



# THE FBI AT WAR

## MELVIN PURVIS IN WORLD WAR II

By Gilberto Villahermosa



*Before his time in the military, Purvis was instrumental in bringing down gangster John Dillinger.*

Every law enforcement specialist and enthusiast in the world knows the name of FBI Special Agent Melvin Purvis, responsible for killing Charles Arthur “Pretty Boy” Floyd, Lester Joseph Gillis (aka “Baby Face Nelson”), and John Herbert Dillinger. Few are aware, after being hounded out of J. Edgar Hoover’s Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Purvis went on to an equally successful military career as an officer in the United States Army during World War II.

### Early Life and FBI Service

Melvin Horace Purvis, Jr. was born 24 October 1903, in Timmonsville, South Carolina, to Melvin Horace Purvis, a tobacco and cotton farmer, and Janie Elizabeth Mims Purvis. Both his parents were natives of Timmonsville. Melvin was the fifth of 12 siblings. As a child he loved books, horses and dogs, was an avid hunter and crack shot. Purvis graduated from Timmonsville High School, where he played football and was on the debate team. He attended the University of South Carolina, where he received his law degree in 1925.



Following graduation, Purvis enjoyed a brief career as a lawyer with the firm of Willcox & Hardee in Florence, South Carolina.

Melvin applied to join the Department of Justice's Bureau of Investigation (BOI) on 18 December 1926, at the age of 23. The Bureau had been established in 1908 to monitor anarchists in the United States following the 1901 assassination of President William McKinley. In 1932 it would become the United States Bureau of Investigation, and in 1935 the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Purvis started his service on 4 February 1927. After a period of training in New York, he began his investigative duties. Between 1927 and 1931 Special Agent Purvis was constantly on the move and spent time in Dallas, New York City, Norfolk, Columbus, Cincinnati, Oklahoma City and Chicago. His first Efficiency Rating (performance report) in 1927 was 88 percent. His rating declined the next year to a low of 81.5, before climbing to 89.8 in 1929 and 90.2 in 1930.

Excelling as a field agent, Purvis quickly rose through the ranks. By 1931, Purvis was head of the Department of Justice Bureau in Birmingham, Alabama. The following year he was picked to head the Chicago office and track down some of the nation's most notorious gangsters. At the time, the Department of Justice and the Bureau of Investigation were engaged in a "War on Crime" against high-profile, notorious criminals. Purvis lost three men tracking "Baby Face" Nelson. On 22 July 1934, he and his team killed John Dillinger, making Purvis one of the most famous men in America.

Purvis was eventually hounded out of the FBI by publicity hungry Hoover, who was jealous of Purvis's immense popularity with the public and the

news media. He resigned from the FBI in 1935, the resignation receiving wide coverage in the press.

After leaving the FBI, Purvis settled in San Francisco and returned to practicing law. He spent his free time writing, lecturing, playing golf and traveling. On 20 May 1937, he boarded the French luxury liner *Normandie* disguised as "Oscar Smith," for a European vacation. Four days later he was at the opening of the Paris World's Fair.

It was during that trip Purvis met Herman Goering in Berlin. At that time, Goering was an aviation hero and the head of the German Air Force. Like most ardent Nazis, the commander of the *Luftwaffe* was fascinated with American gangsters. After Dillinger's death in Chicago four years earlier, German Chancellor Adolf Hitler had exclaimed dramatically: "[t]he Chicago chief of police shot him like a mad dog in the public street, filling him with holes, like a sieve, without regard to bystanders. Does a land where such things happen still deserve to be called a country where law rules? Without court procedure, without a single question, the man was shot into the great beyond."

Goering had heard the FBI agent who had eliminated Dillinger was in Berlin and telephoned him at his hotel. The two men went wild boar hunting. Goering also presented Purvis with a sword.

On his return to the United States, Purvis's first order of business was personal. On 14 September 1938 he married his childhood sweetheart, Marie Rosanne Willcox. He was 34, she was 30. It was his first marriage, her second. Following the ceremony in Charlotte, North Carolina, the couple boarded the German cruise ship *S.S. Europa* for a European honeymoon.

