

THE SPY WHO DOWNED THE YANKEES

By Dennis Drabelle

MY candidate for the most visceral prose ever written by a Penn graduate is this firsthand account of parachuting in World War II: “The hole in the plane’s belly through which one jumped looked like a straight-sided water barrel. One at a time we were to swing our legs into the hole, feet together, rump edged forward on the rim, one hand beside each thigh, palms down against the deck, head up and, at the jump master’s command, push off, snapping the body straight, standing at attention in space, head up, dropping straight as a candle, holding an attention posture as we dropped, waiting for the static line attached to the plane to snake the silk canopy out of the canopy’s pack strapped to each back and for the rush of air to fill it out.”

That kinetic passage—embellished by a warning not to look where you’re going (i.e., down), lest your body go “tumbling end-over-end”—comes early in Michael Burke W’39’s memoir, *Outrageous Good Fortune*. Burke, who attended Penn on a football scholarship when that freebie was still licit, possessed virtually every skill that a go-getter needs: athleticism, charm, articulateness in person and on paper, and an eye for the main chance. His stomping grounds included New

England, Philadelphia, several countries on the European continent, Hollywood, Manhattan, and eventually the Ireland of his ancestors; his career encompassed spy-craft, the movies, the circus, major-league baseball, and showbiz; his friends included Ernest Hemingway, Gary Cooper, and Marianne Moore. By the end, Burke had racked up a series of jobs and experiences about which most boys—and men—can only daydream.

Michael Burke was born to middle-class parents (his father was a Yale Law grad) in 1916. As a boy in small-town Connecticut, he excelled at baseball and basketball. But in high school another sport took precedence: he became “possessed by football.” Courted by several colleges, he chose Penn after visiting the campus and being wowed by the grandeur of Franklin Field. At the time, the university as a whole was possessed by football: “In our senior year,” Burke recalled, “Penn played before more people than any other college in the nation except the University of Southern California.” That same year (1938), against Cornell, Burke covered himself with glory by making two pass interceptions—“twice Brad Holland, Cornell’s All-American end, and I leaped for the ball together; both

times I came down with it”—as the Quakers played the heavily favored Big Red to a scoreless tie.

“You’ve got to be a football hero,” the old song goes, “to get along with the beautiful girls”—and, the lyricist might have added, “to get ahead of the scrambling boys.” A few years after graduating—now married and selling maritime insurance in New York City—Burke was invited to a dinner party in Washington, DC. There he met “Wild Bill” Donovan, a former Columbia quarterback who had seen Burke play. In short order, the younger man agreed to go to work for Donovan’s Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA.

At a time (1943) when Donovan needed a victory to overcome bureaucratic resistance to him and his new agency, Burke gave him one. He went on a mission to smuggle out of Italy an admiral named Eugenio Minisini, who had invented “an electromagnetic device for detonating torpedoes as they passed beneath the hull of a ship.” With his country about to be invaded by the Allies, Minisini agreed to place himself in US custody rather than let his technology fall into German hands. Burke helped the admiral elude the pursuing Gestapo, but his real contribution was to fly back to Washington and persuade



ALUMNUS MICHAEL BURKE'S LIFE
READS LIKE AN ADVENTURE STORY—
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Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox to authorize use of military aircraft to whisk Minisini and his family to the States.

A year later, Burke's wartime service reached its apogee. Applying the technique outlined in the first paragraph of this article, he and a colleague parachuted into Alsace after the D-Day invasion. On being surrounded by members of the French Resistance, Burke managed to remember his password: *Le renard a couru* (the fox has run). At the time, the region was still German-occupied—a burden that Burke was assigned to help lift. Encountering the Americans, an elderly Frenchwoman teared up and said, "To think that General Eisenhower has sent two officers to free our little village." Other local women had an ulterior reason to be pleased: they couldn't wait to get hold of the Americans' silk parachutes and turn them into underwear.

Burke's account of the danger-filled weeks he spent as a guest Resistance fighter is moving and piquant. The most memorable vignette occurs when he and a French colleague enter a hurriedly abandoned Gestapo office and notice three photos hanging on the wall: one of Hitler, one of Himmler, and one of Claude, the very man standing at Burke's side, under whose picture the legend "greatest terrorist of the region" had been scrawled. "Claude smiled shyly," Burke writes, "half-embarrassed, half-pleased." While recounting the deaths of several comrades and some close calls of his own, Burke conveys the constant wariness felt by those who operate behind enemy lines: "If this tension were a sound it would be the single shrill note of a piper playing at a distance, audible if you stopped to listen."

