

# Who Were The Ritchie Boys?

SECRET WWII HEROES RECRUITED INTO THE MILITARY INTELLIGENCE TRAINING CENTER AT CAMP RITCHIE, MARYLAND



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Washington County held a World War II secret for decades. In fact, the war time program was so confidential that its secrecy extended beyond the World War and into the Cold War era. Only in recent times have the restrictions been lifted and heroes recognized for the countless lives they saved during the conflict. Those heroes came from many countries and backgrounds, but all had one common experience—specialized training at Camp Ritchie in the Catoctin Mountains of Washington County, Maryland. The secret “Ritchie Boys” story is now on full display at the Ritchie History

Museum located on the grounds of historic Fort Ritchie adjacent to Cascade, Maryland.

Originally a Maryland National Guard camp with construction beginning in May 1926, the facility was named for Maryland Governor Albert Ritchie, and hosted guard exercises until the United States entered World War II. The camp’s proximity to Washington, DC, and the Pentagon quickly caught the attention of the United States Army that established the first Military



Intelligence Training Center (MITC) at the location. In 1942, the state of Maryland leased the site to the army that began construction of 165 buildings for the purpose of quartering soldiers during training programs.

Upon completion of facilities, the army recruited qualified personnel for specialized intelligence training. Shrouded in secrecy, recruits could not divulge information concerning location or purpose of missions—even family members were shielded from knowledge of the camp's existence. The federal government's G-2 section of the War Department General Staff enhanced secrecy by ordering troops to arrive in small numbers under classified orders, to reveal themselves to no one, and to remain tight lipped even at the



**Above: A display area of WWII memorabilia and artifacts in the Ritchie History Museum.**

**Inset photos: Displayed photos of Hitler likely confiscated from German POWs during interrogations by Military Intelligence.**

facility. Clearly, Camp Ritchie held an elevated status during World War II.

The recruits arriving at Camp Ritchie became the driving force behind America's intelligence service during the war. Drawn from a variety of European countries and the homeland, the army sought personnel with language skills to interpret enemy documents and gather intelligence in the field, but its primary purpose was to train interrogators. Many proved to be



### ***What Became of the Ritchie Boys?***

**Some of those featured in the museum exhibits attained prominent positions in their professional careers after the war. Not specifically because of their training at Camp Ritchie, but most likely to the reasons they were selected — language and logic skills and intelligence.**

highly motivated German-Austrian Jews who fled their homelands following persecution, while others fled for related reasons from German speaking territories occupied by the Germans. Approximately 9,000 refugees were handpicked for the top secret program; there were also about 2,000 “Ritchie Girls.”

German-Austrian “Ritchie Boys” offered the army invaluable skills because of familiarity with nuances of language and culture within their homelands. Those skills were demonstrated many times during interrogations of prisoners and in attempts to convince enemy troops to surrender and divulge information. Dr. Guy Stern, Ritchie Boy, recalled one example of cultural attribution when aircraft distributed pamphlets in enemy held territory. The pamphlets encouraged Germans to surrender rather than continue a hopeless war. Deemed the Allies most successful leaflet, Stern explained the Germans’ tendency to obey and respect authority caused them to be influenced by General Eisenhower’s statement and signature.

Ritchie Boys were also critical to gathering and interpreting information in the field. It is estimated that more than half

of the intelligence gathering during the war was provided by them, thereby saving the lives of Allied troops.

The end of World War II saw the gradual transition of Camp Ritchie to permanent army installation status concentrating on communications. The transition to permanent status elevated Camp Ritchie to Fort Ritchie on November 1, 1951, a title it held until closing in 1998 after a military base realignment study.

The Fort Ritchie site then underwent a number of changes before its purchase by John Krumpotich, developer, who desired to revive history and develop community on the expanse of acreage. An exciting part of the revival was realized when the Ritchie History Museum opened in June 2023. Visitors were welcomed by a variety of artifacts that brought the once forbidden stories to life, as well as a large exhibit relating to the Korean War.

Katy Self, director of the museum explains, “When visiting the Ritchie History Museum, you can expect to learn about the diverse history of the historic site and its role in American Military History. We begin with the Ice Harvest, as the lakes created by the company played a role in the



**Above: A large exhibit relating to the Korean War is also housed at the Ritchie History Museum.**

**Left: Since the Fort's purchase in 2021, Cascade Properties and Ritchie Revival have spearheaded the revitalization of Fort Ritchie through the revival and management of the existing buildings.**

decision to establish Camp Ritchie. Next to the Ice Harvest, we have a section on the establishment of Camp Ritchie by the Maryland National Guard for its Summer Training Camp. The next exhibit you go into is 'Secret Heroes: The Ritchie Boys.' In this exhibit, you learn about the Ritchie Boys' training at Camp Ritchie and their vital role in intelligence collection and the victory of World War II. After our Ritchie Boy exhibit, we have a Korean War exhibit dedicated to the Washington County veterans.

Then, further on, you learn about Fort Ritchie as a 7th Signal Command and its support for Raven Rock Complex. Ending your visit, you will find information on the base's closure, the many hands it passed through after, and its new life as Ritchie Revival takes off with 'Bringing back the Fort!'

"The museum's efforts to interpret Fort Ritchie's history have been well received by the base's prior veterans, their families, and the local populace. Recognizing the Fort's

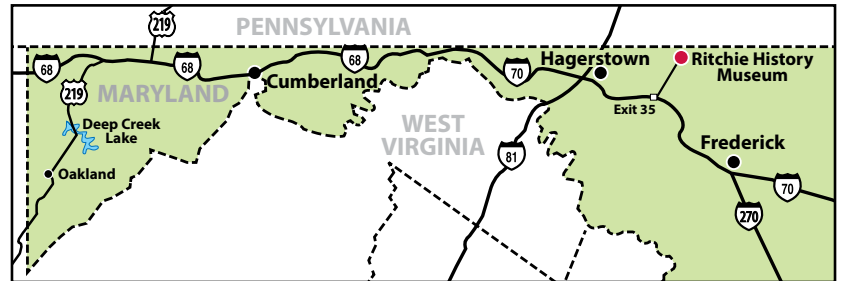
little-known history has had a substantial impact, and our collection and support at the museum continue growing daily.”

In 2022, the Ritchie Boys story received impressive coverage during an episode of CBS’s *60 Minutes*. From secrecy to national television programming, to a dedicated museum, the Ritchie Boys and Fort Ritchie have finally received recognition for a job well done!

Dan Spedden, President of Visit Hagerstown added, “The Ritchie History Museum is an invaluable tourism asset to our community, preserving a vital chapter in American history. It’s a place where visitors can step back in time and appreciate the sacrifices made by those who served, including the unsung heroes of intelligence who played a critical role in thwarting enemy plans during World War II. This museum is a testament to our rich heritage and a must-see for anyone interested in our nation’s past.”



Ritchie Revival is all about reviving history and building community (see <https://www.ritchierevival.com>). The Top Secret Tap Room (above) has been declassified and serves a great selection of local beers as well as delicious food and sits in a beautiful spot overlooking the parade field.



**Ritchie History Museum • 202 Barrick Avenue, Cascade, MD 21719**  
**301-781-7740 • [www.RitchieMuseum.org](http://www.RitchieMuseum.org)**  
**Hours: Wednesday thru Saturday 10 am – 4 pm; Sunday 12 pm – 4 pm**

*sweet charlotte*  
photography

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