

Robert Lanke

The Longest
Interrogation

A Novel

Translated by Patricia Kollander

An exiled Jew returns to Nazi-occupied Europe and embarks on a risky mission.

June 1944: Adam is a young interrogation specialist in the U.S. Military Intelligence Service. On D-Day, he parachutes into Normandy and makes a dangerous discovery far behind the enemy lines. Before Adam can warn his superiors about what he knows, he is captured by the Germans. In order to save himself and to ensure the success of the Allied invasion, Adam has to keep his secret at all costs: He was born in Germany.

Inspired by a little-known chapter in the history of the Second World War: the Ritchie Boys.

The Book

Adam Ruby wears an American uniform, but he is not a typical U.S. soldier. This son of a Jewish merchant from Heidelberg knows practically everything there is to know about Hitler's armed forces, thanks to his training at Camp Ritchie, a secret military intelligence center in the U.S. Army. On D-Day, he parachutes into Normandy along with the men of the 82nd Airborne Division. But he misses his drop zone and gets lost behind enemy lines. There he makes a dangerous discovery which may jeopardize the progress of the Allied invasion. Before he can get back to his unit, however, he is captured by the Germans – and finds himself in an interrogation room. In order to save his life and warn his superiors, he makes a desperate gamble that puts his training at Camp Ritchie to the ultimate test.

The Author

Robert Lanke was born in 1984 and studied Modern History in Graz and Paris. After working for international organizations and a consulting firm in Vienna, he returned to academia in 2011 and joined a research center for intelligence and propaganda in Graz. Since then, he has visited archives in Great Britain, Israel, and the United States. His recent project on Camp Ritchie in Maryland has inspired him to write his first novel "The Longest Interrogation".

D-Day

5 to 6 June 1944

CHAPTER 1

Hundreds of soldiers with blackened faces shuffled in the direction of their transport vehicles.

Their faces had been blackened with the ashes of the barbecued steaks they had eaten for dinner the night before.

This may have been their last meal.

Adam checked his equipment one last time. He was carrying two parachutes. The main parachute was strapped on his back and an emergency parachute was on his chest. He had a gas mask on his right side and a feldspar switchblade on the left. Two hand grenades were attached to top of his reserve parachute. On his belt Adam had a water bottle, a first aid kit and ammunition for his rifle, a M1 carbine. Another knife was strapped to his right lower leg. In his shoulder bag, which was attached underneath the reserve parachute, he had a phosphorous grenade, rain gear, a compass, a flashlight, chewing gum, bouillon cubes, water treatment tablets, a couple of Hershey's chocolate bars, a pack of cigarettes, a lighter, extra underwear, socks, a map of the area of operations, three notepads and a handful of pencils. And, of course, Adam also had his Order of Battle book, the most important weapon of the interrogation specialist. His gear weighed over sixty pounds, but Adam was so wired that he hardly noticed. He was finally facing the C-47 aircraft that would soon take him up into the skies.

The airplane that might also turn out to be his grave.

"Take care of yourselves, you old bastards," he yelled to Frank and Harry, who were standing in front of him in

the line to board the airplane. Then he quickly hugged them as best as he could wearing his bulky gear.

"I'll see you on the ground," said Frank, grinning; he was a brawny lieutenant with bright blue eyes and a mustache. "And don't even think about kicking those Krauts in the ass without me. Wait for me."

"Sure thing, Frank," said Harry. He tried to smile back, but the best expression he could muster was a weak grin.

One by one, the men clambered into the airplane and sat down on metal benches attached to the sides of the fuselage. There were twenty-seven other soldiers in that C-47 transport. These were the men of the 82nd Airborne Division; their mission was to compromise German supply lines, disrupt their communications, and occupy strategic positions before the Allies landed on the beaches of Normandy's Cotentin peninsula. Though Adam and his two friends wore the same uniforms as these men, there was a significant difference between them. Adam, Frank and Harry weren't warriors, but interrogation specialists. They were interrogators of prisoners of war, trained by the Military Intelligence Service of the US Army. Thanks to their training at Camp Ritchie in the Blue Ridge mountains of Maryland, they knew more about their German enemies than anyone else in the United States. And now the time had finally come to put their training to the test.

