

# Operation Pastorius

## WWII

Shortly after Adolf Hitler declared war on the United States, just four days after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, he was eager to prove to the United States that it was vulnerable despite its distance from Europe, Hitler ordered a sabotage operation to be mounted against targets inside America. The task fell to the Abwehr (defense) section of the German Military Intelligence Corps headed by Admiral Wilhelm Canaris.

The job was right up the Abwehr's alley. It already had conducted extensive sabotage operations against the Reich's European enemies, developing all the necessary tools and techniques and establishing an elaborate sabotage school in the wooded German countryside near Brandenburg.

Lieutenant Walter Kappe, 37, a pudgy, bull-necked man, was given command of the mission against America, which he dubbed Operation Pastorius, after an early German settler in America. Kappe was a longtime member of the Nazi party, and he also knew the United States very well, having lived there for 12 years.

To find men suitable for his enterprise, Lieutenant Kappe scoured the records of the Ausland Institute, which had financed thousands of German expatriates' return from America. Kappe selected 12 whom he thought were energetic, capable and loyal to the German cause. Most were blue-collar workers, and all but two had long been members of the party. Four dropped out of the team almost immediately; the rest were organized into two teams of four.

George John Dasch, the eldest at 39, was chosen to lead the first team. He was a glib talker with what Kappe thought were American mannerisms. Dasch had served in the German army during World War I, then emigrated to America, where he had worked as a waiter. When war broke out in September 1939, he impulsively went home.



George John Dasch



Ernst Peter Burger



Herbert Haupt



Heinrich Heinck

The second man in the first team was Ernest Peter Burger, a stocky, intelligent man with slick black hair. Burger had been a Nazi almost as long as Hitler himself, playing an active role in the 1923 Munich Beer Hall Putsch—Hitler’s abortive initial attempt to gain power. In 1927, Burger fled Germany for the United States to escape criminal charges for brawling. He stayed until 1933, working as a machinist in Detroit and Milwaukee, joining the National Guard, studying English and even becoming an American citizen.

When Hitler came to power, however, Burger headed home, rejoined the Nazi Party and became aide-de-camp to Ernst Röhm, chief of the Nazi storm troopers. He escaped Hitler’s bloody purge of that organization and went to college, but he soon got into trouble by writing a report critical of the Gestapo. He was arrested, jailed for 17 months, then released into the infantry.

Heinrich Heinck and Richard Quirin were the other members of Dasch’s team. Machinists by trade, they had gone to America in 1927, eventually joining different chapters of the German-American Bund. In 1939 both accepted Germany’s offer to pay return passage for emigrants. They ended up at adjoining workbenches at a Volkswagen factory. The second team’s leader was Edward Kerling, 32. Kerling went to America in 1929 looking for work. He married a German girl and together they hired out as a butler and a cook. He later abandoned his wife and took up with an American girl. When the war broke out, Kerling bought a yawl, which he attempted to sail to Germany, but he was stopped by the Coast Guard. In June 1940, eager to help the Fatherland, Kerling returned to Germany, where he went to work for the Ministry of Propaganda.

Kerling was put in charge of three other men. The youngest, at 22, was Herbert Haupt. His parents had taken him to the United States when he was five. As a young man, he became an optician’s apprentice in Chicago. Just before World War II broke out, Haupt traveled to Mexico, then made his way to Germany. The third member of Kerling’s team, Hermann Neubauer, went to America in 1931 at the age of 21. He worked as a cook in several U.S. cities and became a member of the Bund and the Nazi Party. In 1939, he joined Kerling’s boat crew. A year later, he returned to Germany, where he was drafted. He had been slightly wounded during Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union and was in the hospital when Kappe contacted him, on Kerling’s recommendation.



Kerling’s fourth man, Werner Thiel, had gone to America in 1927. He found a series of menial jobs in Detroit, Indiana, California and Florida, and helped to found a chapter of the Bund. He returned to Germany after the war began and got a job in a war plant, where Kappe spotted him.

The would-be saboteurs arrived at the Abwehr school in early April 1942, joining two instructors and an assistant from the Abwehrexplosives laboratory in Berlin, as well as several military observers.

