

AMERICA's Spies

Almost lost in the murky and mysterious backwaters of pre-World War Two espionage is a dark story about a German spy ring whose activities once briefly shadowed the luxury liner SS AMERICA.



By the time the newly-built SS AMERICA sailed into her home port of New York City in the summer of 1940 to begin her planned peacetime career, Europe had been at war for almost a year. But long before that, in anticipation of what eventually became reality – the United States' entry into the worldwide conflict – German intelligence agents were already here, and busily pursuing devious deeds. A very large clandestine group (over thirty), identified by the FBI as the Duquesne Spy Ring, included three individuals who had some direct association with the SS AMERICA. In fact, two of them – perhaps more - were even crewmembers for a short period of time.

This is their sordid story. But more significantly, it is a retelling of one of the FBI's largest successes ever; replete with many of the trappings of spy stories that always intrigue. Included is concentration on, and a bit of imaginative conjecture in (absent numerous details – not all that uncommon when it comes to absolute documentation of such things), this spy ring's thankfully minor involvement with the SS AMERICA.

But most importantly, it is the intriguing, true tale of an unsung, brave and courageous naturalized American hero.

The Duquesne Spy Ring

On January 2, 1942, 33 members of the largest espionage ring in the history of the United States were sentenced to serve a total of over 300 years in prison. One German spymaster later commented that the ring's roundup delivered 'the death blow' to their espionage efforts in the United States.

The FBI brought them to justice after a lengthy espionage investigation. William Sebold, who had been recruited as a spy for Germany, was the major factor in the FBI's success in this case through his work as a double agent.

In one blow, a major portion of the enemy's subversive network in North America simply vanished. Perhaps more importantly, the capture and incarceration of the entire Duquesne Spy Ring prevented the axis powers from obtaining further information about the technologies that would ultimately spell their defeat.

Hard on the heels of Pearl Harbor, Germany essentially lost any hope to glean intelligence information about the hurried conversion to a wartime economy, and the massive logistical effort that transformed a peaceful United States into an 'arsenal of democracy'. In fact, for months, the information that Germany's Military Intelligence had so valued – which they had covertly acquired, or so they thought - had been so altered before transmission as to render it useless. Principally thanks to William Sebold.

William Sebold

In 1939, when naturalized American citizen William George Sebold (born as Wilhelm Georg Debrowski in Muehlheim, Germany in 1899) made a visit to his native land, Major Nikolaus Ritter of the German Abwehr (Military Intelligence) made uninvited contact and persuaded Sebold to cooperate with the Reich. Fearing reprisals against family members still living in Germany, Sebold reluctantly agreed. But while arranging his passage back to the United States, he surreptitiously tipped off American officials, signaling his desire to work on behalf of his adopted country instead.

After receiving final instructions from Ritter, including the use of codes and microphotographs, Sebold was assigned the alias "Harry Sawyer", along with a code name – Tramp” – and even an Abwehr number (A.3549). He sailed from Genoa, Italy, and arrived in New York City on February 8, 1940. There, Sebold (with secret help from the FBI) set himself up as a consulting engineer in an office on 42nd Street in Manhattan. The FBI, forewarned of Sebold's arrival, his mission, and his secret intentions to assist them in identifying German agents in the United States, carefully selected and outfitted an office for Sebold where they could not only record, but also observe and film (via a two-way mirror) any meetings taking place there.

This was the very kind of stuff that movies were made of (and, in fact, the 1945 thriller – *The House on 92nd Street* – is a thinly disguised version of the Duquesne Spy Ring saga). The ending, however is typical Hollywood melodramatic, and deviates significantly from the true story. But it was successful in its own right, for screenwriter Charles Booth won the Academy Award that year for the best original motion picture story. In the movie version, the hero's double agent role is revealed and he barely escapes with his skin intact.



Back to the true story: Over a sixteen-month period, Sebold (as Sawyer) elicited more than 300 reports from a number of axis agents; most frequently and notably from their leader, 'Fritz' Duquesne. Unbeknownst to the spies, FBI agents were in an office immediately adjacent to Sebold's office, secretly filming virtually every transaction.

The FBI even set up a short-wave radio station for Harry Sawyer's use on Long Island, transmitting hundreds of coded (but FBI-censored and significantly distorted) messages to Germany. Some 200 incriminating messages were received in return.

