

Chapter 24

December 1945

The five German recorders meet with me again at my quarters at 7:00 P.M.

“Now to get on with all of you being assigned to Hitler’s headquarters. I’d like to hear more about that.” I look at Krieger, who was directed by Goering to recruit the “best obtainable recorders in the country” to record statements made at Hitler’s twice-daily military-situation conferences.

“I selected the men, and we all went to Hitler’s headquarters,” Krieger says. “We all had about the same experience. We arrived between September and December 1942. At first there were six, then eight of us. All of us had been civil-service officials in the Stenographic Office of the Reichstag.

“I reported to a building in an isolated place outside the town of Vinnitsa in Ukrania, southwest of Kiev. This was the command post

for the war in Russia. The code name for the place was ‘Werewolf,’” Krieger recalls.

“What happened when you arrived there?”

Krieger goes on: “The adjutant took the first three of us to a room where we met Martin Bormann. He was in his Nazi uniform, decorated as befitted the head of the Nazi party, under Hitler, of course. He was a short, heavy man with a round face and a grim expression. We were introduced, and we shook hands. I then sat at a table where he handed me a paper and said, ‘Read it and sign it.’”

“Did you see Hitler?”

Krieger continues: “I was reading the paper when Hitler came into the room and half-sat on the edge of a desk nearby. He said nothing. I saw that he had on a plain army uniform with no decorations except an Iron Cross. He was awarded the medal for combat as a private in World War I.”

“What did the paper say?”

“The paper had several paragraphs, each beginning: ‘The party member agrees to . . .’ As a matter of fact, none of we three were party members. I thought of telling Bormann, but on second thought I realized he might say, ‘Then it is certainly high time to alter that.’ But there was no time to worry about that. Hitler himself told us: ‘Whoever will give away anything he has seen or heard here will lose his head.’ And that settled it. The pledge was signed by all three of us,” Krieger recalls.

“Bormann took the paper and put it in a file. Later I learned that two SS clerks of the party’s offices in Munich had been trying to take notes at the military-situation conferences, but they could not keep up. Hitler wanted every word spoken to be recorded without error.”

“How did you work?” I look at Buchholz.

“It was arranged that two of us would work together, one at each end of the long conference table, so not a word would be missed. We would then dictate from our stenograms to one of several female typists who would type while listening. What one of us missed, the other would catch, so we could verify the verbatim transcript as it was being typed.”

“What happened to the transcript?” I glance at Buchholz.

“The transcript consisted of an original and two copies,” he replies. “The original was retained for Hitler’s use, a copy went to the Wehrmacht historian Brig. Gen. Walter Scherff, and a copy was placed in storage in care of the SS men.

“Hitler wanted the transcripts within 48 hours of the end of each conference. Normally, there were two conferences each day—one after noon and the other after dinner—with staff officers and others on the military situation. We rotated in pairs so we could hear everything and make sure the transcripts were finished in time. We were free to go as we chose after being questioned separately by the counterintelligence corps. This gave us the chance to exchange what each of us found out at the military conferences, so when we finished each of us knew what the total facts were,” concludes Buchholz.

“Why did Hitler want verbatim transcripts?”

Buchholz replies: “In the course of time we learned that Hitler had reasons for these verbatim transcripts. He said, ‘As a man of destiny I want them for history, even if they fall into enemy hands.’ He especially wanted a correct record of what his military leaders said at each conference, and the ‘exact orders’ he gave them, so he could refer to

the transcripts if anyone claimed a misunderstanding, intentional or otherwise.”

“That’s interesting. And what else were you told?” I look at Thoet as do the others.

“All of us were warned several times not to discuss, amongst ourselves or with the typists or anyone else there or elsewhere, anything said by anyone at the conferences,” says Thoet.

“He certainly was secretive,” I say. “What occurred next?”

“We were shown to our living quarters. Each of us had a private room. The typists were housed at another place, two in a room. We had a common lounge at headquarters where we could rest and talk about anything except the conferences.” Thoet remembers the details.