On May 23, the men were given their assignments. Dasch's team was assigned to destroy the hydroelectric plants at Niagara Falls, the Aluminum Company of America factories in Illinois, Tennessee and New York, as well as the Philadelphia Salt Company's cryolite plant in Philadelphia, which supplied raw material for aluminum manufacture. They were also instructed to bomb locks on the Ohio River between Louisville, Ky., and Pittsburgh, Pa.

Kerling's team was given the job of blowing up the Pennsylvania Railroad station at Newark, plus the famous horseshoe bend section of the railroad near Altoona, Pa., parts of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad, the New York Central Railroad's Hell Gate bridge, the lock and canal complexes at St. Louis, Mo., and Cincinnati, Ohio, and the water supply system in New York City. In addition, both teams were told to plant bombs in Jewish-owned department stores and in the locker rooms at major passenger railroad stations, with the object of creating panic and terror.

Kerling's team left the submarine base at Lorient, France, aboard U-584 on the evening of May 26, bound for a beach near Jacksonville, Fla. Dasch's team departed two nights later, aboard U-202. Its destination: the south shore of Long Island, near East Hampton.

The two teams were to bury their munitions crates on the beach, where they could be left safely and dug up later, then proceed to various cities and set up phony identities. They planned to meet in Cincinnati on July 4.

Each group carried \$50,000 for living expenses, travel, supplies—and bribes. Each member was also given \$9,000, \$5,000 of which was held by the group leader. The remaining \$4,000 was put in a money belt. Everyone was also given \$450 in cash for immediate use. All of this was in genuine U.S. bills, none larger than \$50. Both team leaders were also given a handkerchief that carried the names and addresses of mail drops and contacts in America, written in invisible ink.

Finally, each team was supplied with four waterproof wooden crates, each about twice the size of a shoebox. Three were filled with dynamite, some pieces disguised as lumps of coal. The fourth box carried fuses, timing devices, wire, incendiary pen and pencil sets and sulfuric acid.

As far as the Abwehr was concerned, these were only the first of many sabotage teams that would be slipped into America at the rate of one or two every six weeks. Once the network was fully operational, Kappe planned to join his men in America and direct their activities.

Although Dasch's team was the last to leave, it was the first to arrive. U-202 made the 3,000-mile-plus trip across the Atlantic in 15 days, traveling underwater during the day, on the surface at night. At 8 o'clock Friday evening, June 12, U-202 came within sight of the American coast. She submerged and slowly crept closer, grounding about 50 yards off the shore at 11 p.m. Because of the fog, visibility was terrible.

Dressed as German marines—so they would not be shot as spies if they were caught during the landing—Dasch and his team crawled into an inflatable rubber boat and their crates were loaded aboard. Two armed German sailors rowed the boat to shore, where the sabotage team changed into civilian clothing.

While the others were burying the crates and uniforms, Dasch climbed over a dune to reconnoiter. Suddenly he spotted a young Coast Guardsman, Seaman second class John C. Cullen, headed in his direction, waving a flashlight. Terrified that the Coast Guardsman would spot the half-buried boxes and the rest of his team, Dasch quickly walked toward him.

The saboteur told the Coast Guardsman that he and some friends on the beach were stranded fishermen. The Coast Guardsman suggested they take shelter at the Coast Guard station, less than half a mile away. Dasch declined, saying that he and his friends had no IDs or fishing permits. Not surprisingly, the young Coast Guardsman started to get suspicious.



**Amagansett Coast Guard station at Atlantic Avenue Beach in Amagansett, New York. The station was moved in 1966 to a private residence to protect it from demolition. In May 2007, the structure was moved back to near its original location.**

Just then, Ernest Burger came up out of the fog. Thinking Dasch was talking to one of the sailors, he asked a question in German. Dasch ordered him to shut up and go away. Burger did as he was told, but now the Coast Guardsman was certain something funny was going on. Burger climbed back over the dune and told the others to stay out of sight.

Meanwhile, Dasch and the Coast Guardsman were having an odd exchange:



**Seaman second class John C. Cullen**

‘How old are you?’ Dasch asked the young man.

‘Twenty-one.’