By late June of 1941 the FBI had amassed enough evidence and information to allow them to locate and arrest all of the spy ring members. More over, Federal Government officials decided the time had definitely come to act, and act swiftly, for on June 25th, the leader of the spy ring had suggested to Sawyer that it might be possible to plant a bomb at Hyde Park when President Roosevelt was visiting his family home.

On the hot and humid Sunday evening of June 29, 1941, 93 Special Agents swooped down and scooped up the majority of the 33 known enemy agents. Three of them, not captured that night, were at sea on separate American-flagged vessels. They were detained onboard their respective ships, and arrested by the FBI at each vessel's next port of call.

When the arrests became public knowledge, German Military Intelligence officers were surprised and puzzled that Harry Sawyer was not on the list of those arrested. Thinking that he might have somehow escaped the FBI dragnet, they sent a coded message to "Tramp" on July 7th to "Suspend contact with Hamburg until further notice in the interest of your security." They heard nothing more from or about him - until he emerged at the spies' trail in early September; dramatically identified as William Sebold, alias Harry Sawyer, alias "Tramp" and alias A.3549. The Government's star witness, he shocked all those indicted and especially his supposed and previously confident German spymasters.

To protect him from reprisal, photographers present at the trial were forbidden to take Sebold's picture. They complied.

This grainy picture shows Sebold (carefully positioned with his back to the hidden FBI camera while posing as Harry Sawyer) meeting in his Manhattan office with Duquesne. In the films the FBI took through the two-way mirror, a daily calendar was deliberately positioned to prominently appear as well.



No photographs - clear or otherwise - of his facial features - are known to publicly exist.

Of those arrested on the charge of espionage, 19 pleaded guilty, including two of the three female members of the group. The others, who entered pleas of not guilty, were brought to trial in Federal District Court, Brooklyn, New York, on September 3, 1941. After a lengthy trial, a jury found them all guilty on December 13, 1941 (a decision possibly influenced by the sneak attack at Pearl Harbor the week before, despite the judge's charge to the jury to the contrary). The longest sentence was given to the group's unrepentant leader, Fritz Duquesne.

Sebold's triumph as a counterespionage agent is demonstrated by the successful detention, prosecution and sentencing of over thirty German agents in one classic counterspy operation. After the trial, in what may well have been one of the first government witness-programs, Sebold was given still another identity and set up with a chicken farm in California. But even that may not be accurate, perhaps deliberately so, for other published accounts have him rumored to have been relocated to a Texas farm.

Frederick Joubert Duquesne

Fritz, as his friends called him, was a bon vivant, stockbroker, womanizer, prisoner of war, confidence man, reporter, novelist, African hunting adviser to Teddy Roosevelt, and publicist for Joseph P. Kennedy's movie company. But above all else, he was a spy or saboteur for the Germans in both world wars.



Duquesne, a native of South Africa, was a deeply Anglophobic Boer, who spent much of his life attempting to take revenge upon the British Empire for its actions in his homeland during the Boer wars. This hatred had caused him to offer his services as spy and saboteur to Imperial Germany during the First World War. There is solid evidence that Fritz and a group of saboteurs were responsible for the destruction of a British merchant ship in 1916 that caused the death of three crewmembers. There is inferential evidence that he was the prime leader in other acts of German espionage and sabotage against English assets in South America from 1914 to 1916.

British Intelligence tried hard to capture Duquesne, under a death sentence for his actions. In order to elude the British, he fled to the United States in May of 1916. The United States at that time was still neutral, and Fritz believed he would have a better chance in American courts of escaping extradition if he were discovered. He was later arrested by New York's metropolitan police masquerading as an Australian Captain lecturing on the Great War. He was successful in escaping extradition to England by faking insanity, then paralysis, and finally escaping from Bellevue Hospital.

In 1937, Fritz Duquesne was 60 years old and living in New York, eluding police by using one or more of the forty aliases he is known to have utilized in his lifetime. He was contacted there and personally recruited by the very same Major Nikolaus Ritter that ironically would later recruit William Sebold – the individual who would ultimately have such a significant role in bringing Fritz to justice.

When Sebold returned to the United States in February of 1940, Duquesne was operating a business known as the "Air Terminals Company" in New York City. After establishing his first contact with Duquesne by letter, Sebold, using the name Harry Sawyer, met with Fritz in Duquesne's office. During their initial meeting, Duquesne was extremely concerned about the possibility of electronic surveillance devices being present in his office, and gave Sebold a note stating that they should talk elsewhere. After relocating to the Automat, the two men quietly exchanged information about members of the German espionage system with whom they had been in contact.