“What happened in the lounge?” I ask Thoet.

“Hitler made infrequent visits to the lay staff in the lounge. There was no conversation. Hitler did all the talking—his monologue lasted almost a half-hour sometimes,” Thoet finishes.

“Were you in uniform?”

Buchholz is ready: “A few days after I arrived, my colleagues and I were issued plain gray civil-service uniforms, with no insignia or decoration of any kind. One day at a conference, Goering saw our uniforms for the first time and said loudly, ‘You call those uniforms?’ As chief of the Luftwaffe, he had many medals and decorations, quite a contrast with Hitler’s plain uniform—and ours.”

“What was the average day like, would you say?” I notice Krieger with a paper clip. He tries to straighten it as he listens to Reynitz.

“Hitler was in the conference room first, and we came next, one of us sitting down at each end of the table, with our pens, pencils, and

notebooks. The generals, admirals, and others were in an anteroom where there were refreshments. They waited there until Hitler gave the order for them to come in,” Reynitz recalls.

“The conference started with briefings by the chief officers on the military situations. They made short statements of what the combat generals under their command in the field had most recently reported by radio, pointing to marked maps. The field marshal doing the briefing would sometimes say, ‘If this and that happens, we should do this,’ and so on. Other times he would describe the situation and simply say what he intended to do with his forces. Then came the briefing by the navy and lastly by the air force.”

“With all three branches reporting to him, Hitler had rather complete information on the military situation, didn’t he?” I continue to question Reynitz

“Yes,” says Reynitz.

“Did Hitler look at the maps?” I glance at Jonuschat.

“Hitler, with spectacles on because his eyesight was poor, would look carefully at the maps on the conference table. He also used a magnifying glass, which he kept in his pocket, even though the maps were large and detailed. I have noticed that pictures of him show no spectacles. I’m sure he didn’t want outsiders to know about his poor eyes,” says Jonuschat.

“How long would these conferences last?”

Jonuschat stands to stretch: “The first conference, near noon, would last from two to 2½ hours. Sometimes the evening meetings were shorter. But there were many exceptions. More and longer sessions were held when the military situations were bad.

“Usually from ten to 20 or more attended a conference. Besides the military chiefs and their adjutants, there were sometimes field commanders, SS representatives, whoever Hitler wanted there.”

“What was the atmosphere at these conferences?”

Reynitz still sits straight in his wing chair: “The atmosphere was very grim because the Russians were counterattacking with great effect. No one smiled or made any jokes. Hitler was serious to the extreme. There was no geniality. There was pressure on everyone.”

“How did Hitler act at these conferences?”

Krieger picks at his fingernail with the straightened paper clip as Jonuschat prepares to answer.

“Hitler listened to his military chiefs, asked questions, and made comments, but at the end he stated his orders for combat moves. He almost always overruled his staff chiefs, who recommended retreating and regrouping. He ordered them to hold their positions, even if they had to fight to the last man.”

“Overruling his field marshals was a gutsy thing to do.”

“He didn’t like to hear bad news and would usually disregard it. He improvised tactics on the spot. He seemed to believe he was infallible,” Jonuschat answers.

“How long were you in Ukrania?” I ask Thoet. He seems relaxed. Reynitz, too, has his long legs stretched out, his head resting on the back of his chair.

“To the end of October 1942, when Russian artillery shells were exploding about 60 miles from headquarters. Hitler then ordered headquarters moved to Wolfsschanze—a hidden place near Rastenburg in East Prussia. The battle at Stalingrad was then nearing its peak. A hell of a fight,” says Thoet with conviction.

He continues: “The Sixth Army, the largest and best equipped, was surrounded by the Russians at Stalingrad. The generals told Hitler that if they could not break out and retreat, there would be a terrible loss. Hitler was firm and said again, ‘There will be no retreat. I will try to get some more tanks there, and Goering will drop supplies by air to the troops, and we will have victory.’”