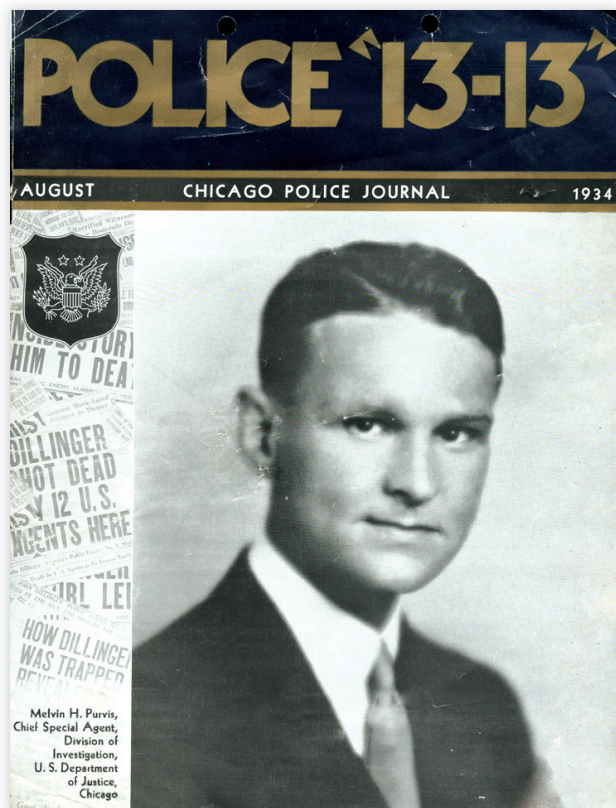
After their honeymoon, Melvin and Roseanne returned to South Carolina, where he tried his hand at a number of enterprises before finally setting his sights on the US military. Aware Hoover had blocked many of his lucrative employment opportunities, Purvis wrote a letter to the FBI director and requested he not block his entry into the army. Either Hoover did not interfere, or he tried and the War Department ignored him.

## Military Service

Purvis entered the army on 31 January 1942, as a captain in the Military Police Corps, part of the Provost Marshal's Office. By that time, he and Roseanne had a two-year-old son, Melvin Horace Purvis III.

The Office of the Provost Marshal in World War II was a new and relatively small organization. Though it had existed as part of the US Army during World War I, it had been disbanded at the end of the conflict and resurrected for World War II. Headed by Maj. Gen. Allen W. Gullion, the US Army's Staff Judge Advocate, the organization became part of the Army Service Forces in 1942.

It had four major responsibilities: organization and training of military police units, protection of vital military and industrial installations from sabotage, custody of prisoners of war, and recruitment and training of military



Purvis gained the national spotlight during his service with the FBI.



government teams for service overseas. The missions drove its organization into five major divisions: Military Police, Traffic Control, Prisoners of War, Disciplinary Barracks, and Criminal Investigation.

Purvis's reputation had preceded him. According to FBI records, Gen. Gullion made it clear Purvis would emerge as the head man in the War Department in charge of all investigations. It is also clear from his FBI file that, even after joining the army, the FBI continued to monitor him and collected derogatory information on the former special agent.

According to a memorandum in the file dated 11 March 1942: "*Capt. Melvin Purvis was a member of a group centered around Maj. Gen. Allen W. Gullion, Provost Marshal General of the US Army. This group contemplated a military dictatorship in the US and whose objective was 'to put the Jews in their place' and to remove the 'left-wing friends of Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt from public affairs.'*"

Unlike the dozens of other reports on him in Purvis's FBI file, there was no source stated for this entry. Reports indicate the FBI seemed genuinely alarmed by remarks attributed to Gen. Gullion that "*there was no longer any need for the FBI except in a minor capacity, working under Army supervision or in labor districts in the interior of the country, as the Army and Navy were going to take over the coasts.*"

By the spring of 1942, Purvis was working in the Office of the Provost Marshal in Washington D.C. Promoted to the rank of major, he took provost marshal training at Arlington Cantonment in nearby Arlington, Virginia, later that year. Following his tour of duty in the nation's capital, Purvis went on to Fort Custer, Michigan, along with his wife and young son Melvin. More than 300,000 troops trained at Fort Custer during World War II, and the base served as the Military Police Replacement Training Center. Purvis served for a while as the Commandant of the Officer Candidate School and the Enlisted Men's Schools of the Provost Marshal General's Schools at Fort Custer and later at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, where he interviewed candidates for training.