‘Do you have a father?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you have a mother?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t want to kill you,’ said Dasch. ‘Forget about this and I’ll give you some money and you can have a good time.’ Dasch held out two \$50 bills, which the Coast Guardsman refused. He added more bills and tried again. This time his offer was accepted. Then Dasch did something that was to prove very important later on. He grabbed the Coast Guardsman’s flashlight and shone it on his own face. ‘You’ll be meeting me in East Hampton sometime,’ he said. ‘Do you know me?’

‘No sir, I never saw you before in my life.’

‘My name is George John Davis. What’s yours?’

‘Frank Collins,’ the Coast Guardsman said. Then, without another word, he bolted, disappearing into the fog.

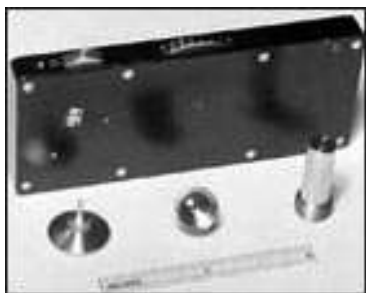
Dasch sauntered back to the group and told everyone he had the Coast Guardsman ‘buffaloed.’ He and his team nervously finished burying everything and walked to the road. Eventually, the four men found the Long Island Railroad station at Amagansett. They caught the 6:57 to New York, joining a few Saturday morning commuters.

Meanwhile, ‘Frank Collins’—actually Seaman 2nd Class John Cullen—ran back to the Coast Guard station and roused some colleagues. They picked up weapons and hurried back to the beach. Dasch and the others were gone. But through the fog, the Coast Guardsmen spotted the departing submarine. When they searched the beach, they found freshly dug holes and, inside of them, the four wooden munitions crates, as well as a duffel bag filled with German uniforms.

By 10:23 a.m., the boxes were at the New York City office of Captain John Baylis, New York Coast Guard commander. He called the Federal Bureau of Investigation. By noon, 13 hours after Dasch and his men had arrived, the FBI had taken possession of everything the saboteurs had brought from Germany except their clothes and money. In Washington, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover imposed a news blackout to avoid alerting the saboteurs and ordered the largest manhunt in the Bureau’s history. Unfortunately, the FBI had no leads whatsoever.



**Contents of box recovered from spot where buried on beach south of Jacksonville, FL, showing electric blasting caps, pen and pencil delay mechanisms, detonators, ampoules of acid, and other time delay devices**



Disassembled timing device showing component parts



Pen and Pencil assembled for use as delay device



Capsule containing sulphuric acid encased in a rubber tubing for protection

By that time, Dasch and his team had already found their way to Manhattan. That afternoon, they bought clothing at Macy's, then split into pairs for the night, Quirin and Heinck checking in at the Hotel Martinique, Dasch and Burger registering at the Governor Clinton. That evening, over dinner, Dasch and Burger began talking about their worries for Germany and for their family members who lived there. Slowly, they began to realize they had identical intentions: to betray the operation to the Americans. When did they make this momentous decision? Both men later insisted they were strong anti-Nazis who had intended to scuttle the mission from the moment they were recruited. In Dasch's case, anyhow, his behavior, particularly the nature of his encounter with Coast Guardsman Cullen, suggests he might have been telling the truth. On the other hand, that encounter might have so spooked Dasch that he felt capture was inevitable and figured the only way he could avoid being executed as a spy was to confess everything and help the FBI catch the others.

As for Burger, there is no hard evidence prior to his conversation with Dasch that he had planned to scuttle the mission. He probably realized, however, that once Dasch made up his mind to double-cross his German employers, he either had to go along with it or kill the other man. And though he was an enthusiastic brawler, Burger was no killer.

On Monday morning, June 15, Dasch and Burger made their plans. Dasch would go to Washington, drop in on J. Edgar Hoover and tell him everything. Burger would wait at the hotel and pacify Heinck and Quirin.

Dasch was worried about contacting the FBI, however. During sabotage training, Kappe had boasted to his recruits that they would be safe in America because the Gestapo had infiltrated the FBI. To protect himself, Dasch called the FBI in New York. Agent Dean McWhorter answered the phone. Dasch said he had arrived from Germany the day before and had information for J. Edgar Hoover. He planned to deliver it in a couple of days, and he wanted the agent to alert Hoover.

McWhorter must have heard about the spy hunt, but he apparently did not connect it with the call. He asked Dasch to come to the FBI office, but Dasch said he needed to speak to Hoover personally, then hung up.

