

The Traitor Is A Hero

The Story Of America's Greatest World War II Spy

Some say he was the most important American spy of World War II. He was a dashing, self-made American millionaire—and a war profiteer who earned millions in oil deals with the Third Reich that led his family to disown him and countrymen to view him as the most repugnant traitor. Then, suddenly, he made secret contact with the Allies to volunteer for a spy mission so danger-filled that it was almost ludicrous. Was he for real? Read the incredible story of Eric Erickson and his suspenseful, tide-turning contribution to the American war effort.

Spring of 1944 was as mild and balmy as any other spring, but no one seemed to take notice of the blooming flowers. War was raging and bombs were exploding over Europe. On this particular evening, as the shrill wailing of sirens cut through the spring air, a tall, middle-aged American sat cowering in the bomb shelter of the Mercedes-Benz factory in Germany together with a group of terrified Nazi engineers. His heart pounded as he listened to the roar of the American B-17 planes, courtesy of the Eighth Air Force Division which was preparing to release several tons of explosives onto the roof of the factory.

If all had gone according to plan, the man, Eric Erickson, would have been far away from the factory at this time. He was supposed to have conducted an inspection



American bombs raining down on Stuttgart during the war.



Workers in a bombed-out car factory in Germany try to salvage what they can from the wreckage.

of the plant earlier that day accompanied by the supervisor, a portly middle-aged German. The joint inspection had been postponed due to an unexpected visit by a group of Nazi officials from the German Ministry of Weapons and War Productions, headed by Albert Speer.

Erickson was forced to cool his heels in the supervisor's office. He was bursting with impatience as the Nazi officials proceeded to inspect the entire complex in order to establish the exact number of military trucks produced by the plant. Afterward, in an effort to placate him, the Mercedes supervisor invited Erickson to join him for dinner in his office. He was quite fascinated with this strange American, living and working freely on enemy soil.

The two chatted amiably over a sumptuous dinner of liverwurst, sauerkraut and plenty of beer. Ever the gallant gentleman, Erickson presented his host with a sizeable parcel containing an assortment of delicacies that included real coffee and American cigarettes. At that time, delicacies were practically impossible to come by in war-torn Germany, while coffee and cigarettes were equal in value to gold dust. Meanwhile, the German had just taken his first puff of a cigarette when the sirens started wailing.

Erickson, or "Red," as he was called by his friends, was a popular figure in the upper echelons of the Nazi party. They knew him as a Brooklyn-born businessman who betrayed his country and was dedicated to helping the Nazis obtain fuel for their tanks and planes.

Ever charismatic, Eric impressed his friends with his command of five languages: English, German, Japanese, French and Swedish. He also plied them with generous gifts of Swiss chocolate and whiskey, which he smuggled in from Sweden, where he had obtained citizenship.

Red became a favorite of the Nazi bigwigs, including the second most powerful Nazi, Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering, who frequently invited him on hunting expeditions. Some of the most illustrious architects



The Mercedes headquarters in Stuttgart today.



Stuttgart at night.

of the Final Solution would reserve seats for him in the swankiest restaurants in Berlin. He also had a much-treasured document in his pocket, signed by none other than Heinrich Himmler himself, which afforded him the ability to move freely about the entire length and breadth of Germany.

Erickson was a well-known oil magnate. His was a classic rags-to-riches success story of a boy born into an impoverished family who built his massive oil empire from scratch. He had, for all intents and purposes, earned himself the distinction as one of the most detested men in America. Rumor had it that this traitor was shamelessly collaborating with the Nazis, assisting them in their efforts to produce the "wonder product" known as synthetic oil, which would give the Third Reich a powerful edge over their Allied foes.

Little did anyone know that all was not as it seemed when it came to Eric Erickson.

Germany's Dilemma

By 1944, the Germans were facing a major crisis: their fuel supply was severely depleted. Fuel was the lifeblood of the entire war machine. No oil for tanks, airplanes, trucks and other machinery spelled imminent disaster.

Several years earlier, German scientists came up with a synthetic fuel made from

coal, rendering Germany entirely self-sufficient. It did not depend on oil imports from other countries. The plants producing the fuel were scattered throughout Nazi-occupied territory and the exact locations were kept top secret. They were constructed underground and heavily camouflaged. No outsiders were privy to the location of these plants.

Recently, however, the Allied forces seemed to have gotten wind of these locations, which were bombed mercilessly until they were completely destroyed. The Germans scrambled to rebuild the plants, but no sooner were the plants back in service than the Allies appeared with a fresh aerial armada to bomb them to smithereens.

The Nazis were dumfounded. The Allied bombers consistently targeted these covert installations as accurately as if someone had given them an explicit map. Unbeknown to them, someone had done exactly that.

Eric Erickson, the despicable traitor, as he was known to his country, was really a loyal American. His apparent collaboration was for one purpose: to gain access to crucial information which he passed on to Allied headquarters in London, notwithstanding the danger to his own life.

Back at the Mercedes-Benz factory, the Allied bombers were releasing their 500-pound bombs—painted bright red and