It was at Fort Custer Purvis met another former and extremely colorful FBI Special Agent, Leon George Turrou. Turrou had been born in Poland

*Purvis rose from captain to colonel during his stint in the army.*

in 1895 and had served in the French Army in World War I, then as a United States Marine after the war. He joined the Bureau of Investigation in 1928 and worked a number of high-profile cases over the next decade. He had been involved in a shootout with “Pretty Boy” Floyd, and had taken part in the investigations following the Lindbergh baby kidnapping and the crash of the dirigible USS *Akron*. Hoover fired Turrou in 1938 for leaking information about a German intelligence ring in the United States. When Purvis encountered Turrou as a private first class at Fort Custer, he succeeded in having him commissioned as a first lieutenant in the Military Police Corps and vowed to keep the former agent at his side as he advanced in the army.

## Off to War

Purvis received orders assigning him as executive officer to the US Army’s new Provost Marshal, Brig. Gen. Joseph V.D. Dillon, at the latter’s headquarters in Algiers, North Africa. Dillon had been appointed Provost Marshal General of the North African Theater of Operations in May 1943. Purvis had worked hard to get assigned overseas, and his persistence and fame paid off. He departed for North Africa in August 1943. He and Turrou traveled in a 90 ship convoy and experienced a hair-raising crossing of the Atlantic. The ships were attacked by submarines, and one was sunk. By the fourth day at sea, US Navy destroyers and German U-boats were engaged in a battle around the convoy.

Purvis’ new duties as the Deputy Provost Marshal General included coordinating, planning and supervising all provost activities, an immense responsibility. The area of operations included all of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia.

The Provost Marshal’s major battle was not against spies or saboteurs, but against black marketeers. By the time Purvis arrived in North Africa as much as 20 percent of all American military supplies were being stolen and resold on the black market. That included everything from C-rations to map cases and even entire trucks and jeeps.

Purvis and his 350 men spent a third of their time in North Africa in a war against bands of well-organized thieves. Hundreds were arrested, and the culprits included American military and civilian personnel. The Provost Marshal’s Office and the CID were unable to end black marketing altogether in North Africa. In the end, they did manage to hamper illegal operations and recovered millions in stolen supplies intended for America’s fighting men. The lessons they learned would be applied in Europe once the Allies succeeded in establishing a foothold in France.

Not all the Provost Marshal’s investigations were black market-related. As a member of CID, Purvis’s job was to investigate serious crimes involving both military personnel and civilians subject to the War Department’s Articles of War. Purvis was always accompanied by Turrou, and the two former Special Agents found themselves heading to interview the US Army’s most famous general, George S. Patton, who was headquartered in Palermo, Sicily.

By the time of the Allied landings on Sicily in July 1943, Patton was commanding the *Seventh Army* and had won glory and fame capturing Messina. A month later, America’s most famous general was on the verge of being relieved by Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower for slapping two American soldiers in two high-profile incidents.

On 3 August, Patton had slapped and verbally abused Pvt. Charles H. Kuhl at an evacuation hospital in Nicosia after he had been found to suffer from “battle fatigue.” On 10 August,

Patton slapped Pvt. Paul G. Bennett under similar circumstances. Ordering both soldiers back to the front lines, Patton railed against their cowardice and issued orders to his subordinates to discipline any soldier complaining of battle fatigue.

When Purvis and Turrou arrived, Patton quickly got down to business. “Look,” he said, “I won’t beat around the bush. I know what you two are really here for.”

Purvis had no idea what Patton meant. “For Chrissakes—Don’t play innocent!” the general yelled. “It’s too important to me. I want to settle this one way or the other. I want to get back to the fight.”

Purvis and Turrou were apparently unaware Patton had been suspended from further operations for the two slapping incidents.