Adam closed his eyes and tried to collect himself. To his surprise, he felt not only fear but also a sense of relief. It was finally happening. The waiting game of the preceding days had been hellish. The operation was supposed to have begun the day before. Everyone was ready. But General Eisenhower, the Allied commander-in-chief, elected to postpone the whole landing operation due to gusts of wind and rain in the English Channel.

The invasion required very specific weather conditions: a full moon, light winds, and clear skies for the paratroopers. In addition, the landings had to take place at low tide so that the landing craft could maneuver around the mines that the Germans had placed on the beaches.

The delay not only frayed the nerves of the landings' first wave, but also the army cooks, who had to change their menu. The planned farewell feast with steaks and ice cream now had to be postponed for twenty-four hours, and the men were instead served an improvised meal of watered-down macaroni and cheese. But then Eisenhower's weather guys finally gave the green light and now they were finally in the damn airplane.

The C-47 transport slowly rolled on to the runway at Saltby Airfield in the English Midlands. Adam remembered the address that General Eisenhower had given them the day before. He had spoken of a great crusade that they were embarking upon; the eyes of the whole world were on them. Now Adam looked into the faces of the men who were sitting opposite him. Were they thinking about what Eisenhower had said? More likely they were thinking about the families they had left behind; their wives and children, their parents and siblings.

The engines roared and the C-47 accelerated and rose into the night skies. The plane circled several times around the dark landscape below. Adam knew the reason for this maneuver. The pilot had to wait until all the planes were in the air so that the squadron could head for its target in a massive wave. Adam looked at Frank, who was sitting next to him. His buddy had closed his eyes and he still had a big grin on his face. He looked like he was taking a nap.

Gosh, Adam thought enviously, how did he do it?

Either it was because Frank had always been the calm one, or maybe it was just the pills they had been given before takeoff. Pills to ward off fear of flying. Maybe the pills worked better on Frank than they did on him.

Adam stared into space in front of him and listened to the roar of the engines. He knew that it wasn't going to be a long flight. They had to be over the English Channel by now because they were flying low to avoid fire from German anti-aircraft guns on the Channel Islands. A few moments later, the aircraft abruptly ascended. Adam was startled, and his pulse quickened. This was the sign that the French coast was nearby. They were ascending to jump height.

"Get up and hook on!" roared the jump master, the non-commissioned officer in charge of the jumping operation.

Adam turned to Frank, who was now opening his eyes and nodding encouragingly. Like the other soldiers in the aircraft, they got up and hooked their main parachute rip cords on to the steel cable that was stretched across the cabin above their heads. Adam quickly went over what he had learned during his accelerated paratrooper training program. It wasn't very complicated. All he had to do was step out of the plane and fall into the night sky. The hooks and steel cables would automatically pull Adam's parachute open as he left the airplane. At least this was what was supposed to happen in theory. If there were any problems, he still had the spare parachute, which he fervently hoped he wouldn't need. Adam, Frank and Harry couldn't help thinking about the soldier who had died in a practice jump on the very day they had arrived at the paratrooper training camp. This hadn't been a particularly good omen.

"I shouldn't be thinking about this now," Adam mused as he leaned to one side to get a look at the men in

front of him at the exit hatch. The jump master was there to make sure that all the jumpers were ready. Adam put his hand on the man in front of him to steady himself as he heard a sound above the noise of the engines. It was a dull thud; it sounded like the clap of thunder from a quickly approaching storm. Adam looked over his shoulder at Frank and he nodded grimly.

It was German anti-aircraft fire. The enemy had found them.

Adam pressed his lips together. His fingers trembled as he checked the hook of the person in front of him to make sure that it was properly fastened and that his rip cord wasn't tangled under his arm or anywhere else. He felt Frank do the same for him and then pat him on the shoulder. Everything was OK.