Between missions, Burke barhopped in Paris with Hemingway, who called him "kid," and got to know a fellow OSS man named Moe Berg, who has become renowned for the variegated hats he wore: major league baseball player, lawyer, superspy. One of Berg's intelligence coups dated back to the 1930s, when, Burke noted, as "a private citizen lecturing at the University of Tokyo, Moe used the hospital room of the wife of the American consul, whom he didn't know, to get access to the hospital roof and took panoramic film shots of the city with a 16-mm Bell and Howell movie

camera. It was his film that General Doolittle used [in] planning his famous bombing raid on Tokyo in 1942."

When the war ended, the adventure quotient of Burke's life declined markedly. His marriage was ending too, and in a glum mood he moved into the Penn Club in Manhattan. There he got another of his lucky breaks: a phone call asking if he would like to be a consultant on a movie about espionage. Off to Hollywood he went.

While training to become a secret agent—a regimen that had entailed learning how to send a message by wire, wrangle a collapsible lifeboat, and fire a submachine gun—Burke had marveled at the boy's adventure aspect of it all: "I felt like a character out of a low-budget film or novel." Now, along with another OSS grad, a Dutchman named Andries Dienum, he was advising the great German émigré director Fritz Lang on the not-so-low-budget "Cloak and Dagger," starring Gary Cooper and Lilli Palmer.

Lang was especially keen on bringing a fresh approach to a scene in which one man kills another with his bare hands. In his biography of Lang, Patrick McGilligan describes the pretend mayhem that developed one night as the two ex-spies tried out bare-handed holds at the director's behest. "After dinner, Burke and Dienum ... rolled around on the floor for what seemed like hours, Dienum remembered, acting out variations of weaponless struggle. The director hovered over them, 'making a square with his fingers,' in Dienum's words, 'to get the shots' ... According to [actor] Marc Lawrence, the fight was described by a single line in the screenplay. On the set, Lang spent *six days* filming the scene, 'using extreme close-ups of my fingers poking and tearing at Gary's mouth and distorting parts of his face.'"

Burke had looked good enough inside the square of Lang's fingers to warrant a screen test, but the only comment made by the producer who watched it was, "Jesus, you're a tall son of a bitch," and that was that.

Life in Hollywood had its perks. Burke met the woman who became his second wife, and when the Navy gave him a medal for his war exploits, the Warner Bros. wardrobe department supplied him with a uniform in which to receive the award as Cooper looked on. But a lack

of steady work sent Burke to New York, where he wrote for radio, provided subtitles for foreign films, and borrowed money from his dad to make ends meet. Now in his early thirties, Burke credited himself with "two skills: football and guerrilla warfare. It was too late by far for football, so when the knock came at the door, I was prepared to become a mercenary in the underground war."

Burke had to write circumspectly about his second go-round as a spy: in 1984, when *Outrageous Good Fortune* was published, the Cold War was still being waged, and restrictions on what could be revealed were in place. The CIA contracted with him to manage clandestine missions, and his first big assignment was to unsettle and perhaps topple a communist dictatorship by sending pro-democracy refugees back into their homeland, which he describes only as "a near-primitive European country" (since identified as Albania).

The operation was meticulously planned, starting with a parachute drop of the partisans, who were equipped with communication devices to confirm their successful landing. On two nights running, the plane returned to the dropoff area, hoping to pick up a signal. Nothing. "We did not then know," Burke wrote, "that we had dropped these men into an alerted security net." The Albanian government had been tipped off thanks to the notorious British double agent Kim Philby, who served in Washington as liaison between British and American intelligence agencies and whom Burke had considered not just a colleague but a friend. In the sobering conclusion to this chapter, Burke allows that he could understand someone's turning communist, even betraying his country, but to send so many men to their deaths—that Burke could not fathom. (Philby went on double-dealing until 1963, when he disappeared in Beirut and resurfaced in Moscow. He remained in Russia, feted as a hero, until his death in 1988.)

Now operating out of West Berlin, Burke and his colleagues ran a more successful program in Russian air space: this time several waves of dropped agents radioed back that they had landed safely (though Burke rated their chances of re-emerging from the country alive at 50-50), and pho-

tographs taken by overflying planes provided “invaluable information on the Soviet radar defense system.”

As the Cold War settled into its long stalemate, Burke found that he’d lost his taste for espionage. He’d seen enough of war, he had a wife and daughter to support, with a son on the way, and it was time to see what he could make of himself in what a friend called “the real world.”

In the event, however, Burke transferred into another not-quite-real world. One of his old OSS buddies was John Ringling North, a scion of the family that owned the Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus. When North suggested that Burke try his hand at circus management, Burke overrode his misgivings (he knew zilch about lions or bearded ladies) in order to avoid becoming what he called a “*rond-de-cuir*, as the French say, a leather-ass, forever seated at a desk.”

