

## Air and Space this Week

### Item of the Week

## Two Little-Known, but Significant, Military Events

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**KEY WORDS:** Operation Colossus Bernard Irwin Apache Pass Bascom Cochise Medal of Honor McCormick Tucson Ring

*My motivation for the Item(s) this week is that it is the only point in time where the intervals in time between the two events below, and the present, are equal (160 and 80 years before this week). One is obviously related to A+StW's themes of aviation, astronomy, and Space exploration, but the other is, too (I promise). And, you know me, there may be an odd connection or two along the way.*

This week's Item is about two military events, both little-known today, but significant nonetheless. The most recent of the two is Operation Colossus, an airborne raid against Italy on 10 February 1941. The second is the earliest military action that resulted in award of a Congressional Medal of Honor.

### Operation Colossus

Winston Churchill, reeling from the defeat at Dunkirk, realized the need for a military unit that would be specially trained to carry out raids against Germany-occupied Europe. He wasn't the only one; LtCol Dudley Clarke submitted a proposal to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff to form and train such units. The proposal was sound, and it carried the support of the Prime Minister, so the [Commando](#) units came into being, each with its own special missions and training.

One of the biggest shocks at the start of WWII (before Pearl Harbor) was the German blitzkrieg against the Low Countries and Poland. A key element of those attacks was the use of paratroopers to land behind the defensive lines and secure key position prior to the invasion. Churchill wanted a similar asset. No.2 Commando unit was already training with parachutes, and was renamed the No.11 Special Air Service, the first unit in a long line of SAS units extending to the present day. A number of soldiers volunteered for Commando service, and No.11 grew to a force of ~350 officers and men by [September, 1940](#), the end of the "Battle of Britain."

The No.11 team was ready for combat, but nobody on our side had conducted an airborne operation before. A small, achievable, objective was needed for their initial combat foray. Lessons learned from that experience would be invaluable for future, larger, operations.

Thirty-eight members of No.11 were selected for the first mission. At that time, southern Italy was being used as a staging area for men and material being sent to northern Africa and

Albania. That part of Italy did not have a lot of fresh water; an aqueduct supplied several towns and much of the military infrastructure of the area. The aqueduct was most vulnerable too far inland for a naval-based commando raid to be practical. *This would be an ideal spot for the first Allied attempt at an airborne invasion.*

Mission planning for “Operation Colossus” was completed, and the 38 attackers were readied to be dropped at the target area by a group of six Whitley medium bombers on **February 10, exactly 80 years ago this week.**

Let’s just say that [Hogan’s goat](#) was less “stinky” than this raid. Thirty-eight commandos isn’t particularly “colossal.” There was a lot of problems with the equipment, and even more so with delivering the men in the proper place; a big part of the explosives went awry, including the specially-trained men to plant them properly. The remaining commandos did the best they could, and did manage to knock out part of the aqueduct (there were actually two aqueducts at this site; they only tried to wreck one, but they did destroy a small bridge nearby). The damage would be repaired before the water in cisterns and otherwise in the delivery system ran out. There was no material effect on the transport of men/material to northern Africa.

The plan called for the commandos to march west for ~30 miles to the coast (near Salerno), where they would be picked up by a submarine. They ended up in three groups, but all were captured only a few hours after the explosives went off. Even if they had made the pickup spot on the coast, they would not have found the sub. One of the bombers that flew a diversionary attack near Foggia had engine problems, and ditched near the pickup spot, after sending an uncoded radio message they were going down in the pick-up location. Naval leaders feared a sub would be facing a trap, so the recovery mission was canceled.

One of the commando team was an Italian national, a former waiter serving as an interpreter. The other commandos were sent to Naples as POWs, but the waiter was turned over to the Blackshirts, who tortured and then executed him. [One of the others](#) did manage to escape successfully (after being captured and escaping a second time) and return to combat, but the others survived the war and made their way home after the Italian surrender.

While this mission was a mess, it provided invaluable experience in all aspects of the use of paratroopers in the manner Churchill and others anticipated. The first step in any new endeavor usually has a steep learning curve, but can provide input on how to make that endeavor effective.

For another example of the difficulties faced by a new endeavor, this one the robotic exploration of Mars, see the “Mars is Hard” spreadsheet [here](#).

## References

[https://military.wikia.org/wiki/Operation\\_Colossus#cite\\_note-H200-14](https://military.wikia.org/wiki/Operation_Colossus#cite_note-H200-14)

[https://www.battlefieldhistorian.com/operation\\_colossus.asp](https://www.battlefieldhistorian.com/operation_colossus.asp)

<https://hforhistory.co.uk/h-for-history-posts/2019/10/31/operation-colossus-sas-shadow-raiders>

Patterson, Lawrence, 2020, *Operation Colossus: The First British Airborne Raid of World War II*, Greenhill Books, 256 pp., ISBN 13: 9781784383787.

### **Action at Apache Pass**

Let's go back another 80 years before Operation Colossus. The Civil War had not yet started (although war clouds were on the horizon), and the U.S. Army was already stretched thin fighting native peoples in the New Mexico Territory.