Though initially covered up by the press, the slapping incidents eventually made their way into American newspapers. As a result, Patton’s beloved *Seventh Army* had been disbanded, with some of its formations transferred to the *Fifth Army*, and its former commander demoted to the role of military governor of Sicily. “I admit that under the circumstances my hitting the boy was villainous,” Patton told Purvis. “But it was a reflex, an impulse. I was helpless to stop it.” Patton then began to weep.

“If I hadn’t seen Patton crying with my own eyes I wouldn’t have believed it,” Turrou later recorded. “But even the way he cried was a virile, soldierly thing.”

## Nuremburg Trials

Purvis’s records and letters home indicate after North Africa he served in sensitive assignments in Italy and north-



*Purvis would assist with hunting down black market goods stolen from the American supply chain in North Africa.*



Purvis with FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover prior to his service in the US Army.

west Europe. The details of that service are lacking, as his military personnel records were burned along with thousands of others in a 1973 fire at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis. Following his tour in Europe, he was summoned back to Washington to help organize the War Department's War Crimes Division and serve as its deputy director. On 8 February 1945, Purvis was picked by the US War Department to track down high-level Nazis accused of war crimes.

In his new capacity, Purvis spent time in Heidelberg, Germany, following the surrender of the Third Reich, searching for Adolf Hitler. His assignment was to investigate whether Hitler had indeed died in his Berlin bunker, as was believed, or had somehow escaped. On 18 September 1945, Purvis and Turrou were in Heidelberg checking rumors Hitler was hiding there. They also searched for Martin Bormann, who was believed to have had access to a fortune stashed away by Hitler and to still be alive.

Purvis was later appointed Chief American Investigator of War Crimes. In his new position, Purvis helped institute the protocols for the Nuremberg Trials. He also had a second encounter with Reich's Marshal Hermann Goering.

Soon after Goering's arraignment for war crimes, Purvis, then working at the Nuremberg Trials, interrogated Goering, who had surrendered to the Americans shortly before the end of the war. Ironically, due to the housing shortage in the city (Allied bombers had almost leveled it), Purvis was staying in Goering's private rail car.

Goering was the second-highest-ranking Nazi official tried at Nuremberg, after Adm. Karl Doenitz, Hitler's succes-

sor. The prosecution levelled six charges against Goering: conspiracy, waging a war of aggression, war crimes, including the plundering and removal to Germany of works of art and other property, crimes against humanity, including the disappearance of political and other opponents under the *Nacht und Nebel* (Night and Fog) decree, the torture and ill-treatment of prisoners of war, and the murder and enslavement of civilians, including an estimated 5.7 million Jews.

The trial lasted 218 days. The prosecution presented their case from November through March. Goering's defense lasted from 8 to 22 March. The sentences were read out on 30 September 1946, and Goering was sentenced to death.

## Post War

Melvin Purvis had risen to the rank of colonel in the army, and was decorated by both the Judge Advocate's Office and the War Department for his work in the War Crimes Division. Following his departure from the army, Purvis dabbled in various private pursuits, including owning a radio station. None of them seemed to make him happy. In May 1951 he reentered government service. Senator Olin D. Johnson, Chairman of the Post Office and Civil Service Subcommittee, asked Purvis to serve as counsel to a subcommittee investigating graft and waste in the government's personnel system.

Purvis died by his own hand on 29 February 1960, in his home in Florence, South Carolina. He was 57 years old. He had been suffering from depression and was afflicted with great physical discomfort. According to his

son Alston, his father suffered from chronic back pain and sometimes relied on morphine to dull the agony. Purvis was killed by the same nickel-plated, pearl-handled Colt .45 automatic pistol that had killed John Dillinger. The initial cause of death was ruled a suicide, but the evidence suggests it may have been accidental.

About a month after Purvis' funeral, J. Edgar Hoover received a stinging telegram from Purvis's widow Roseanne: "*We are honored that you ignored Melvin's death. Your jealousy hurt him very much but until the end I think he loved you.*" The telegram was signed "*Rosanne, Melvin Jr., Alston and Christopher Purvis*". ★

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Purvis at his desk during the Nuremburg trials.



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