

POPSEC: Inglourious Basterds

Learning Operational Security Lessons... and Scalping Nazis

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With fascism on the rise both in the United States and Europe, it's a good time to remind everyone of *Inglourious Basterds*. This movie is full of people kicking Nazi ass and offers a wealth of entertaining operational security lessons. The following text is packed with both spoilers and important takeaways from the film.

Lesson 1: Don't put your trust in someone who has everything to lose from helping you and nothing to gain.

The opening scene of *Inglourious Basterds* features a confrontation between a Nazi officer and a French dairy farmer who is hiding a Jewish family under his house. The Jews have entrusted their safety to the dairy farmer because, prior to the German occupation of France, he was one of their neighbors. The farmer has nothing to gain from aiding his Jewish neighbors besides the fact that offering to hide your neighbors when they are being threatened with genocide is the only decent thing to do. Unfortunately, the dairy farmer has three daughters and a vested interest in keeping them safe from the occupying Germans. The farmer reveals the location of the Jewish family because protecting them and protecting his family have become mutually exclusive.

People who stand to gain little from helping us seldom choose decency over the preservation of their own interests. This doesn't necessarily mean we should never place our trust in such people, but it does mean that we need to have explicit conversations with them about how much risk they're willing to take on in the course of providing their assistance, especially when betrayal carries serious consequences.

Lesson 2: Share details exclusively on a need-to-know basis.

Shoshanna is a woman with a plan. To pull it off, she needs complete buy-in from her counterpart, Marcel, and the services of a film developer. Her plan is both dangerous and tenuous, and even one breach in security could land her and her co-conspirator in a concentration camp (or worse), leaving Hitler and the rest of the Nazi party top brass free to continue their reign of terror. Fortunately for Shoshanna, she has two really important things going for her: she is cool as a cucumber, and she knows better than to share essential details with nonessential players. Shoshanna never reveals even a single detail about her plan to the film developer, choosing instead to provide what you might call an alternate incentive for his cooperation. In fact, aside from Marcel, whose complete loyalty has already been verified, and whose collaboration is essential to ensure the success of Shoshanna's plan, Shoshanna never breathes a word about her intentions to anyone, leaving her free and clear to carry out her act of vengeance.

This lesson applies in real life: if you never tell your colleagues anything more than what is needed for them to execute their part of the plan, you significantly reduce the risk that they will share damaging information and ruin your plans.

Lesson 3: Own your weaknesses so you can work around them.

Lieutenant Archie Hicox is an exemplary soldier and an above-average spy who understands German fluently. Unfortunately, Lieutenant Hicox speaks with an unusual accent, and while his

knowledge of German film is unparalleled within the Allied forces, his understanding of German culture is severely lacking in several regards. Also severely lacking is Hicox' awareness of his weaknesses. As a result of this lack of self-awareness, Hicox first draws attention to his covert meeting by being overheard speaking with an odd accent, then ultimately botches the mission, resulting in his own death and the deaths of nearly everyone else in the room. Fraulein von Hammersmark later tells Lieutenant Rains that Hicox screwed up by holding up the incorrect fingers to signal "three" while ordering from the bartender. While this is certainly an accurate description of events, the truth is that he flubbed the operation by not having the good sense to shut the hell up once he'd drawn the attention of an SS officer.

This offers two real-world takeaways: first, be self-aware about your weaknesses so you can work around them. The second, which is related, is to be aware enough to know when your operation has failed, so you can pull back in time to regroup and try again later—or at least so you can live to fight another day.

Lesson 4: Clean up after yourself.

Sure, Bridget von Hammersmark made a mission-critical error by choosing a pub full of Nazi soldiers as the place for her rendezvous with the Basterds, but her much deadlier mistake was neglecting to clean up after herself before leaving the scene. It can be damn near impossible to keep your wits when everything is falling to pieces around you, but if you're engaged in something subversive or clandestine, you need to remain calm during catastrophes to ensure that the trouble doesn't spread. In Bridget von Hammersmark's case, a discarded autograph and an errant shoe effectively sealed her fate.

In the real world, cleaning up after yourself might be as simple as wiping chat and text message logs before going out to a risky action, or making sure your bags do not contain anything you don't want to be arrested carrying before you leave the house, or making sure you don't leave behind anything potentially incriminating.

Lesson 5: Sometimes you can't salvage a plan.

The Basterds had an airtight plan for infiltrating the premier of Fredrick Zoller's film: send in three operatives all fluent in German to accompany famed German actress Bridget von Hammersmark to the premier of *Stolz der Nation*, and use the event as an opportunity to take out Hitler. Unfortunately, all the German-speaking Basterds were present at Frau von Hammersmark's disastrous basement rendezvous and none of them survived. Now, most people might face these facts with an air of resignation, but Lieutenant Aldo Raine is not most people. Raine makes the extremely ill-advised and regrettable decision to move forward as planned, posing as Italians rather than Germans. Granted, Aldo speaks Italian... sort of. And sure, Frau von Hammersmark does tell him that Germans don't have a good ear for Italian accents... but reasonably, all parties involved should have called it quits.

Sometimes, it is impossible to salvage a plan. The best you can do is call it quits and live to fight another day—whether that means backing out of a plan to assassinate Hitler, or recognizing that it's time to leave an action, go home, and start preparing for the next one.

Lesson 6: The most dangerous kind of adversary is the one who has nothing to lose.

Shoshanna Dreyfus, aka Emmanuelle Mimieux, is a young Frenchwoman who owns a movie theater. Unbeknownst to everyone but her lover and her reluctant but loyal collaborator, Marcel, Shoshanna is also a young Jewish woman whose family was massacred before her eyes, who only barely escaped sharing their fate. In other words, Shoshanna is clean out of fucks to give, and is willing to burn it all down in order to get revenge and prevent others from sharing her family's fate. Shoshanna is the epitome of a dangerous adversary because she has decided she has nothing to lose.

The lesson here is a grim one: you can only defeat an adversary willing to sacrifice everything to take you down by acting preemptively. In the best-case scenario, you should not make such enemies in the first place. In the worst-case scenario, you must neutralize such threats before they are able to enact mutually-assured destruction.

Lesson 7: Be careful making deals with your adversary.

There may come a time in your life when, like Colonel Hans Landa, you need to make a deal with your enemies in order to ensure your survival. The lesson to take away from Landa's deal with the American military is simple: make sure you iron out all of the details and don't trust your adversary any more than is necessary. Landa, for example, probably shouldn't have trusted Aldo Raine to adhere to all the details of the agreement he had made.

In a real-life context, this means you should never trust the police when they offer you a deal in exchange for information. Police frequently assure arrestees that if they cooperate (i.e., answer questions and give up information), they'll tell the district attorney to go easy on them. The reality of the situation is that police have no control over how a district attorney files charges or tries cases, and a police officer is never going to get on the stand and testify that a defendant should be exonerated if the DA instructs him otherwise.

It is also important to be circumspect about making deals with your adversaries when you are considering accepting a plea deal offered by a prosecuting attorney. Be wary of plea deals stipulating probation, as probation frequently carries with it a suspension of the meager civil liberties offered by the state—sometimes not just for the person on probation, but also for all those in proximity to that person. If you are considering accepting a plea deal rather than going to trial, work with your attorney to try to negotiate a deal that actually protects you and your comrades.

Always do your best to find out what your enemies stand to lose if they go back on their word. If it's negligible—or nothing at all—there's no reason to put faith in the deal.

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