Everything was going according to plan.

The thundering noise grew louder.

The man in front of him moved up as Adam edged closer to the hatch. There the jump master checked several bundles, which were also attached to parachutes. These included food rations, spare ammunition, a mortar, and a machine gun. Upon reaching the landing zone, the jump master would shove them out of the airplane, and the paratroopers and their equipment would float to the ground together. Just as they had done in training.

Everything was going according to plan.

A loud bang made Adam jump. A second later, the aircraft veered sharply to the right. Adam crashed into the man in front of him and was thrown to the floor of the aircraft. Panicked shouts filled the C-47. Adam struggled to his feet. Sweat ran down his back. He wanted to scream too, but he was able to get a hold of himself.

"We're over the target!" yelled Frank, who didn't sound a bit scared.

Again and again, Adam heard deafening explosions,

and through an opening he saw the flares of exploding anti-aircraft fire. Another explosion hurled him to the aircraft floor one more time. More screams. Adam could barely breathe. The C-47 had been hit but was still flying. Adam pulled himself up, panting. Through the hatch he saw the airplane next to them had burst into flames. His hands were shaking.

"Move over!" the jump master said as he cursed and pushed past Adam towards the cockpit. "The damn light doesn't work anymore. I have to tell the pilots. Make way!"

Adam turned around. "What's happening?" he asked Frank.

"I think the power in the cabin is gone." Frank gestured to the hatch, where the lamp that had been red had gone out. The green lamp next to it, which the pilot used to signal the jump master that he had reached the destination, was also out.

Adam turned back to the jump master, who had finally made his way to the cockpit door. Just a moment later he spun around wildly waving his arms. He was yelling at the top of his lungs, and even though Adam couldn't understand him, they knew what they had to do. The soldiers at the hatch grabbed their bundles and jumped out. Adam came closer to the hatch.

Three men were still ahead of him.

"See you soon," Frank shouted in his ear.

Two men were in front of him.

He took a breath.

One man.

Explosions flashed nearby and the pilot revved up his engines again. Adam staggered backwards and crashed into Frank.

Then he took a step forward, stepped into space and fell.

One-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand, Adam counted.

Then he looked up and sighed a breath of relief. His main parachute had opened properly, and he was floating toward the ground. The planes thundered above him. The farther he got away from them, the quieter it became. The darkness seemed to devour him. Soon the hum of the airplane engines and the sound of explosions subsided.

A gust caught him and abruptly pulled him aside. Then came another gust, and he briefly lost his bearings. His helmet had slipped. Hadn't he strapped the damn thing down? No matter, he didn't have time for that now. He had to prepare for his landing. As the ground came closer, he could see the silhouettes of trees beneath him that were in a meadow.

It's an orchard, he thought. He felt fortunate that he wasn't landing in some damn forest where he could get caught in the treetops and be unable to free himself.

Adam pulled on the two steering cords and tried to guide his parachute so that he could land as softly as possible between two apple trees, just as he had done with Frank and Harry. The ground was getting closer. Just a few yards to go. As Adam prepared for the landing, he was ready to hit the ground, drop to the side and roll. But instead he heard the crack of branches. He jerked abruptly as he got stuck in a tree, and his stomach churned as he came to an abrupt stop. He cursed and looked up. At the last moment, he had erred in his steering and his parachute was caught in a tree. He looked around in panic. But at the same moment he realized that he was uninjured and that his feet were just dangling just above the ground. He opened the strap of his parachute and glided gently onto the meadow floor.

"Shit, that wasn't bad at all," he muttered, but at the

same time he thought how ridiculous and inappropriate it was to feel even the slightest hint of euphoria. His hands were still shaking with excitement. He got on one knee and lifted his head a little as he strained to see something in the dark. Then he took off his leather gloves, put them in his pocket, and listened, but there was no sound except the rustle of his parachute. A light, warm breeze blew. Then he heard a noise in the dark before him. Adam drew back.

Was it a horse?

