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William J. Donovan

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William Joseph ("Wild Bill") Donovan (January 1, 1883 – February 8, 1959) was a **United States** soldier, lawyer, **intelligence officer** and diplomat. Donovan is best remembered as the wartime head of the **Office of Strategic Services** (OSS), a precursor to the **Central Intelligence Agency**, during **World War II**. He is also known as the "Father of American Intelligence" and the "Father of Central Intelligence".^{[2][3]}

A decorated veteran of **World War I**, General Donovan is the only person to have received these four awards in the United States: The **Medal of Honor**, the **Distinguished Service Cross**, the **Distinguished Service Medal**, and the **National Security Medal**.^[4] He is also a recipient of the **Silver Star** and **Purple Heart**, as well as decorations from a number of other nations for his service during both World Wars.

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Biography [edit]

Early life [edit]

Of **Irish** descent, Donovan was born in **Buffalo, New York** to first generation immigrants Anna Letitia "Tish" Donovan (née **Lennon**) and Timothy P. Donovan, of **Ulster** and **County Cork** origins respectively. His grandfather Timothy **O'Donovan** (Sr.) was from the town of **Skibbereen**, being raised there by an uncle, a parish priest, and married Donovan's grandmother Mary **Mahoney**, who belonged to a propertied family of substantial means which disapproved of him. They would move first to Canada and then to New York, where their son Timothy (Jr.), Donovan's father, would attempt to engage in a political career, but with little success.

William Joseph attended **St. Joseph's Collegiate Institute** and **Niagara University** before starring on the football team at **Columbia University**. On the field, he earned the nickname "Wild Bill", which would remain with him for the rest of his life.^{[2][5]} Donovan graduated from Columbia in 1905 and was a member of the **Phi Kappa Psi** fraternity,^{[2][6]} as well as the **Knights of Malta**.^[7]

Donovan was a graduate of **Columbia Law School** and became an influential **Wall Street** lawyer.

In 1912, Donovan formed and led a troop of **cavalry** of the **New**

William J. Donovan	
 <div>William J. Donovan</div>	
 <div>Medal of Honor</div>	
Birth name	William Joseph Donovan
Nickname(s)	"Wild Bill"
Born	January 1, 1883 <div>Buffalo, New York</div>
Died	February 8, 1959 (aged 76) <div>Walter Reed Army Medical Center Washington, D.C.</div>
Place of burial	Arlington National Cemetery
Allegiance	 United States of America
Service/branch	New York Guard United States Army
Years of service	1912 - 1916, 1919 - 1922 (State Guard) 1916 – 1919, 1941 – 1945 (Army)
Rank	 Major General
Commands held	165th Infantry Regiment (World War I) Office of Strategic Services (World War II)
Battles/wars	World War I World War II
Awards	Medal of Honor Distinguished Service Cross Distinguished Service Medal (3) Purple Heart (2) National Security Medal Freedom Award ^[1]
Other work	U.S. Attorney

York State Militia.^[8] This unit was **mobilized** in 1916 and served on the **U.S.-Mexico border** during the American government's campaign against **Pancho Villa**.^[8]

Other work
U.S. Attorney
United States Ambassador to Thailand
Wall Street

World War I [edit]



Donovan as a Major with the Fighting 69th in France in 1918.

During World War I, Major Donovan organized and led the 1st battalion of the **165th Regiment** of the **42nd Division**, the federalized designation of the famed 69th New York Volunteers, (the "**Fighting 69th**"). In France one of his aides was poet **Joyce Kilmer**, a fellow Columbia College alumnus. For his service near Landres-et-St. Georges, France, on 14 and 15 October 1918, he received the **Medal of Honor**. By the end of the war he received a promotion to **colonel**, the **Distinguished Service Cross** and two **Purple Hearts** (the full text of his Medal of Honor citation can be found further below).

Between the wars [edit]

From 1922 to 1924, he was **US Attorney for the Western District of New York**, famous for his energetic enforcement of **Prohibition**. In 1924 President **Calvin Coolidge** named Donovan to the **United States Department of Justice's Antitrust Division** as a deputy assistant to Attorney General **Harry M. Daugherty**.^[8]



Donovan in 1924, during his time in the Department of Justice

Donovan ran unsuccessfully as a **Republican** for **Lieutenant Governor of New York** in **1922**, and for **Governor of New York** in **1932**.^[9] Assisting Donovan in his 1932 campaign was journalist **James J. Montague**, who served as "personal adviser and campaign critic."^[10]

World War II [edit]

During the interwar years, Donovan traveled extensively in Europe and met with foreign leaders including **Benito Mussolini** of **Italy**. Donovan openly believed during this time that a second major European war was inevitable. His foreign experience and realism earned him the attention and friendship of President **Franklin D. Roosevelt**. The two men were from opposing political parties, but were similar in personality. Because of this, Roosevelt came to highly value Donovan's insights. Following Germany's invasion of Poland in September 1939 and the start of World War II in Europe, President Roosevelt began to put the United States on a war footing. This was a crisis of the sort that Donovan had predicted, and he sought out a responsible place in the wartime infrastructure. On the recommendation of Donovan's friend **United States Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox**, Roosevelt gave him a number of increasingly important assignments. In 1940 and 1941, Donovan traveled as an informal **emissary** to Britain, where he was urged by Knox and Roosevelt to gauge Britain's ability to withstand Germany's aggression. During these trips, Donovan met with key officials in the British war effort, including **Winston Churchill** and the directors of Britain's intelligence services. Donovan returned to the US confident of Britain's chances and enamored with the possibility of founding an American intelligence service modeled on that of the British.