In the next photo, Fritz Duquesne (left) and an unidentifiable Harry Sawyer cross a New York City street in May of 1940. Even Sebald did not know that the FBI was recording their movements; apparently to make sure their agent did not also double cross them.



Duquesne subsequently provided Sebald with information for transmittal to Germany during subsequent meetings, some of which occurred in "Harry Sawyer's" office and were duly recorded and filmed by FBI Agents. Duquesne provided information dealing with national defense in the United States, the sailing of ships to British ports, and a wide range of emerging technologies.

Duquesne was one of the spies who pleaded not guilty, but he was easily convicted on the basis of irrefutable testimony and overwhelming evidence. He was sentenced to serve 18 years in prison on espionage charges, as well as a two-year concurrent sentence and payment of a \$2,000 fine for violation of the Registration Act.

Fritz was incarcerated at the age of 65 in Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary in Kansas. There he was mistreated and beaten by other inmates. Eventually released because of deteriorating health on September 19 1954, he moved back to New York only to die indigent at age 79 on May 24, 1956 at City Hospital on Welfare Island.

In a biography entitled *Counterfeit Hero*, the author succinctly sums up Duquesne: "He was no hero, but his incredible life encompassed bizarre exploits of drama, danger, and adventure few people are privileged to live."

AMERICA's Spies

FBI records indicate a direct involvement with the SS AMERICA by at least three members of the Duquesne Spy Ring. There may well have been even more, for many of that group were crew members on one or more American-flagged vessels, or otherwise associated with shipping interests in New York harbor.

Fortunately, the information they gathered about (or while onboard) the SS AMERICA was of little – if any - strategic consequence or tactical value. Most of what they were allowed to pass on was heavily doctored by the FBI, rendering it useless; or already in the public venue. The FBI was in a commanding position, by virtue of controlling the emissions of Sawyer's Long Island short-wave radio station. They made it very certain that nothing of military value was beamed to Germany. At the time the spy ring was most active, German Military Intelligence was extremely interested in what the United States was doing with respect to providing aid, both direct and indirect, to Great Britain. Since most of such aid was shipped overseas in American-flagged (and neutral) vessels, the spy ring's interest in such movements was paramount.

It had been well publicized before her mid-1940 completion that the SS AMERICA was not only the largest, fastest and most luxurious ship ever built in the United States, but that she had ‘certain national defense features’ built in – and paid for by the U.S. Navy. Seeking out these unpublicized details undoubtedly was something the Germans greatly desired that their spy ring uncover. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that maritime-knowledgeable members of this subversive organization would join her crew.

Hartwig Richard Kleiss



Born in Germany, Hartwig Kleiss came to this country in 1925 and became a naturalized citizen six years later. Following his arrival in the United States, he was employed as a cook on various ships. Among his informants was a chef (name not known) onboard the SS AMERICA, who gave Kleiss blueprints for turning the vessel into an Army transport vessel. After these plans were delivered to Sawyer, the FBI screened all the information and authorized him to transmit to Germany harmless or incorrect details.

It should be noted that such information was, even at that time, relatively insignificant and of little, if any, real military value. In fact, if a copy of the August, 1940 issue of *Marine Engineering* had been sent to Europe instead, much more – and more useful – information would have been revealed; such things as the SS AMERICA’s extensive watertight compartmentation, engineering details, and trials’ performance data.

Detailed deck plans in that issue included – but did not identify – some curious circles on several of her weather decks. But any one skilled in matters of naval architecture would have easily associated them with the ‘certain defense features incorporated into her design’ so widely reported then. Following her conversion into a troop transport, the meaning of the circles became quite clear to all, for in the center of each was mounted a large caliber weapon, and the circles then physically became stout protective shields for the gun crews.



While no doubt intriguing to the German military, such information was of no practical use; especially after some of the guns were relocated (and numerous others were added) during the course of the war.

Kleiss also obtained details on the construction and performance of new speedboats being developed by the United States Navy, which he submitted to Sebold for transmittal. Kleiss had originally chosen to stand trial. However, after cross-examination, he changed his plea to guilty to the charge of espionage and received an eight-year prison sentence.