He heard the sound again. Yes, it was a whinnying horse. Was there a paddock somewhere here? Or was it a farm? He peered intently into the darkness, but all he could see around him was fruit trees. No sign of people. He left the main parachute in the tree branches, unfastened the spare chute and left it under the tree.

Rifle in hand, he took a few steps and looked all around him. Where was the damn blue light that marked the meeting point? Where were the other men from his airplane, where were Frank and Harry? He thought about calling out their names but didn't.

They have to be here somewhere, he thought to himself as he circled the tree where he had landed. They had all jumped out of the airplane, one after the other. Frank and Harry were right behind him. Where the hell were they now?

"Stay calm," he said to himself again, only hoping to hear the sound of a human voice. "Just stay calm." He fought the panic that was rising inside him and knelt down. Then he opened his bag and furtively grabbed his map, compass, and flashlight. He had to try to figure out where he was, so he spread his equipment on the ground in front of him. Eisenhower's meteorologists had been right. The skies were clear enough for parachuting, but they weren't bright enough to study a map. He needed his flashlight. But when he picked it up, he hesitated for a

moment. Should he turn it on? He could draw the Germans' attention to the flashlight, because even the glow of a lit cigarette could be seen for miles. That's what they had taught him at Camp Ritchie.

So he took out his rain tarp, spread it out and slipped underneath it. Only then did he switch on the flashlight. He stared at the area on the map where his jump sector was marked. But there was no damn orchard on it. No paddock either. He snorted and looked at his watch. It was just after two o'clock. Adam switched off the flashlight and came out from under the tarp. Then he leaned against a tree to think. He had to admit that he had no idea where he was. What was he supposed to do? He was alone and had to find his bearings in the field at night. It was ironic that he of all people was in this fix, as he was the one who had always gotten lost during the nightly training exercises at Camp Ritchie. He took a deep breath, then stowed the rain cover, flashlight, map and compass back in his gear and stood up. He looked in all directions and decided to go east. That was the logical way to go, no matter where he currently found himself. The beaches where the allied forces were landing were east of the Cotentin Peninsula.

He headed east.

At first, he crawled from tree to tree, as if expecting to be attacked at any moment. The line of apple trees stretched seemingly endlessly into the distance. He stopped and took another look around. Where were any mines here? These damned Germans must have mined the whole peninsula. Would they have mined an orchard? If so, that horse he heard earlier would have blown up into a thousand pieces.

But what if ...

Fuck it, he thought, and sat up. Now he was moving faster, darting from tree to tree.

Stop, listen.

Again, nothing.

After a few minutes, he finally left the orchard behind and came to a narrow street. It was not much more than a gravel road. There was not a soul in sight. He considered for a moment which direction he would take on that road when roar of engines abruptly interrupted his thoughts.

For a heartbeat he stood still, petrified.

Then he whirled around and ran back towards the nearest apple tree. He leapt as he took cover behind it just as a motorcycle raced past him on the street. Then came another and another. They shot out of the darkness like demons only to be engulfed by darkness again. Their drivers, donned in dark gray uniforms, seemed to blend together. Only the contours of the unmistakable Wehrmacht helmets stood out clearly against the gloomy landscape behind them.

Our guys must have startled these motorcycle troops, Adam thought, ducking behind the tree. The men were long gone and could not possibly see him, but his stomach contracted when he thought about them. They were the first enemies he had seen in combat. This was real. During the long months of preparation for the invasion, he had faced German prisoners of war in England, but they had been unable to defend themselves. These men were locked up; they were disarmed, demoralized, and guarded by military police. Things were different now. The motorcyclist troops who had just raced past him were not prisoners, and they wouldn't hesitate for a second to kill him.

This realization struck him like a cold slap in the face and he pressed himself even closer to the tree trunk as the smell of the exhaust from the motorcycle engines wafted upwards towards his nose. He was completely

alone, he didn't know his position, and was probably surrounded by Germans. Inevitably the words of an officer from the staff of the 82nd Airborne Division came to his mind: "Happy hunting," he had said to his men before they had embarked on their mission. And he was right about that. Adam was now part of a hunting party – except now he was the prey.

