

This spy's life would make 007 shudder

By Richard Leach
staff writer

John Cottell was sure he was about to die.

The German troops led him to a wall at the Gestapo headquarters. The lights of four trucks shone on him as the Nazi firing squad prepared to fire.

As a British spy with a price on his head, Cottell had been condemned to die by Nazi leader Heinrich Himmler.

"It was not like a Douglas Fairbanks movie," Cottell told the Livonia Town Hall audience last week.

"I was very frightened, but, you know, there is a very big difference between being frightened and letting the blighters see it. I fought and kicked not to have a bloodflood."

HE REMEMBERED making his peace with God, then bracing himself with his hand against the wall.

"To my surprise, the wall shuddered as the bullets shot over my head," he said. "This, of course, was done to make me talk."

For five consecutive mornings the sequence was repeated, each time the firing squad aiming high. Seeing this could not make him talk, the Nazis commuted his sentence to long imprisonment in a place he calls a "Dante's Inferno," the concentration camp at Buchenwald.

Cottell described those and other grim experiences he had in 32 years with the British secret service. Cottell, who retired from the service in 1974 with the rank of colonel, was the second speaker in the 1984-85 Town Hall season at the Mai Kai Theater in Livonia.

WITH HIS walking cane (a gift to his great-grandfather from King Edward VII) at his side, Cottell spoke in a restrained, gentle voice about horrors that were neither restrained nor gentle.

"I would like to dispel the James Bond image people have," Cottell said. "It was not like that at all. It was extremely difficult."

He described his experiences in wars both hot and cold, including 18 months in solitary confinement in a Russian prison.

He told how two of those he loved were killed by those he fought against. His first wife was killed by the Nazis. His son died as the result of injuries suffered in an auto "accident" that Cottell subsequently found had been committed by Soviet agents as a way of getting at him.

"One never really gets away from the feeling of someone's hand on your shoulder," he said. "Although there is only about 1 percent of a chance of something happening, I still look over my shoulder and keep my back to the wall. That sounds dramatic, but that's the way I live."

HE SAID his message was to describe the sacrifices people have made for freedom — and to warn of the threat to freedom that exists today from the Soviet Union.

Cottell, who became a resident of the United States four years ago, sees his adopted country as being in danger from enemies within and without.

"You must remember, in this country there are Russian agents, people brought up as first and second generation Americans. They do exist. The Soviet Union has done a great job of infiltration."

A supporter of President Reagan, Cottell said proponents of the nuclear freeze are "naïve." He said he, too, would like to abandon all nuclear weapons.

"But we can't do that because whatever we do the Soviets are going to keep building up."

John Cottell spent 32 years in the British secret service. During that time he was imprisoned in Buchenwald concentration camp, spent 18 months in solitary confinement in a Russian prison and learned that his wife was killed by Nazis and his son by Russian agents.



HE CHARACTERIZED the Soviets as ruthless adversaries who have said they intend to enslave the West — and mean it.

"Sometimes when I hear people voice their opinion I say, 'Fine, you've said what you feel. Now shut up and listen for God's sake listen, to us who know what's going on.'"

Cottell first entered the spy business at the age of 18 during World War II. At school, he had been a "mild boy" who didn't like to fight and did not get very high grades.

When war came, Cottell had been turned down for an officer's position with the army and became an army mechanic instead. An intelligence officer saw potential in him, however, and recruited him for Special Operations Executive (SOE), the section of British Intelligence that operated behind enemy lines with the resistance fighters.

COTTELL UNDERWENT extensive training, including learning from criminals how to blow safes and burglarize a building.

At the end of his training he was sent to a place called Camp X on the shores of Lake Ontario in Canada.

"This was a barbaric school, and I saw men killed in training," he said. "I went through two months of extreme pressure. At the end of that I suppose I was a high-powered secret agent."

One of his teeth was removed and replaced with a false tooth with a top that unwound. Inside, Cottell was told, was cyanide capsule with which he could kill himself within 15 seconds if captured.

The young agent then was sent to meet with no less a personality than the British prime minister, Winston Churchill.

"I want you to go, as one of my best agents, to Holland," Churchill said. "I remember saying, 'But I don't speak Dutch.'"

"Well, my boy, you have one week to learn."

WHAT COTTELL didn't know was that he was being used to try to deceive the enemy. Intelligence had looked at his poor school grades and decided he was a weak man who would crack un-

der pressure. He was fed false information that the British hoped he would give to the Nazis once he was captured.