One important outpost, Fort Buchanan, guarded a trail junction and water hole near a place called Apache Gap, in what is now southeastern Arizona.

Our hero is one Bernard John Dowling Irwin, a native of County Roscommon, Ireland, born on 24 June 1830. His family immigrated to the U.S. when he was a young boy. He had two years of college education at New York University, then served as a private in the NY Militia (1848-1849). He then obtained a medical degree in 1852, after which he served at the Emigrant Hospital on Ward's Island, east of Harlem. He obtained an appointment as an Army assistant surgeon in 1856, and was sent to the southwestern frontier, ending up at Fort Buchanan.

Relations between the Army and the Chiricahua Apaches near Fort Buchanan were strained, to say the least. The Chiricahuas were led by their famed Chief, Cochise, a very capable leader and strategist. (Geronimo was also a member of the tribe, but he was never a chief, although he did lead smaller groups of guerillas most effectively.)

The Chiricahuas were a nuisance to traveler in the area, and Fort Buchanan's proximity to one of the few sources of year-round water in the area was a problem for them. The situation deteriorated when the Army captured Cochise's brother and a couple of his nephews. In retaliation, the Apaches captured a group of soldiers and a young boy. Cochise offered an exchange of prisoners, but was turned down cold by the Army. Cochise had expected a routine exchange, and was enraged by the refusal. He killed his prisoners (except the boy, whom he kept captive), and in return, the Army killed his relatives. Ka-boom.

2Lt. George Nicholas Bascom was dispatched from Fort Buchanan with 60 soldiers from the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry, on a mission to capture Cochise.

Near this area of operations is a place that is to this day called the "[Cochise Stronghold](#)." It is a very rugged (and [beautiful](#)) place, almost impossible to assault. The topography negated the use of horses and artillery, and the Apaches knew every nook and cranny.

Bascom and his men were at a terrible disadvantage, surrounded by angry defenders. They sent word for help back to Fort Buchanan.

Forces were thin at the fort. Fourteen men of the First Dragoons were rounded up by Dr. Irwin, and they headed out to rescue Bascom if they could. Horses were also in short supply, and the Irwin party had to ride mules to Apache Pass, near the Stronghold. Irwin was a doctor, not a combat leader, but he was no dummy, nor was he overconfident (like Bascom).

Rather than trying to beat the Apaches by brute force, Irwin tried guile instead. He pulled off a trick that became a staple of cowboy-and-Indian movies of the 40s and 50s. He knew he was

outnumbered, so he sent small groups of men into the hills surrounding the Pass and had them make the noise a much larger force would make. It worked. The Apaches felt that they were outnumbered, and fled to the Stronghold. Pursuing soldiers could not catch them, although they tried. They did manage to rescue the boy Cochise was holding.

For more about Cochise and Geronimo, see: <https://www.desertusa.com/desert-people/chiricahua-apaches.html>.

The Congressional Medal of Honor was established in 1862. The first recipients were the men of the “Great Locomotive Chase,” the raid led by James J. Andrews. He and a force of 22 Union Army volunteers and a civilian captured a locomotive named the “General,” in northern Georgia, and drove it northward toward Chattanooga, destroying rails and telegraph lines as they went. They were captured after a spirited chase. Andrews (a civilian), the other civilian, and seven of the soldiers involved were executed as spies. Eight soldiers escaped and safely reached the North. The remaining six were exchanged for Confederate POWs in early 1863.

The returned men created a sensation with their story of the mission. The Medal of Honor had just been approved, and Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, saw to it that the surviving Andrews team got them. The very first MoH ever awarded was to Private Jacob Parrott, who had been tortured brutally by his captors. His five companions also got the MoH, all of them from President Lincoln himself, establishing the tradition still in use today. All but three of the other soldiers (or their families) would receive the MoH, but Andrews and the other civilian were ineligible for the honor.

During the post-War years, the MoH gained in public esteem, and the military considered other actions in giving out the award, ones overlooked, or in Irwin’s case, happened before the MoH was created.

Irwin had an exemplary career after the Bascom rescue mission, serving with distinction in the Civil War and afterward. He created the first mobile field hospital, saving the lives of a number of wounded at the Battle of Shiloh (shades of M.A.S.H.!). He held a number of increasingly-important posts, including serving as the senior medical officer at West Point for five years. Just before his retirement, his actions at Apache Pass were reviewed and deemed worthy of a belated Medal of Honor, which he received on 24 January 1894. He also received a retirement promotion to Brigadier General.

Many Medals of Honor had been awarded by 1894, **but Irwin’s was the earliest action to have resulted in the awarding of the MoH**. This was the first (on the calendar) of a long line of recognitions for the best of military heroes.

But wait, there’s more, there’s always more!