OSS [edit]

On July 11, 1941, Donovan was named **Coordinator of Information** (COI). America's foreign intelligence organizations at the time were fragmented and isolated from each other. The Army, Navy, **Federal Bureau of Investigation** (FBI), **United States Department of State**, and other interests each ran their own intelligence operations, the results of which they were reluctant to share with the other departments. Donovan was the nominal director of this unwieldy system, but was plagued over the course of the next year with jurisdictional battles. Few of the leaders in the intelligence community were willing to part with any of the power that the current *ad hoc* system granted them. The FBI, for example, under the control of Donovan's rival **J. Edgar Hoover**, insisted on retaining its autonomy in South America.

Nevertheless, Donovan began to lay the groundwork for a centralized intelligence program. It was he who organized the COI's New York headquarters in Room 3603 of **Rockefeller Center** in October, 1941 and asked **Allen Dulles** to head it; the offices Dulles took over had been the location of the operations of Britain's **M16**.

In 1942, the COI became the **Office of Strategic Services** (OSS) and Donovan was returned to active duty in his World War I rank of colonel (by war's end, he would be promoted to major general). Under his leadership the OSS would eventually conduct successful espionage and sabotage operations in Europe and parts of Asia, but continued to be kept out of South America as a result of **Hoover's** hostility to Donovan. In addition, the OSS was blocked from the Philippines by the antipathy of General **Douglas MacArthur**, the commander of the Southwest Pacific Theater.

For many years the operations of the OSS remained secret, but in the 1970s and 1980s, significant parts of the OSS history were declassified and became public record.

As World War II began to wind to a close in early 1945, Donovan began to focus on preserving the OSS beyond the end of the war. After President Roosevelt's death in April, however, Donovan's political position, which had thrived because of his personal relationship to the President, was substantially weakened. Although he argued forcefully for the OSS's retention, he found himself opposed by numerous opponents, including President **Harry S. Truman**, who personally

disliked Donovan, as well as **J. Edgar Hoover**, who viewed the OSS as competition for his goal to expand the FBI's investigative operations internationally. Public opinion turned against Donovan's efforts when conservative critics rallied against the intelligence service that they called an 'American Gestapo.' After Truman disbanded the OSS in September 1945, Donovan returned to civilian life. Various departments of the OSS survived the agency's dissolution, however, and less than two years later the **Central Intelligence Agency** was founded, a realization of Donovan's hopes for a centralized peacetime intelligence agency.

Role in formation of the CIA [edit]

Donovan did not have an official role in the newly formed CIA but with his protégé **Allen Dulles** and others, he was instrumental in its formation. Having led the OSS during World War II, Donovan's opinion was especially influential as to what kind of intelligence organization was needed as a bi-polar post-war world began to take shape. Although he was a force to be reckoned with, his idea for consolidating intelligence met with strong opposition from the State, War and Navy Departments and **J. Edgar Hoover**. President Truman was inclined to create an organization that would gather and disseminate foreign intelligence; Donovan argued that the new agency should also be able to conduct covert action. Truman was unenthusiastic about this additional authority, but Donovan's arguments prevailed and were reflected in the **National Security Act of 1947** and the **Central Intelligence Agency Act** of 1949. In 1946, Truman appointed Rear Admiral **Sidney Souers**, USNR, as the first **Director of Central Intelligence**. This was an important first step but the actual creation of the CIA required another persuasive voice, that of **Hoyt Vandenberg**. In 1947 Rear Admiral **Roscoe H. Hillenkoetter** was appointed as the first Director of the CIA.^[11]

Post-war era [edit]

After the war ended, Donovan reverted to his lifelong role as a lawyer to perform one last duty: he served as special assistant to chief **prosecutor Telford Taylor** at several trials following the main **Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal** in Germany. There he had the personal satisfaction of seeing the **Nazi** leaders responsible for the torture and murder of captured OSS agents brought to justice. For his World War II service, Donovan received the **Distinguished Service Medal**, the highest American military decoration for outstanding non-combat service.

At the conclusion of the Nazi war criminal trials, Donovan returned to Wall Street and his highly successful law firm, **Donovan, Leisure, Newton & Irvine**. He remained always available to postwar Presidents who requested his advice on intelligence matters.