Now Dasch began working up his nerve to go to Washington. He chose an odd way to gain courage—he went to a waiter’s club he knew and played pinochle from Monday night until early Wednesday morning. Then he went back to his hotel and slept until midday. The next morning, he took a train for Washington.

That same day, Thursday, June 18, Edward Kerling and his team landed without incident on Ponte Verdra Beach, 25 miles southeast of Jacksonville. They buried their crates, walked to Route 1 and caught the Greyhound bus for Jacksonville. Within hours, all four were on trains—Kerling and Thiel bound for Cincinnati, Haupt and Neubauer for Chicago.

George Dasch arrived in Washington by midmorning, checked into the Mayflower Hotel and called the FBI. The agent he reached, Duane Traynor, thought it was another crank call but, on the outside chance it was somehow connected with the Amagansett investigation, he sent a man to pick up Dasch.

At the Justice Department, as Dasch later told the story, he was shunted from office to office, finally getting an audience with D.M. ‘Mickey’ Ladd, the man in charge of the spy hunt. Despite the news blackout, Ladd at first believed Dasch had somehow heard about the landing and was trying to cash in on it. Finally, Dasch dumped all of the money Kappe had given him on Ladd’s desk—\$84,000 in all. Ladd became a believer.

Now Dasch repeated his request. He wanted to tell his story to Hoover. He fully believed he would be treated as a hero, perhaps even brought in to help make the arrests. Dasch did get to see J. Edgar Hoover, briefly, but he ended up telling his story, 254 pages of it, to Ladd and Traynor. He rambled on for 13 hours, beginning by revealing where Burger was staying.

Before he finished talking, FBI agents had staked out Burger’s hotel room. Burger led them to a clothing store, where he met Quirin and Heinck and the agents arrested all three men. Burger told the FBI he was in on Dasch’s surrender and intended to cooperate fully.

So much for the first team.



**J. Edger Hoover**

On June 22, Hoover proudly wrote President Franklin D. Roosevelt that the FBI 'had already apprehended all members of the group which landed on Long Island,' adding that he expected to have the rest in custody soon. He failed to mention that without Dasch's unexpected surrender and confession the FBI might never have found the saboteurs. Roosevelt could have drawn only one conclusion from Hoover's memo: that Hoover and his men had succeeded in tracking down the spies on their own.

The FBI had a little more trouble rounding up the second team, since Dasch knew only that both groups were supposed to meet in Cincinnati on July 4. The only help he could offer was the handkerchief that listed German contacts in America, written in invisible ink. Dasch could not remember how to bring out the script, but the FBI lab figured it out. Agents were then dispatched to watch all the contacts.

Edward Kerling, who was traveling with Werner Thiel, had gone to New York by way of Cincinnati. There, he had contacted a trustworthy friend, Helmut Leiner, one of the names on the handkerchief. Leiner arranged for Kerling to see his mistress. Kerling told her a little of what he was doing, and she agreed to travel with him. Within a couple of days of Dasch's surrender, FBI agents spotted Kerling talking to Leiner. They followed Kerling to a bar, where he met Werner Thiel. Both men were arrested shortly afterward—two down and two to go.

The youngest member of the team, Herbert Haupt, had gone back to his parents in Chicago and told them everything. He used some of his sabotage money to buy a new car, and he proposed to his girlfriend, who had had a miscarriage. Then he dropped into the local FBI office to clear up his draft problems. He explained that he had been away when he should have registered and had since reported to his draft board.

The FBI seemed to accept the explanation, but when Haupt left the office, agents followed him. They trailed him for three days in hopes he would lead them to Neubauer. When that did not happen, they arrested him, and he told them where they could find the last member of his team.

Hermann Neubauer, who was staying at the Sheridan Plaza hotel, had gotten so lonely that he visited a couple he barely knew—friends of his wife. He told them he had come to America aboard a German submarine on assignment from the German government, and he left his money in their care. Meanwhile, he spent most of his time in movie theaters. When he got back to his hotel Saturday night after a film, FBI agents were waiting for him.