"I'm sure the capsule that was under my tooth was not lethal because they wanted me to talk," Cottell said. After the war, Churchill apologized to Cottell for using him in an attempt to fool the Germans.

"Well, bad luck sir," an angry Cottell said, "it didn't work."

INSTEAD OF being captured, Cottell worked with the Dutch resistance, blowing up trains and doing "as much damage as I could."

The Nazis put a price on Cottell's head and his name and face were plastered on wanted posters throughout Holland. He eventually made his way to pro-British Portugal, but only after being imprisoned for a while in Nazi-sympathizing Spain.

Back in England, Cottell married a Belgian woman who also was working for the SOE and made two parachute missions to France herself.

In September 1944, the British decided upon a massive parachute raid on Arnhem in Holland. Cottell became a regular British army officer for the first time, and was supposed to serve as a liaison between the Dutch resistance and the British Army.

COTTELL PARACHUTED behind German lines, was wounded, picked up by resistance fighters and left at a Dutch hospital, where he was to have a much unwelcome visitor.

"A young German officer was looking down at my bed," Cottell said. "In one hand he had a rope, in the other one of the pictures of me that had been on the wall of a police station."

"He addressed me by the name I had used in the Dutch resistance. Then he tried cowboy style he put the rope around my neck and drove me down the hallway to a waiting truck."

Cottell underwent his firing-squad ordeal, then was packed in chains in a cattle car to Buchenwald. There he was assigned to the camp hospital to remove the remains of the victims of the sinister experiments performed by the "doctors" there.

"Don't believe what people tell you about the gas chambers or concentration camps never existing," Cottell said. "I am a living witness."

ONLY THE ARRIVAL of the U.S. Army in April 1945 saved Cottell and other Buchenwald survivors from death. In a near state of shock from his experience, Cottell returned to England.

His wife had gone on her third mission to France, after giving birth to their son. Yet no one would tell him what had happened to her.

"Here came an intricate web of deception to deceive me."

Groggy from a drug treatment, he one day talked to someone who said she was her on the phone. It wasn't until he was assigned to a desk job of sorting photographs of people who hadn't returned from the war that he found out the truth.

The second photograph he saw was of a "solitary, naked girl, with one leg underneath her body."

"This was seconds before my wife was machine-gunned to death. Some casual German photographer had caught the utter look of determination in her eyes, and I can tell you that has carried me all through these years."

AFTER THE war, British Intelli-

gence had to decide what to do with Cottell, who knew a great deal about the intelligence operation.

"They had a decision to make, whether to bump me off or find some other employment for me. So they rehabilitated me."

For this new, cold war, he was given a cover as a businessman.

In this role, he collected troop movements and other information during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution.

But on another assignment, in Dresden, East Germany, Cottell was arrested as an agent of a foreign power. Someone within British Intelligence had betrayed him.

After his trial — during which he was beaten three times — he was sentenced to 10 years in prison, the first two in solitary confinement at the dread Lubyanka Prison in Moscow. For four months he was subjected to daily interrogations lasting 18 hours.

TO SAVE his mind, he mentally constructed a house down to every detail, even the gutters.

"Many years later I built that house, in Spain."

He also made a pact with God that if

He would "give me my life, I will serve You all my days."

"That's what kept me alive, not their training," he said.

British authorities eventually won his release.

His experience later became part of the spy novel "Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy" by John LeCarre.

THROUGHOUT his years in intelligence, Cottell's family never knew his real occupation. He had remarried, yet his wife, son and daughter did not know the truth. He only gradually let them know in later years.

"There is no way I could let anyone in my family know what I really do," he said. "That would have been the chink in my armor."

"I had to live a lie, it had to be part of me. It had to come off my lips just like that, and it did."

After his retirement, Cottell was ordained an Anglican minister and eventually left England because it was "too near the nerve center of my past." He now considers himself a permanent resident of the United States.

"I love England, but this is my country now, this is my home," he said.

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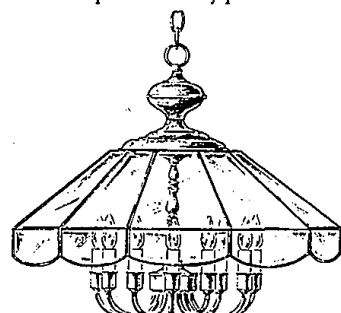
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