

Stories

Julia Child: Cooking Up Spy Ops for OSS

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Intelligence and Operations

Julia Child is probably best known for bringing French cuisine into America's mainstream. But, few know that she had a dynamic career as an intelligence officer before she became a cooking icon.



She was born in Pasadena, Calif., on Aug. 15, 1912. Arriving at Smith College in 1930, Julia was an active student throughout her college career. She was a member of the Student Council, played basketball, and worked for the Dramatics Association. Julia experienced her first culinary moments at Smith, as chair of the Refreshment Committee for Senior Prom and Fall Dance. After graduating from Smith in 1934, Julia wrote advertising copy for W. & J. Sloane, a furniture store in New York City.

Soon after the United States entered World War II, Julia felt the need to serve her country. Too tall to join the military (she was 6'2"), Julia volunteered her services to the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), which was the forerunner of today's Central Intelligence Agency. She was one of 4,500 women who served in the OSS.



She started out at OSS Headquarters in Washington, working directly for General William J. Donovan, the leader of OSS. Working as a research assistant in the Secret Intelligence division, Julia typed up thousands of names on little white note cards, a system that was needed to keep track of officers during the days before computers. Although her encounters with the General were minor, she recalled later in life that his "aura" always remained with her.

Julia then worked with the OSS Emergency Sea Rescue Equipment Section, where she worked in close proximity to officers who developed shark repellent. The repellent was a critical tool during WWII, and was coated on explosives that were targeting German U-boats. Before the introduction of the shark repellent, curious sharks would sometimes set off the explosives when they bumped into them.

From 1944-1945, Julia was sent overseas and worked in Ceylon, present day Sri Lanka, and Kunming, China. During these last two years in the OSS, Julia served as Chief of the OSS Registry, Julia — having top security clearances — knew every incoming and outgoing message that passed throughout her office, as her Registry was serving all the intelligence branches.



During her time in Ceylon, Julia handled highly classified papers that dealt with the invasion of the Malay Peninsula. Julia was fascinated with the work, even when there were moments of danger.

Not only did Julia contribute to the efforts of the OSS, but during her time of service, she met her husband. Paul Child was also an OSS officer. He was well traveled, and it was he who opened Julia's eyes to appreciate fine French cuisine. The two married in September 1946.



Paul was assigned with the U.S. Information Agency in France in 1948, and this is where Julia's studies of the culinary arts began at one of France's most prestigious cooking schools, Le Cordon Bleu. Julia became interested in cooking because she was looking for something to do while her husband was away on work.

Julia's cooking career has a place in American history, as many remember her as an enthusiastic and opinionated chef. With her many television series and cookbooks, her legacy still lives on.


Her contributions and eagerness to serve her country are well remembered and appreciated by the OSS family. Julia died at the age of 91 in 2004, two days before her 92nd birthday.



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