Only after all his colleagues were in jail did the FBI officially arrest George Dasch. To his great dismay, they considered him just as guilty as the others. Dasch begged to be jailed with his colleagues, so they would not realize he had turned them in. Hoover, who did not want Germany or even the president of the United States to know how the saboteurs had been captured, was only too happy to comply.

On Saturday, June 27, exactly two weeks after Dasch and his team had landed at Amagansett, Hoover wrote Roosevelt to tell him all eight German agents had been caught. 'On June 20, 1942,' he said, 'Robert Quirin, Heinrich Heinck and Ernest Peter Burger were apprehended in New York City by Special Agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The leader of the group, George John Dasch, was apprehended by Special Agents of the FBI on June 22, 1942, at New York City.' Actually, of course, Dasch had surrendered to the FBI in Washington four days earlier. It was his surrender that led to the other arrests, not the other way around.



After the news of the arrests broke, Roosevelt got dozens of letters and telegrams urging that Hoover get the Medal of Honor. The president settled for a congratulatory statement.

Roosevelt realized that neither the death penalty nor secrecy could be guaranteed in a civilian trial, so he issued a proclamation that established a military tribunal consisting of seven generals, the first to be convened in the United States since Lincoln's assassination. The prosecutor was Attorney General Francis Biddle. The chief defense lawyer was Colonel Kenneth Royall, a distinguished attorney in civilian life and later President Harry Truman's secretary of war.

The trial, which was held in secret at the Justice Department, occupied most of the month of July 1942. Biddle accused the Germans of coming to America to wreak havoc and death, basing his accusations on their own confessions. The would-be saboteurs pleaded innocence, denounced Hitler and insisted they had had no intention of actually engaging in sabotage.

The prosecution asked for the death penalty, the punishment required of spies during wartime, but it had a hard time making its case against Dasch and Burger, who had confessed so quickly and collaborated so completely.

On July 27, the defense rested. The seven generals quickly prepared a report and sent it—and the 3,000-page trial transcript—to Roosevelt who, under his proclamation, was responsible for determining the time and place of execution if that was the tribunal's sentence. Now, finally, Roosevelt found out exactly how Hoover had managed to catch the saboteurs so quickly. He never made any public comment about it, however.



**A United States Army Signal Corps photo taken during the third day of the trial of the captured German saboteurs, July 1942**

On August 8, six of the eight German agents were electrocuted at the District Jail in Washington, D.C. Burger was sentenced to hard labor for life; Dasch was given 30 years. Meanwhile, fearing more landings, the FBI put out an alert for Walter Kappe and others at the German sabotage school. Late in 1944, the Abwehr did manage to place two spies on the Maine coast, but they were quickly picked up. If other such attempts were made, they have never come to light.

The failure of Operation Pastorius led Hitler to rebuke Admiral Canaris and no sabotage attempt was ever made again in the United States. During the remaining years of the war, the Germans only once more dispatched agents to the United States by submarine. In November 1944, as part of Operation Elster a German submarine, U-1230, dropped two RSHA spies off the coast of Maine to gather intelligence on the Manhattan Project and sabotage it, as well as dozens of American munition factories. The FBI captured both men shortly after. These agents benefited from the calmer state of public nerves in the later years of the war and received prison sentences rather than execution.

Although many allegations of sabotage were investigated by the FBI during World War II, not one instance was found of enemy-inspired sabotage. Every suspect act traced to its source was the result of vandalism, pique, resentment, a desire for relief from boredom, the curiosity of children “to see what would happen,” or other personal motive

In 1948, President Harry S. Truman granted executive clemency to Dasch and Burger after five years and eight months in prison on the condition that they be deported to the American Zone of occupied Germany. They were not welcomed back in Germany, as they were regarded as traitors who had caused the death of their comrades.

In 1953, Der Stern magazine published articles obviously based on information supplied by Burger, which condemned Dasch for causing the deaths of his six colleagues. Vilified in Germany, Dasch unsuccessfully tried to get a pardon from the United States and return to America. In 1959, Dasch published a book that attempted to justify his behavior; he then disappeared from the public eye.

Dasch died in Germany in 1992, still awaiting the pardon promised him by J. Edgar Hoover half a century earlier.

[Source: <http://www.historynet.com/world-war-ii-german-saboteurs-invade-america-in-1942.htm> | June 2016 ++]