Erwin Wilhelm Siegler

Erwin Siegler came to the United States from Germany in 1929 and attained citizenship in 1936. He served as chief butcher on the SS AMERICA until the U.S. Navy requisitioned her. A courier, Siegler brought microphotographic instructions to Sebold from German authorities on one occasion. He also had brought \$2,900 from German contacts abroad to pay Duquesne and several others for their nefarious services. He served the espionage group as an organizer and contact man, and he also obtained information about the movement of ships and military defense preparations at the Panama Canal.



In this latter role, it is quite possible that he made notes – perhaps even photographed the defenses of the Panama Canal and other ships’ movements - when the SS AMERICA transited ‘the big ditch’ several times in the Spring of 1941. Subsequent to his conviction, Siegler was sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment on espionage charges and a concurrent two-year term for violation of the Registration Act.

Franz Joseph Stigler

In 1931, Franz Stigler left Germany for the United States, where he became a citizen in 1939. He had been employed as a crewmember aboard several different American-flagged vessels, until his discharge from the SS AMERICA when the U.S. Navy drafted and then converted that almost new vessel into the USS WEST POINT.



His constant companion was Erwin Siegler, and they operated as couriers in transmitting information between the United States and German agents aboard. Stigler sought to recruit amateur radio operators in the United States as channels of communication to German radio stations. He had also observed and reported defense preparations in the Canal Zone and had met with other German agents to advise them in their espionage pursuits.

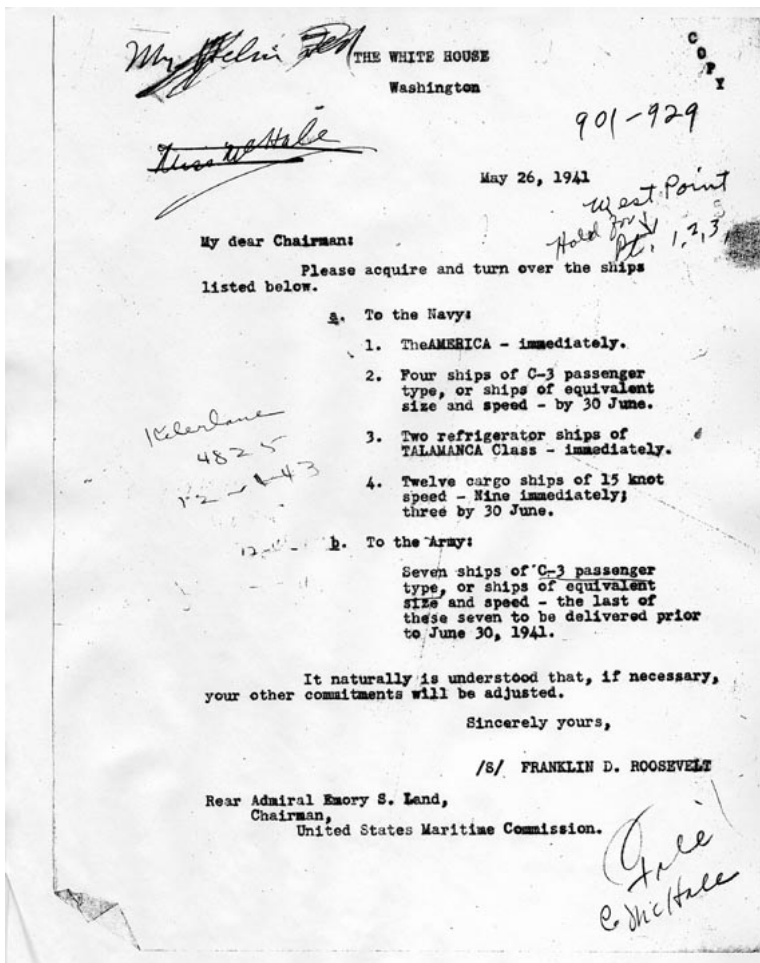
In addition, one, or both of these treasonous crewmembers, undoubtedly, would have been keenly interested in the activities that surrounded the AMERICA’s ‘hush-hush’ arrival at the Norfolk Navy Yard on January 3, 1941. There, ‘as a precautionary measure’, she was fitted with mine-degaussing cables, the first civilian vessel so outfitted during the United States’ self-proclaimed neutrality period. Although that installation only took three days, that would have afforded ample time and opportunity for AMERICA’s spies to observe the activities of one of the U.S. Navy’s most important installations. Upon conviction, Stigler was sentenced to serve 16 years in prison on espionage charges with two concurrent years for registration violations.

