

## **Rush To The War Prize - 1945**

### **Hitler's Berchtesgaden**

On this early daay in May 1945, I stood upon the huge concrete bridge abutment looking down the Autobahn Highway where long double column-tanks, self-propelled artillery, staff cars, trucks and Jeeps stood bumper to bumper, stopped dead in their tracks at the huge demolished double-span bridge just ahead; stopped just miles away from the Great War Prize: Hitler's mountain home and military headquarters- Berchtesgaden. Giant slabs of gleaming white concrete were held in place with massive twisted steel girders, hanging downwards like wet blankets. The ravine of some two hundred feet below created immediate need for another route.

American, French and British forces were at odds, vying for the glory and prestige of being "First to Capture" the site. Commanders gathered at the bridge head - the 3rd U.S. Division in front of the long columns. General "Iron Mike" O'Daniel, Commander of the 3rd, promptly ordered my Commander, Colonel Petherick, to delegate orders for a small motorized unit of engineers and infantry to quickly find another route and proceed at once to Berchtesgaden.

By now, as dusk turned to darkness on this spring day, our group's command was given to me to be formed up with a few Jeeps and a couple of trucks. Now, driving under black out conditions, another road was found several hundred yards from the blown out bridge. Guided by old French maps formerly printed for pre-war tourists, we took an old construction road that led up to the Autobahn's opposite bank.

*The governing orders were to proceed, checking roads, bridges, and culverts for mines up to the Berghof at Berchtesgaden. Turning here and there, lost in total darkness, with the constant fear of German troops and/or a chance encounter with Mark IV Tiger Tanks with their lethal 88 mm guns, we proceeded on. Passing alpine villages and farms without enemy troops blocking the way, a road sign prompted a change of direction alongside a small stream indicating the road to Berchtesgaden. Some half an hour later, at a crawl speed, there appeared a guard shack and gate leading over a*

*rock bridge to a double-wide concrete road winding upwards into timber. Here, undoubtedly, such a large road had to lead only to the Berghof.*

Engineers dismounted and inspected the bridge for signs of demolitions; the area deserted and void of German guards was a most welcome relief to our state of **nerves!**

The time by my watch read 0330 hours, as our unit drove upwards on the large boulevard, fringed in dark by spruce and fir trees, creating an ominous specter of what lay ahead. The road leveled off where the garage came into view. Inside we liberated Hitler's touring cars; both replete with the Nazi emblems, chrome motors and glass 3 inches thick. Both eventually were brought back to the U.S. and sold on the collectors market numerous times.

Just above the garage, the road curved up to the great glass window of the Berghof, outlined in the darkness. Engineers began their survey for explosives and booby-traps, devices the Germans excelled in. A civilian caretaker approached, stating in broken English that half of the SS troops had departed a week before and the remaining balance took flight yesterday. All is kaput he said, wishing to avoid arrest as a Nazi, saying he never was a Nazi. A great fear had been eased. Army intelligence previously expounded the universal belief that the alpine region was to be Hitler's national redoubt, or fortress, where large caverns of stores of munitions and SS troops would fight to the last – prolonging the war for many months to come. Such belief had no truth in fact. It is believed by historians that the huge, elaborate construction of Hitler's Eagles Nest mountain top house and the elevator carved out of solid rock created that fearful myth.

As a faint light broke the darkness, infantry and high-ranking officials made their way onto the scene; giving orders, pushing others aside, claiming to be the first there for national pride. With a sense of elation we used those moments to explore and hunt for souvenirs.

With the aid of a flashlight, I entered the Berghof by way of the kitchen and pantry.

Beyond there a door led to a great room, dark and smoke filled, with debris as far as the dimmed light revealed. Much rubble filled the room. My light shone and reflected upon a bright object - Hitler's silver ashtrays. Looking further I found a fine carved wood statue of an Austrian, dressed in native attire, reading from a book - perhaps preaching? An engraved plate affixed to the base of the statue revealed the wording: "Presented to the Fuhrer by the Young Maidens of Salzburg," with the date of Hitler's birthday and presentation date of 1936. Smoke drove me out of the building shortly thereafter. The keepsakes went into my Jeep, later to be boxed and sent home.

Troops now were exploring every nook and cranny of the complex. From the air raid cellar carved into the mountain behind the Berghof, an infantry trooper showed me a Field Marshal's baton replete with ivory and jeweled inlay. Another soldier discovered a trunk in the same location containing Hitler's personal large photographs of informal scenes and gatherings of Nazi bigwigs. Moments after showing an album the OSS, Wartime CIA authorities, confiscated the entire lot for evidence in future war crimes trials.

As the clock approached 1000 hours, Allied commanders declared an official flag dedication ceremony held on the Plaza. Within a few feet of the group of Allied officers and press, an argument took hold and became very heated. American, French and British brass declared that their flag be flown from the top of Hitler's Plaza, for the benefit of the press and for national pride. At last, it was compromised by agreeing that all three flags be hooked to the same halyard.

All troops then commenced departure from Berchtesgaden. Garrison of the complex was turned over to the U.S. Airborne. The U.S. 3rd Infantry Division proceeded to capture Salzburg, Austria. A few days after the German Army surrendered, peace came to soldiers of the 3rd.

I was delegated to remain in Austria with the Army of Occupation, and before departing for home was assigned to USFET Headquarters in Frankfurt, Germany.

The facts concerning the above stated, are accurate according to memory. The statue and other souvenirs have been stored and preserved in the exact condition as when found on May 4, 1945.

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Engrs. **1944-1946**