his army could help the Allies decisively destroy the enemy without excessive casualties and without upending Yugoslavia's prewar power dynamics and monarchy.

The OSS had to execute its mission to defeat the Axis powers with delicate diplomacy, supporting two resistance movements with opposite views on politics and strategy, while also placating the United States' operational partner, Britain's Special Operations Executive, which had been aiding the rebel groups for nearly two years before Americans arrived on scene. The SOE had aided OSS during its formation and initial activities and understandably regarded itself as the senior partner in the covert war against the Axis, and the Americans usually played along. Hamilton, however, had very little patience with the political delicacy of the situation, especially when it came to helping refugees.

The onetime actor had barely seen combat when he began crossing the Adriatic to aid Tito's partisans on the Dalmatian islands, earning his Silver Star only a month into his stint in Italy. When he returned to Monopoli the first week of 1944, he and three other junior OSS officers argued with the brass for help aiding the thousands of Yugoslavs stuck and starving on the islands. Ignoring their request, area commander Major Robert Koch split up the group of four officers. Hamilton was sent to the port of Bari to cool his heels. He made no secret of his annoyance with his superiors and took every opportunity to call out officers who in his estimation performed ineptly. None of it seemed to harm his military career, however.

Two weeks later Koch performed an about-face and ordered Hamilton to "procure, equip, man and operate a small Italian fishing vessel which would be capable of running agents and small quantities of material to the Albanian coast at night." The operative found a 50-foot boat with a top speed of 8 knots. For the first two trips he and his partisan crew ran unarmed across the Adriatic due to a lack of guns in the supply depot. They made 10 trips in all between mid-February and April 1. Hamilton later



In this 1942 publicity image from Parris Island, S.C., Hayden poses for his new role as a private in the U.S Marine Corps.





## Will Act for Sailing Time

After the war Hayden returned to his given name and resumed his acting career, primarily to fund his beloved pastime of sailing. Among other roles, he played the lead in *The Killing* and supporting roles in *Dr. Strangelove* and *The Godfather*. During the Red Scare in the 1950s he named communist actors, an action he later regretted.

mission to rescue allied airmen, he explained that contrary to partisan claims, they had virtually no ability to hold territory. "Partisan territory is 'free' simply because the enemy does not care to use it at the time," he wrote. "When the enemy wants to, he marches in, and the partisans take to the hills. This leaves the farmer holding the bag. The Germans, or local Fascists, plunder his farm, rape his women, burn a few homes and move on. Then the partisans return, and the cycle is ready to commence anew." In Hamilton's eyes the

described a routine passage: "By plunging through the Allied minefield late of an afternoon a schooner always had a fighting chance of reaching Vis at dawn—barely in time to be backed into a precipitous cove where she could be hastily camouflaged with pine boughs festooned in her rigging, unloaded the following night, the camouflage repeated, and then driven toward Italy as soon as the weather served." Partisan fishing boats took on the challenge of slipping the cargo past German patrols to the mainland. There rebels unloaded the boats and packed the goods onto mules for the trek into the Alps to supply Tito's guerrillas.

In midsummer Hamilton went on another recon mission, mapping out the best route for the delivery of 40 tons of explosives to the Dalmatian coast in support of a proposed attack on German lines of retreat through northern Yugoslavia. He traveled in partisan launches armed with captured Italian-made Breda machine guns and anti-tank weapons. The boats' only "armor" comprised parallel board walls, the gap between them filled with rocks. The crews traveled at night, hiding ashore by day beneath the cover of pine boughs. When Hamilton returned to Italy, he again got disappointing news. For diplomatic reasons the entire operation had passed into British hands. Hamilton threw up his hands and sought a transfer out of the area. His request was denied.

Hamilton next helped plan the rescue of Allied airmen downed over German-occupied Yugoslavia. On August 22 he and two enlisted men landed in Croatia, and over the next month, with partisan assistance, they trekked overland through German lines. The group located nine Allied airmen and organized their evacuation to Italy on September 26.

By then Hamilton's assessment of the partisan contribution to the war was mixed. On the one hand he was indebted to Tito's fighters for safely ferrying U.S. operatives through repeated engagements, often sacrificing their own in the effort. Yet he also saw the organization's limitations. In a report filed two days after the

partisan role comprised mainly harassment, and the movement's aims were "not an expression of the people's will." But that didn't put a dent in his admiration for Tito.