Burke soon learned something that North had held back: this particular circus was in desperate straits, thanks largely to kickbacks pocketed by the “Sneeze Mob,” middle managers who took cuts from suppliers and patrons alike. “Receipts,” Burke recalled, “were a joke.” After Burke fired the Sneeze Mob members en masse, the circus got along without them until Jimmy Hoffa’s Teamsters union stepped in, insisting that it be recognized as the circus workers’ representative and following up with picketing and less benign forms of pressure. Burke now faced a dilemma: In his words, “To run against the Teamsters’ costly harassment would have been self-defeating; to agree to Hoffa’s demands was economically prohibitive.” The solution was to eliminate the labor-intensive big top-style operation and to stage the circus indoors, in such fixed venues as Madison Square Garden. In the meantime, few of Burke’s paychecks had been cut, and in 1956 he quit with a feeling of having been euchred by his old friend North.

The circus had made a few appearances on TV during Burke’s tenure, and he wondered if that still-young medium might have opportunities for him. With an introduction from a mutual friend, he scored an interview with CBS’s president, Frank Stanton, and then a job as head of European operations. Brought back to New York in 1962, he became director of

diversification, which is to say he helped transform CBS from a radio and TV network into a global conglomerate.

Though the idea originally came from Stanton, Burke endorsed CBS’s acquisition of the New York Yankees, of which he was named president. Later, however, he admitted that the network had bought a “pig in a poke.” The era of Berra and Mantle and Maris was ending, no replacements of their caliber were in the pipeline, and not even the hiring of Johnny Keane as manager after his St. Louis Cardinals beat the Yanks in the 1964 World Series could revive the stagnating team.

Nonetheless, CBS thought that in Burke it had the right man for the baseball job. “Mostly, he had a manner that was thought to appeal to a younger generation,” writes Marty Appel in *Pinstripe Empire*, his history of the Yankees. “That same appeal almost made Burke commissioner,” Appel continues. “In 1969, when looking for a new commissioner to replace William Eckert, the American League backed Burke, the National League Charles Feeney. The compromise candidate was National League lawyer Bowie Kuhn, who could get a consensus.” Meanwhile, Burke had persuaded the city of New York to renovate Yankee Stadium in return for the Yankees’ commitment to stay in the Bronx (the football Giants had unnerved all five boroughs by decamping to New Jersey). And he’d struck a blow for culture by reaching out to the poet Marianne Moore. Though a Brooklyn Dodgers fan, Moore had worked various Yankees into her poem “Baseball Writing.” (She summed up the great lefty Whitey Ford’s incessant attempts to hold runners at first base as a “pick-off psychosis,” but her best line was “Pitching is a large subject.”) At Burke’s request, Moore, wearing her trademark tri-cornered hat, threw out the first ball of the 1968 season.

It took CBS only a few years to realize that the Yankees were not a good fit. Having done so, it sold the club to a group that included Burke himself and a Cleveland shipping magnate named George Steinbrenner. Burke and Steinbrenner quickly clashed over both substance and style. As the photo of Burke on the cover of his memoirs bears out, he reveled in the hirsute 1960s and ’70s, while Steinbrenner most assuredly

did not. At the start of the 1973 season, Appel explains, Steinbrenner “furiously wrote down the numbers of all players he thought wore their hair too long. The Yankees, to his thinking, had grown apart from the traditions that made them stand out—a fault of the careless leadership of the long-haired Burke.” The partnership lasted only three months before Burke gave up and cashed in his share.

Burke was then recruited for his last job, head of Madison Square Garden, a possession of the conglomerate Gulf & Western. Putting in workdays that often stretched from 9:30 a.m. to midnight, he seems to have thrived on handling the logistics and public relations needed to accommodate hundreds of acts per year. In one three-day span, he recalled, the Garden “hosted three events, any one of which could have sent a spark of drama coursing through the city. The heavyweight fight rematched Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier; the basketball game featured the traditional rivalry between the Knicks and the Celtics; and the concert was Bob Dylan and The Band, Dylan’s first concert in eight years.” From time to time, Burke again found himself at loggerheads with Steinbrenner, whom he described as “hooked on power ... He is not the first nor the last man to suffer that torment, a habit as insidious as the roughest narcotic. However perverse, it is also one kind of motivation that has moved the world along, like it or not.”

Burke retired in the early 1980s and moved to Ireland. In 1987, at the age of 70, he died of cancer.

In *The Old Boys: The American Elite and the Origins of the CIA*, Burton Hersh sums up Burke as “a self-dramatizing one-time football star with a bona fide Hollywood presence and an OSS reputation for juggling unstable resistance groups.” That “self-dramatizing” quality is what makes *Outrageous Good Fortune* such an engaging and quotable book. Constantly on display in its pages is the dashing Michael Burke—on the playing fields of Penn, in the skies over wartime Europe, in Hollywood, inside the corporate boardrooms of New York City, at large in Yankee Stadium and the Garden—always making the right moves. ♦

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