“What happened then?” I inquire, looking at Reynitz. He straightens in his chair.

“None of these things worked. The Russians kept on counterattacking until finally, near the end of December 1942, that large battle at Stalingrad was lost. The commander, Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus, surrendered. Hitler blamed Paulus for the defeat of his prized Sixth Army, which was encircled by the Russians, and said, ‘He should have shot himself.’ But it was obvious to me that Stalingrad was lost because of Hitler’s orders to stand and fight to the last man. Everything was captured—tanks, trucks, ammunition, and many thousand men. Everything. I learned that the prior attacks against Moscow, then Leningrad, carried the same orders,” Reynitz answers. The others watch him with interest and approval.

“Did Hitler say anything publicly about Stalingrad?”

“Hitler publicly stated that the sacrifices of the Wehrmacht were not in vain and that it was still the main force in eastern Europe. He ordered a period of three days of mourning in Germany, and all nonessential activities were to close down during those three days. But, at that time, the Russians were advancing all along the front. I believe the heavy loss at Stalingrad was the turning point on the eastern front,” Reynitz ends, relaxing into his chair.

“Why would his top commanders obey his orders?” I ask.

Jonuschat answers, "They were strictly trained to obey orders of the highest in command. Remember, they took oaths to obey Hitler as Der Fuehrer. For that reason they probably were afraid of each other. They also were afraid of being reported if they talked about Hitler out of his hearing."

"A good reason," I think. "How did Hitler find out whether his field generals failed to obey his orders?" I ask Reynitz.

He repeats what Buchholz said earlier: "Hitler had two spy systems in the staffs of his field generals. Reports of Nazi party spies came to Martin Bormann. SS spy reports came to the SS liaison officer in headquarters, appointed by Himmler. If a frontline general spoke against an order of Hitler's or retreated instead of fighting to the last man, Hitler found out these things by secret radio or telephone. The generals had no way of knowing who was a party member or SS man."

"What happened to a general who failed to obey Hitler's orders?" I look at Reynitz.

"When his orders were not followed, the next day he would say to the general reporting to his conferences, 'You failed to obey my orders.' These generals would not be seen at headquarters again."

"Did heavy combat losses bother Hitler?"

Buchholz sits on the edge of his chair: "If they did, he never showed it. He was convinced he could conquer Russia somehow, always relying on his intuition. He told his generals that his orders were based on his intuition and that they knew nothing of politics."

"Relied on his intuition, did he? That's no way to direct a war. What did he do about bad news?"

Buchholz continues: "Hitler never wanted to hear any bad news. He listened but soon switched the subject. When he read a

report, a letter, or memo, he skipped over the bad news. It was evident that he read only the parts that were agreeable to his thinking.”

“What happened next?” I ask. Jonuschat looks at me expectantly, and I nod.

“The Balkans were being threatened as the Russians moved westward from Stalingrad, and the war in Africa was going badly. The forces under General Rommel were being pushed back. In March 1943, Rommel was ordered out of Africa and, as I recall, he was sent to inspect the front at Greece,” Jonuschat answers.



Gen. Erwin Rommel

“Did anyone try to kill Hitler at this time?”

“About that time, as I learned later, there were two attempts on Hitler’s life that failed because the bombs didn’t go off or Hitler did not arrive at the place. I was told that one bomb was placed in an airplane carrying Hitler, but the fuse failed to function. Another time I was told a bomb was carried in some new uniforms that Hitler was to inspect, but Hitler did not attend this inspection.”

“Did Hitler blame others for defeats?”

“He always blamed the field marshals for defeats, for not fighting to the last man. In North Africa it was Rommel, as it was Paulus at

Stalingrad. Sometimes he would talk at length, in a continuous monologue, about generals giving ground when there were still unwounded troops to fight. Sometimes Hitler's angry speeches would last for a half-hour, and no one at the conference would say anything afterward," Jonuschat replies.

"Did Hitler pay any attention to what other countries were thinking?" I look at Thoet.