For minutes Adam sat in the darkness. The hum of the motorcycles had long since died away. The only sound that came to his ears was the monotonous hoot of a night owl. He got up and went to the street. It ran roughly north to south. Adam listened again but could not hear any suspicious noises. The smell of the motorcycle engine exhaust was still in the air. Gravel creaked under his heavy spring boots as he turned about.

Where had the men come from? he wondered. They passed through here in a hurry, so maybe they were on the run from Adam's comrades in arms. Did it make sense to go in the direction where they came from? Yes, that sounded plausible. So he gripped his rifle more tightly and took off. To his left was the orchard where he had landed. The right side of the road was lined with one of the thick bocage hedges that typically adorned the landscape of the Cotentin peninsula. These were as tall as two men and almost impenetrable. Adam couldn't see what was on the other side of them, but the same applied to the enemy. He tried to make as little noise as possible, ready to dive at any time into the shallow ditch next to the road that the rain had washed away. But nothing moved, either in front of him or behind him. Restless and with his rifle at the ready, he followed the road, and it wasn't long before the hedges got lower before they disappeared altogether. Trees took their place. First only a few, then more, and soon the road was lined on both sides with dense forest.

He stopped and looked in all directions. Was that a blue glow? No, his mind was already playing tricks on him. It was like a nightmare. Where were Frank and Harry? Maybe they survived the jump and were lying somewhere in the mud, their bodies broken, or shot? Or had the Germans gotten them? Adam pushed those thoughts away. It was absurd to think he was the only survivor. But what had happened then? He had landed an hour ago and hadn't met a single American. The area should have been swarming with paratroopers. How could that be? There were only two possible explanations. Either he had run in the wrong direction, or the pilot had dropped them in the wrong place. Because of heavy enemy fire, the pilot might have had to change course. But even so, Frank, Harry and the other occupants of his airplanes should be somewhere around here. Or perhaps the wind, which was stronger than predicted, had blown him off course and left him alone here.

Adam walked on; he left the road and made his way through the thicket for better cover. After less than ten minutes' walk, the road, which now resembled a dirt path rather than a road, ended in a large clearing. The clouds that had darkened the moon in the past half hour had cleared somewhat. At last he could see more.

And he gasped.

The skies had brightened just enough for Adam to see the machine gun post on the roadside. The Germans hadn't bothered to disguise them particularly well. It was behind a low earth wall, roughly where the forest ended, and the clearing began. The machine gun was aiming at the open area in front of the post, so that the three German soldiers standing next to it had their backs to Adam.

He stood still.

Fucking shit, he thought, as a shiver ran down his

back. While trying not to make a sound, he took stock of the situation. He quickly searched the rest of the clearing for other enemy troops, but he couldn't see anyone else. These three motorcycle troopers must have passed this point because he hadn't passed any turns. But now he doubted that they had been on the run, as he previously thought, because the behavior of the three German soldiers spoke volumes. They talked calmly and were smoking; one had even removed his steel helmet and was scratching his ear. The other two held their cigarettes between their thumbs and forefingers so that the light from the embers were covered by the palm of their hands. They appeared to be observant, but they didn't look like they expected to be attacked at any moment. Adam could not understand what they were saying, but the tone of their voices did not indicate nervousness.

Get out of here, Adam thought to himself, or they'll shoot you.

He stepped backwards in the direction he had come from when his foot got caught in a branch. To keep his balance, he took a lunge and his rifle grazed his water bottle. The metallic scratch was just loud enough to make the bare-headed Germans turn around.

No, Adam thought, as he cursed under his breath.

"Who is there?" the German called into the darkness in his mother tongue, put on his helmet and took a few steps in Adam's direction. His two comrades had thrown away their cigarettes, crouched and raised their rifles.