In 1949 he became chairman of the newly founded **American Committee on United Europe**, which worked to counter the new Communist threat to Europe by promoting European political unity.

In 1953 President Dwight Eisenhower appointed Donovan **Ambassador to Thailand** on August 3, 1953. He served in that capacity from September 4, 1953 until his resignation on August 21, 1954.

Donovan's son, David Rumsey Donovan, was a naval officer who served with distinction in World War II. His grandson, William James Donovan, served as an enlisted soldier in Vietnam and is also buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

Death and legacy [edit]

Donovan died from complications of **vascular dementia** on February 8, 1959, at **Walter Reed Army Medical Center**, in **Washington, D.C.** at the age of 76, and is buried in Section 2 of **Arlington National Cemetery**.

President **Dwight D. Eisenhower** referred to him as "the Last Hero", which later became the title of a biography of him. After his death, Donovan was awarded the **Freedom Award** of the **International Rescue Committee** (not, as some biographies state, the "Medal of Freedom", a different award).

The law firm he founded, **Donovan, Leisure, Newton & Irvine** was dissolved in 1998.

His home **Chapel Hill** near **Berryville, Virginia**, was listed on the **National Register of Historic Places** in 2004.^[12] Major General Donovan is a member of the **Military Intelligence Hall of Fame**.

Awards and decorations [edit]

U.S. awards

 **Medal of Honor**

 **Distinguished Service Cross**

 **Distinguished Service Medal with two oak leaf clusters**

 **Silver Star**

 **Purple Heart with one oak leaf cluster**

 **National Security Medal**

 **Mexican Border Service Medal**

 **World War I Victory Medal with 5 campaign bars**

 **Army of Occupation of Germany Medal**

 **American Defense Service Medal**

-  [American Campaign Medal](#)
-  [Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal with Arrowhead device and 2 bronze service stars](#)
-  [European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal with Arrowhead device, two silver service stars, and two bronze service stars](#)
-  [World War II Victory Medal](#)
-  [Army of Occupation Medal with Germany clasp](#)
-  [Armed Forces Reserve Medal with one ten-year hourglass device](#)

Foreign awards

-  [Légion d'honneur](#) (France) (World War I)
-  [Commandeur de la Légion d'honneur](#) (France) (World War II)
-  [Croix de guerre with Palm and Silver Star](#) (France) (World War I)
-  [Honorary Knight Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire](#)
-  [Papal Lateran Cross](#) (Vatican) (*Italian: Croce Lateranese*)
-  [Knight Grand Cross of the Order of St. Sylvester](#) (Vatican) (*Italian: Ordine di San Silvestro Papa*)
-  [Order of the Crown](#) (Italy) (*Italian: Ordine della Corona d'Italia*)
-  [Croce al Merito di Guerra](#) (Italy)
-  [Commander's Cross with Star of the Order of Polonia Restituta](#) (Poland)
-  [Grand Officer of the Order of Léopold of Belgium with Palm](#)
-  [Czechoslovakian War Cross \(1939\)](#)
-  [Grand Officer of the Order of Orange Nassau](#) (Netherlands)
-  [Grand Cross of the Royal Norwegian Order of St. Olav](#) (Norway)
-  [Knight Grand Cross \(First Class\) of The Most Exalted Order of the White Elephant](#) (Thailand)

Medal of Honor citation [[edit](#)]

Rank and organization: Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Army, 165th Infantry, 42d Division. Place and date: Near Landres-et-St. Georges, France, 14–15 October 1918. Entered service at: Buffalo, N.Y. Born: 1 January 1883, Buffalo, N.Y. G.O., No.: 56, W.D., 1922.

Citation:

Lt. Col. Donovan personally led the assaulting wave in an attack upon a very strongly organized position, and when our troops were suffering heavy casualties he encouraged all near him by his example, moving among his men in exposed positions, reorganizing decimated platoons, and accompanying them forward in attacks. When he was wounded in the leg by machine-gun bullets, he refused to be evacuated and continued with his unit until it withdrew to a less exposed position.^[13]

See also [[edit](#)]

- [List of Medal of Honor recipients for World War I](#)
- [List of U.S. political appointments that crossed party lines](#)
- [CIA](#)
- [Special Activities Division](#)



References [[edit](#)]

Notes

- ↑ [International Rescue Committee Freedom Award](#)
- ↑ ***a b c*** *CIA: Look Back ... Gen. William J. Donovan Heads Office of Strategic Services*
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- ↑ [Medal of Honor recipients - World War I](#)



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External links [[edit](#)]

- "The OSS Society" .
- "Donovan's Medal of Honor citation" .
- "Donovan's grave" .
- "The Donovan War Crimes Trials Library at Cornell University" .
- "CIA Kids - In the words of William Donovan" .
- "Spartacus Educational" .
- "OSS Blog" .
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New York Republicans

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