"Hitler had special offices in headquarters where men listened to foreign radio broadcasts. They would type the important parts, and these reports would be submitted to Hitler first thing in the morning. If there was something very important, he would open the morning conference by saying, 'Did you hear about [such and such]?'"

"Hitler was secretive to the extreme," I say as Thoet continues.

"I noticed that he would announce those reports that fitted in with his own thinking. For example, if Stalin, Churchill, or Roosevelt was quoted in a way that confirmed what Hitler had been saying at his conferences, he would announce that but keep everything else secret. He often said that the British were stubborn people. When Churchill said they would never surrender, Hitler announced that as confirming what he said previously. And when he had reinforced his troops in the Balkans and Greece, he announced that Churchill had said the best 'second front' for the Allies would be the 'soft underbelly of Europe.' There actually was a southern front," says Thoet.

"That special office also received information by telegraph, telephone, and messenger. Hitler always knew what his enemies and others were saying," Thoet concludes.

Two, then three, of the others stand up and stretch. One walks to the window and stands looking out for a few seconds before he returns to his seat.

“Did Hitler know that the Allies cracked the Ultra Secret [a system for scrambling and unscrambling radio messages] with the Enigma decoding machine learned from a Polish soldier?” I address Reynitz, who likes such subjects.

“I never heard that at headquarters. But Hitler often said at military conferences, ‘What we say here today is known in London tomorrow.’ He said he suspected there were traitors in headquarters. That could not be true, of course, as the security was so tight.”

“What happened later in 1943?” I ask Krieger.

“In the summer, Mussolini was overthrown, and this was discussed at the conference—also that desertions in the Italian army followed. Mussolini was replaced by Marshal Pietro Badoglio.”

“Then what?”

“Hitler ordered German forces into Italy, to hold what he called the southern front. When it was reported at the conferences that the Allies had taken Sicily, Hitler ordered SS Col. Otto Skorzeny to rescue Mussolini, who was held captive in northern Italy. It was reported later that Skorzeny was successful in a spectacular raid by his special SS unit.”

“What happened at Rome?” I ask Krieger.

“There was discussion at headquarters about what should be done with the Vatican when German troops entered Rome. Hitler said, in effect, ‘It would not embarrass me to go in there and kick out all the swine and seize all the traitorous documents.’ He always hated the pope and the church. He could not stand to see any

strong organization function independently. Of course, he would not go so far as to invade the Vatican. He knew that half the population of Germany was Catholic, and he was an adroit politician.

“About the same time that fall, the Allies invaded a beach south of Rome, and there was much discussion about the crucial battles in Italy that lasted many months,” Krieger recalls.

“Was there any discussion about the meeting of Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin at Teheran in Iran later in 1943?”

Jonuschat is ready: “Undoubtedly his press office advised him about this in a daily report, but he would not tell all that he received. I only assume that this was bad news that he did not wish to announce to the military conference. We know now, of course, that one subject of the conference of these leaders was the invasion of Europe. But if the subject matter of the conference was in the daily report, Hitler did not report it. The meeting of these three leaders for the first time could only mean bad news. It had already been reported several times at conferences that Stalin was urging the Allies to open a ‘second front’ to relieve his forces.”

“Was there any discussion about an invasion by the Allies?”

Jonuschat recalls these events easily: “There were several discussions in military conferences about the certainty of an invasion. Support from Britain would seem necessary, so Hitler thought the invasion would be into northern France. Hitler and his inner circle were sure of that.”

“What did Hitler do?” I think Jonuschat will know.

“In December 1943, Hitler announced at a conference that General Rommel was appointed commander of German forces to defend the coast of northern France against an attack across the English

Channel. I would guess that Hitler appointed Rommel because he was still a hero in Germany, even though he lost in Africa,” Jonuschat concludes.

“This is a good time to end our conversation. It’s time to get to bed.”

“So long,” says Krieger, and the others get their coats.



Col. Douglas Bates examines Dr. Klaus Schilling.