Sent stateside for 30 days' leave toward the end of 1944, Hamilton sang the praises of Tito's communist partisans to his New England friends, who told him he was nuts. In early 1945 he returned to Europe, this time to France, arriving as the Allies reorganized after the Battle of the Bulge. In February he earned promotion to captain, and at war's end the OSS transferred Hamilton to its Field Photographic Branch, assigning him to document the damage done by Allied bombing in northern Germany, Denmark and Norway. In September he caught up to wife Madeleine in Paris. She had decided to stay in Europe to help displaced children. Having spent little time together and with few shared interests, they agreed to divorce.

**On Christmas Eve 1945** John Hamilton left active duty and the OSS to again become Sterling Hayden, Hollywood heartthrob. He had hoped to return to sailing but lacked the funds. So against his wishes and better judgment he signed another contract with Paramount.

Hayden joined the Communist Party in June 1946 on the urging of an attractive female friend who goaded him into it over coffee. Months later, however, unable to keep awake when talk turned to terms like "proletariat," "bourgeoisie" and "deviationism," he stopped attending party meetings. Four years later, at the outset of the Korean War, Hayden—still in the Marine Corps Reserve—was concerned he might be called up and asked whether he was or ever had been a communist. Answer no, and he might face perjury charges. Answer yes, and the studio heads might blacklist him. To mitigate the situation, he had his lawyer draw up a letter to the FBI, asking whether there was a way to scrub the books of one's communist past. The answer was no, but he could talk his way into the bureau's favor. And so in a closed-door meeting with FBI agents in the spring of 1950 he revealed the little he knew about U.S. communist activities.

A year later news broke about that interview. While on a film set Hayden received a subpoena to proceed to Washington, D.C. and testify before Congress. Appearing before the House Un-American Activities Committee on April 10, 1951, he named the names of communist friends and colleagues, a move he regretted for the rest of his life. He was praised by most in the press and Hollywood, including Ronald Reagan, who sent the actor personal congratulations for having come clean. "Not often does a man find himself eulogized," Hayden later wrote, "for having behaved in a manner that he himself despises." He soon repudiated his testimony.

Hollywood kept calling anyway. The noir heist film *Asphalt Jungle*, released months before Hayden's HUAC testimony, garnered critical acclaim and five Academy Award nominations. Hayden expected it would be his breakout role, but offers for parts in top-tier films failed to materialize. Not to say he didn't keep busy. Through the early 1950s he worked on an average of five B movies a year, playing



Hayden, posing here on his houseboat in Paris, spent his later years living aboard boats and traveling the world.

cowboys, seafarers, military heroes, lawmen and outlaws. Finally, in 1956, he landed another classic noir role, as Johnny Clay in Stanley Kubrick's *The Killing*. He worked for Kubrick again, appearing as deranged Air Force Brig. Gen. Jack D. Ripper in the 1964 Cold War black comedy *Dr. Strangelove*, and landed other notable roles, such as corrupt police chief Mark McCluskey in *The Godfather* (1972).

Married again in the postwar years, he fathered four children, divorced again, then in 1958 lost a highly publicized battle for custody of his brood, who lived with him piecemeal in Sausalito, Calif., aboard the schooner *Wanderer*. Flouting a court order, he set sail with his kids for Tahiti, an event that inspired his 1963 autobiography, titled appropriately *Wanderer*. Seemingly undaunted by the experience, he married a third and final time in 1960, having two more kids.

Late in life Hayden was the picture of an old seafarer, living aboard sailing vessels and traveling the oceans well into his 60s. When on land he split his time between homes spread across the globe from California to Connecticut to France. He wore a bushy white beard with no moustache, carried a cane, smoked constantly and punctuated sentences with a rising, "Eh?" as if his voice had sea legs. He became a popular guest on talk shows in the 1970s and '80s, bantering with the likes of Johnny Carson and Tom Snyder in segments

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still available on YouTube. On May 23, 1986, Hayden, 70, died at home in Sausalito after a final battle with cancer.

Hayden never forgot about the Yugoslav partisans and Tito, who after the war served as prime minister and eventually dubbed himself "president for life." The actor's admiration for the dictator ran so deep that he traveled to Ljubljana on his own dime to cover Tito's funeral for *Rolling Stone*—an article he never finished. Asked in a 1980 interview why he took the assignment, he said, "Never mind the politics for a moment—what we're talking about is a giant of a human being!" It takes one to know one. **MH**

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