Potential Impact on America – and the SS AMERICA

It should be obvious to even the most casual reader that the timely capture of these spies – several months before the United States officially went to war - was a significant event that may well have saved untold lives, and or even altered the course of history.

Left to their own devices, there is no limit to what one can imagine they might have done; not just by spying, but in actual acts of sabotage. If not rounded up, it is quite possible that the group might have dispersed, making it difficult – if not impossible – for the FBI to track, contain and capture all of them.

As for the SS AMERICA, the timeliness of being ‘drafted’ into the U.S. Navy resulted in her civilian crew being replaced by navy personnel by mid-June of 1941. Her importance to the war effort was clearly signaled when a lengthy list of civilian ships to be requisitioned by the Navy, issued by none other than President Roosevelt himself, had the SS AMERICA prominently listed at the very top of that document.



The two known spy ring members of her crew went ashore shortly thereafter – most likely just before she left New York on June 3, 1941 to return to her birthplace for conversion to a troop transport. If not then, then certainly two weeks later, when renamed USS WEST POINT, she became a United States naval vessel.

It is not known if either of them had the opportunity to actually spy on warships being built at Newport News Shipbuilding during that period of time (which included a nearly completed aircraft carrier - the HORNET of Doolittle Raid fame).

But even if they were still aboard during the hurried conversion, swarms of shipbuilders workers and constantly arriving sailors would have made it difficult for either of them to conduct any form of sabotage onboard the liner.



By the time the WEST POINT sailed from Newport News, all opportunity for any intelligence gathering – or worse - had passed. By war's end, she had safely transported over 500,000 souls to and from warfronts all over the world. The only further German 'intelligence' about her was limited to seven erroneous reports that she had been sunk.

After the war, the USS WEST POINT returned once again to her birthplace, and was painstakingly restored to her prewar beauty. Following a picturesque departure from Newport News in November of 1946, the SS AMERICA set sail for New York.

She then made scheduled transatlantic trips to Europe for eighteen years, with an occasional wintertime cruise to the Caribbean; until commercial jet travel put her out of the luxury liner business.



The Ever-Present Mists

Other than what is mentioned herein about the release and demise of their leader, there is no known public record of what ultimately happened to the other members of the spy ring. They received sentences ranging from one year to sixteen in January of 1942. By the end of 1951, all except one – Fritz Duquesne – had been paroled.

Nor is there any information publicly available about William Sebold after he assumed his new name and life as a farmer in California (or was it Texas?). He has long ago faded – deliberately - into obscurity. No known public record touches on the rest of his life, at least none could be uncovered connected with his real name.

In the best traditions of spy novels, it is like the ever-present mists of wartime intrigue silently closed behind William Sebold when his patriotic work was done.

Hopefully, this brave American then led a long and happy life.

Bill Lee
July, 2004

Footnote: I became aware of “AMERICA’s Spies” (as I choose to call them) when Fred Whyte, a friend of Ken Johnson (President of the USS WEST POINT Reunion Association) related to him seeing mention in a museum about spies being somehow associated with the ship. Ken passed this item of interest on to me, and - after getting more information from Fred – I contacted the International Spy Museum (which opened in June of 2002 in Washington, DC).

That resulted in a prompt and helpful reply from Doctor Thomas Boghardt which put me hot on the trail of the spies (albeit several decades late...). This ‘stranger than fiction’ – but obviously quite true – narrative was then constructed, using several sources. While some relatively minor inconsistencies were discovered, reconciling or choosing amongst them did not materially distract from the basic story. The full truth will likely never be known.

The most authoritative and complete sources (of about a dozen I uncovered) include:

A page on the FBI website (<http://www.fbi.gov>) entitled FBI History – Famous Cases

A very detailed and extensively researched book, **COUNTERFEIT HERO**, Fritz Duquesne, Adventurer and Spy by Art Ronnie, Naval Institute Press, 1995

The spy museum’s website (<http://www.spymuseum.org>)

And – of course, the collection and personal knowledge of yours truly
...AMERICA’s unofficial historian.

Thank you Fred, thank you Ken and most of all, thank you, Doctor B!

