

The invasion of America

By: [R. Marc Kantrowitz](#) September 20, 2018



GEORGE DASCH, ERNEST BURGER, HERBERT HAUPT

The 3,000-mile journey had been a long one. Two weeks on the ocean; under its waters during the day, above it at night. A German submarine U-202 cruising to its destination. Finally, on June 12, 1942, it arrived at Amagansett on the eastern part of Long Island. It was, late, dark and foggy.

As the four-member team of German saboteurs lowered themselves onto their inflatable raft, they knew of a second team traveling aboard another U-boat, this one headed to Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida. And if successful, other teams would follow, landing in America every month or so to wreak havoc, blowing up factories, plants, railways, bridges, canals and stores.

Given Germany's successful clandestine operations against its European enemies, Hitler sought to expand its scope once war with the United States broke out. Thirty-seven-year-old Lt. Walt Kappe was handed the assignment, dubbed Operation Pastorius. Having lived in America for a dozen years himself, he sought out others who had similar backgrounds. He ultimately settled upon eight, three of whom were American citizens.

The talkative George John Dasch led the Long Island team. At 39, he had served in the German army during World War I. Sneaking into America in 1923, he worked as a waiter, becoming a citizen in 1933.

Born in 1906, Ernest Peter Burger served in the Nazi party early on. A machinist, he fled Germany in 1927 to avoid conflict with the Communists. He worked in Michigan and became a citizen before returning to Germany upon Hitler gaining power. On the wrong side of a Nazi power struggle, he served 17 months in jail.

Heinrich Heinck and Richard Quirin, both machinists, came to America in 1927 and left in 1939 to work for the fatherland.

The Florida team was headed up by 32-year-old Edward Kerling, who came to America in 1929 and worked as a chauffeur-butler while his German spouse served as a cook. When he was away from her, he took up with an American woman before returning to Germany in 1940.

The youngest of the group, the adventurous 22-year-old Herbert Hans Haupt, settled in Chicago at the age of 5 and later worked as an apprentice to an optician. He became a citizen, along with his parents, in 1930. Traveling abroad to avoid his pregnant girlfriend, he found himself living with his grandmother in Germany where he won accolades for helping his freighter run the British blockade.

Hermann Neubauer and Walter Thiel rounded out the group. Neubauer worked as a cook while Thiel traveled the county performing a series of menial jobs in Michigan, Indiana, California and Florida.

After completing two months of training in explosives and sabotage, they learned of their specific targets, of where to sow destruction and mayhem. The groups planned to rendezvous in Cincinnati on July 4.

Armed with explosives, fuses, and incendiary and timing devices, the plan was to bury it all on the beach where the stash would be retrieved at the appropriate time. A large amount of money to carry out the mission was also provided. Along with the money, Dasch carried a handkerchief with the names of local contacts written in invisible ink.

Upon landing on Long Island, the group, accompanied by two sailors from the sub, changed into civilian clothing and buried the supplies and uniforms. Dasch meanwhile climbed a dune to reconnoiter the darkened foggy area. He quickly spotted a flashlight headed in his direction.

Patrolling the lonely beach, an unarmed and surprised Seaman 2nd Class John Cullen stumbled upon Dasch, who claimed to be with a small group of stranded fishermen. His suspicion aroused, Cullen offered shelter at the nearby Coast Guard station, which Dasch declined. Burger appeared from the thick fog, headed over to Dasch, and asked him a question in German.

Trained as to how to respond — overpower the distraction and get him onto the sub to be whisked away — Dasch instead offered Cullen a \$260 bribe. To disengage, Cullen took the money and quickly fled, as did Dasch and his crew; the two sailors back to their sub, the four saboteurs to the local train station and New York City, and Cullen to his station, where he roused his fellow sailors who ran back to the beach. They

spotted the sub and the recently disturbed sand, which they dug up, finding the munitions and discarded uniforms.

In the city, Dasch and Burger registered in one hotel while Quirin and Heinck stayed in another. Over dinner, Dasch and Burger discussed their mutual distain for the Nazis and their mission and decided to abort it. Rather than just use the money and melt away in a familiar land, they decided instead to turn themselves in, something that proved to be more difficult than expected.

Seaman Cullen's discovery initially was met with skepticism by the FBI. When the agent in New York received Dasch's call, he thought him a crank. Frustrated, Dasch decided to travel to Washington, D.C., to speak to J. Edgar Hoover himself. First, however, he joined a card game, playing for 36 straight hours.

With Burger staying behind to mollify his two fellow partners, whom he advised to lay low, Dasch arrived in Washington at the same time Kerling's crew successfully landed in Florida. He again contacted the FBI, only to be written off as a crank for a second time.

Shunted from office to office, his story slowly and finally came into focus. Dasch, certain he would be treated as a hero, fully cooperated, speaking for more than 13 hours. His team was arrested in short order. Hoover alerted President Roosevelt that the FBI had cracked the Long Island case, although leaving out how it had done so. All that remained was nabbing the Florida group, whose members' names Dasch revealed, along with the handkerchief with the list of contacts. Family and friends were followed, and Kerling and Thiel were quickly caught in New York where they had traveled. Only the young Haupt and Neubauer remained at large.

Upon landing in America, Haupt went to Chicago, visited his parents, bought a new car, proposed to his girlfriend, and traveled to the local FBI office to clear up his draft problems. He explained that he had been overseas when the war broke out and had finally made his way back.

The FBI followed him, hoping Haupt would lead them to Neubauer, who was so bored he hung out in movie theaters and confessed his mission to friends of his wife, leaving with them the money he had been carrying. The two were quickly apprehended.

Wishing secrecy and the death penalty, President Roosevelt, for the first time since the Civil War, issued a proclamation establishing a military tribunal to resolve the case. Appointing seven generals, a secret trial was conducted and consumed much of

July, ending on the 27th. The defendants insisted they had no intention of carrying out the mission.

With the proceedings being challenged from the outset, the Supreme Court returned from vacation to hear arguments on their legality on July 29 and 30. It issued a per curium opinion one day later upholding the government's position. All eight defendants were found guilty and sentenced to death.

The tribunal noted, however, that Dasch and Burger were worthy of clemency. J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI were lauded for solving the case. In reviewing the 3,000-page transcript, Roosevelt determined that Burger should receive a life sentence and Dasch 30 years. On Aug. 8, the other six were electrocuted.

In October, the Supreme Court issued a formal opinion, *Ex Parte Quirin*, which has been continuously cited in justifying the current proceedings against suspected terrorists held in Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere.

Dasch and Burger were deported to Germany in 1948.

The above column is based on "Saboteurs: The Nazi Raid on America" by Michael Dobbs and various internet sources, including an article by Harvey Ardman in World War II magazine, published in 1997. R. Marc Kantrowitz is a retired Appeals Court judge. He can be contacted at rmarckantrowitz@comcast.net.