Adam didn't move. The threat from these three harmless words paralyzed his body. But then he noticed that the Germans were trying hard to see something in the thicket. They can't see me, he thought, and his fear ebbed a little. He quickly considered his options. He could just stay put and hope that the Germans thought they were wrong about the sound. But that was probably

wishful thinking. Or he could run away, but then they would surely hear him, chase him, and shoot at him. And where could he go? Maybe he could hide himself, but the Germans were too close for that. Only one option remained. What had Major Rex Applegate, his gun instructor at Camp Ritchie, always preached to him about engaging in close combat with the enemy and self-defense?

Kill or be killed.

But how should he do it? The element of surprise was still on his side. The Germans were alarmed, but not suspicious, otherwise they would have shot at him. He had to take advantage of this situation.

Adam slowly crouched down and placed the rifle on the ground in front of him. Then he quietly wiped his sweaty hands on his uniform jacket and pulled one of the two grenades out of the container on his chest.

"Gefreiter auf Patrouille!" he called to buy time. But no sooner had the words left his mouth, he bit his tongue as he thought to himself, You damned idiot! The Wehrmacht did not use the word 'Patrouille' for 'patrol' but 'Streife'. Had he learned nothing at Camp Ritchie?

And had the Germans noticed the mistake before he did?

There was silence for a moment.

"Show yourself and come out here," called the previously bare-headed soldier who was now holding a pistol in his hand. Adam couldn't see his rank but suspected that he had to be the one in command. Probably a non-commissioned officer. He was only thirty yards away from Adam and signaled to his men. They got up and edged closer, with the rifles at the ready. There was no doubt that Adam's answer had made them suspicious.

But they weren't shooting.

Adam had to act.

He purposefully pulled the pin out of the grenade and hurled it at the Germans. Then he grabbed his rifle and ran in the opposite direction as fast as he could. He noticed bullets whistling past him and penetrating the trees to his right and left with a bursting sound. Instinctively, he jumped to the right as he heard one of the Germans shouting, "Grenade!", followed by an explosion. Adam didn't waste time assessing the impact of his attack. Instead, he broke out of the thicket and ran in the middle of the path. Then, after a bend, he saw a few bushes on the side of the path and with one leap he hurdled over them and ran back into the forest. He ran by trees, ducked under branches, stumbled over a root, fell, and quickly got to his feet. He kept running until his entire upper body burned with pain. When he was no longer able to run, he jumped behind a tree trunk and unlocked his carbine. Did he hear yelling behind him? He listened more closely, but all he heard was his rattling breath. He tried to calm himself down and breathe normally again. He sat and listened for minutes. His chest rose and fell wildly as he clung to his rifle. After he was absolutely sure that no one was chasing him, he put the rifle next to him, loosened the water bottle from his belt, opened it and took a long swig. Water ran down his cheeks and dripped from his chin as he gulped greedily.

Had he just killed someone?

He wiped the drops of water off his face with his sleeve.

Had he just killed a man for the first time?

Possibly. He hadn't seen if his grenade had hit its target. But he was fairly certain that he hadn't been followed. This made it clear that he'd taken out the machine gun post. And it was possible that three seriously injured or even dead Nazis lay there.

Adam pushed the thought out of his mind, turned on his stomach, and stared in the direction he had come from. There was nothing. He fumbled in his pocket and pulled out his map, rain tarp, and flashlight. He had tried to memorize the course of the road that he had been on; if he was lucky, he could find it on the map and determine his location. He put the rain tarp over his head and searched the map for a clue. But it was no use. He was too rattled to think clearly. He stowed his map and flashlight and took the gas mask from its container. He placed his mask and spade in a hole under the tree trunk. This gear had weighed him down and he did not expect to have much use for it now.

What should he do now, he wondered? He might have gotten rid of those Germans, but the machine gun post was probably still intact. He could turn back and take it out and render it harmless. And he could determine how effective his surprise attack had been. Maybe one of the three would still be alive and he could interrogate him.

If he had hit his target. But what if he hadn't? Was it worth the risk?

He took another sip of water, then got up and marched on, heading away from the German post.