Bernard Irwin’s son, [George LeRoy Irwin](#) (USMA, 1889), served with distinction in WWI, eventually attaining the rank of Major General. He also served in the Spanish-American War and the Philippine-American War. During WWI, as a Brigadier General, he commanded an artillery brigade, and received the DSM for his service at the Second Battle of the Marne and

other battles. The [Fort Irwin National Training Center](#), in California, was named for him (not his father).

Bernard's daughter, Amy Irwin Adams McCormick, served as a Red Cross nurse during WWI. She married Edward Shields Adams, but their marriage failed in 1914, with Amy citing Adams' alcoholism as the reason (a major scandal ensued). She then married the son of Adams' cousin, Robert R. McCormick, in 1915. He, too, would be a distinguished officer in WWI, also in the artillery; he insisted on being called "Colonel McCormick" for the rest of his life. He became a Chicago alderman, and the owner and publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*. He was an ardent anti-New Dealer, and hated FDR with a passion. His newspaper published an account of the victory at Midway that ultimately led to the Japanese learning we were reading their main naval code (see Coda below). McCormick died childless, and to his credit, he funded a number of charitable causes in his will. Chicago's McCormick Place Convention Center [was named](#) for him.

George Irwin's son, [Stafford LeRoy Irwin](#), made Lieutenant General. He served with distinction in WWI and the inter-War period, and came into his own in WWII. He commanded the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in North Africa, and played an important role at the Battle of Kasserine Pass, in Tunisia (the 78<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of [Sidi Bou Zid](#), one of the [Kasserine Pass battles](#), is on February 14).

*Now, I haven't forgotten that I promised there would be an aviation, astronomy, or Space exploration connection with this story. Seems like a tough thing to do, since the Wright Brothers and Kittyhawk were over 40 years in the future, and Space exploration was over 90 years away. In fact, it's not only do-able, it's a double – both to astronomy and to the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History (NMNH)!*

Bernard Irwin, while serving in the Southwest prior to the Bascom affair, had a lot of opportunity to study all aspects of the abundant natural science of the area. He collected reptile specimens for the Smithsonian Institution during the three years prior to Bascom's rescue. In addition, while visiting Tucson during that time, he found and claimed a large iron meteorite, which had been discovered, along with another piece, many years before. It had a most unusual shape, a ring. One end had been embedded in the ground, and the flatter top had been used as an anvil for decades. It had fallen into disuse, and had fallen over in the dirt, when Irwin saw it. He had immediately recognized its scientific importance, took possession of it, and [donated it to the Smithsonian](#), too, in 1857. It is officially known today as the Irwin-Ainsa Meteorite, but it is more commonly known as the "[Tucson Ring](#)." It is so distinctive and so rare that it deserved prominent display. **Today, it shares the [exhibit room](#) in NMNH with the also-somewhat-unique-and-famous Hope Diamond!**

**Coda:** The Sunday edition of the *Chicago Tribune*, June 7, 1942, carried a banner headline that stated that the Navy had advanced notice of the Japanese strike at Midway, and that the simultaneous small attack in the Aleutians was merely a diversion. The story was under the byline of a reporter that had been embedded on the carrier *USS Lexington* prior to the Battle of the Coral Sea. He was looking for stories for home front consumption, intending to write a book about life aboard the *Lex*, and he got more than he bargained for when the ship was sunk.

During his return home, the XO of the *Lexington* showed him a CINCPAC secret warning about Midway, based on codebreaking. The *Tribune* story caused a big furor, because the Navy could have only learned of the Japanese plans via espionage (not likely) or codebreaking. Efforts were made to suppress the story and any follow-ups, and the Japanese did not seem to have noticed, because they didn't change the code. However, internal Navy politics in the Pentagon led to charges being filed against the reporter and *Tribune* management. This created a public bruhaha that the Japanese must have heard about. U.S. Marines went ashore on Guadalcanal at that very same time. They found a complete Japanese book with the latest codes (JN-25 C), and sent it to the codebreakers in Hawaii. Just as the codebreakers started to dig into it, the Japanese prematurely changed the code to JN-25 D, almost certainly due to the fuss over the *Tribune* article. The change in code blanked out the codebreakers' ability to decode messages for many months, which profoundly affected Navy operations during the key battles of late 1942. The perpetrators of this fiasco were rewarded with plum assignments during and after the War. The head codebreaker, about whom Admiral Nimitz said, "This officer deserves a major share of the credit for the victory at Midway," did not fare as well. His reward for providing arguably the most important military intelligence in history was the command of the engine-less floating drydock [ABSD-2](#).

If you want to read more about this dreadful aspect of the Midway battle, see the following two books, both of which should already be in the possession of anyone interested in WWII Naval operations:

Layton, Edwin T., Roger Pineau, and John Costello, 1985, *And I Was There: Pearl Harbor and Midway – Breaking the Secrets*, New York, William Morrow and Company, ISBN 0-688-04883-8, with particular attention to Chapters 32 and 33.

Holmes, W.J., *Double-Edged Secrets*, 1979, Naval Institute Press, ISBN 0-87021-162-5. Check out the book's Dedication, and pages 112-117.

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