

The Secret History of a Surrender

By FORREST DAVIS

In the second and last chapter of this story of an American triumph, the author gives you fascinating glimpses of Hitler, Himmler, Kesselring and other high Nazis in the dying days of the Reich.

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II

IT seemed for a few hours on April 21, 1945, that the exasperatingly slow endeavor to wind up the war in Italy by surrender had fallen irretrievably flat. The negotiations, crammed with the standard ingredients of spy fiction—suspense, danger and the startling experience of meeting notorious enemy characters face to face while the fighting was still going on—had lasted seven weeks. But while Allen W. Dulles, the astute chief of Maj. Gen. William J. Donovan's Office of Strategic Services in Switzerland, was dejectedly preparing to break communications with the Nazi peace conspirators, in obedience to the day's orders from the High Command in Washington, a message came from the other side of the lines. Relayed by Little Wally, the clandestine radio operator in Milan, it announced that the SS General Karl Wolff and the Reichswehr Col. Gen. Heinrich von Vietinghoff were at last unreservedly ready to down arms. Even then, in fact, emissaries, armed with full powers, were preparing to cross the frontier and put themselves in the hands of the O. S. S., according to agreement, for the journey to the Caserta headquarters, where the surrender would be completed.

Two days later, Baron Luigi Parrilli, the faithful Italian go-between, arrived in Switzerland with word direct from Wolff. The prime mover in the peace junta was coming with the emissaries. Parrilli had been waiting at Fasano, Wolff's headquarters on Lake Garda, when the SS general returned from his unsought visit to Himmler and Hitler in Germany.

Himmler, Wolff reported, was badly frayed, indecisively pondering whether the top Nazis should fight it out in Berlin, retreat to a northern redoubt or fly to Berchtesgaden. Against the third option stood the Führer's recently acquired and somewhat hysterical aversion to flying. Both Himmler and Dr. Ernst Kaltenbrunner, chief of the Gestapo, castigated Wolff for his part in Sunrise; Kaltenbrunner, reading from stacked documents, confronted him with details which he had thought deeply secret. Wolff quaked as Kaltenbrunner read. Expecting to be liquidated, Wolff thought he owed his escape solely to the fact that the nerves of the high Nazis already had cracked.

Once, testing Kaltenbrunner's mood, Wolff bristled, saying, "I will not accept being treated as if I were on trial; if I have done anything dishonorable take me out and shoot me." Kaltenbrunner thereupon subsided. Emboldened, Wolff charged Himmler with having miscalculated Germany's ca-

capacity to resist in the Rhineland as well as in the east against the Russians. When the SS Reichsführer offered no defense against these reproaches, Wolff declared that, Himmler having proved a false guide, he felt entitled now to shift for himself. At the moment, Himmler seemed acquiescent. Kaltenbrunner, however, insisted that all must go down together. Late that night the Gestapo chief ordered Wolff to accompany him to Hitler's headquarters. Arriving at 4:30 in the morning, they found the Führer, gray and despondent, in his bunker, preparing to sleep. He asked them to return at five p.m.

At that hour there took place one of the last conversations with Hitler as reported directly from high Nazi sources. The talk began with Wolff explaining that he undertook the parleys with the Americans only after the Führer, in February, had sent out secret instructions to establish contact wherever possible with the Allies. Making no comment, Hitler launched instead into a harangue, giving Wolff explicit orders concerning the last-stand defense of Northern Italy and the scorched-earth policy he expected to be pursued. When Wolff advised against leveling Italy, Hitler listened quietly, but again made no comment. Preoccupied with the defense of the Italian front, he remarked that Italy must be held for at least two months. He was convinced that the Russians could be stood off for two months.

"We must fight to gain time," Hitler told Wolff, as reported to Dulles. "In two more months the break between the Anglo-Saxons and the Russians will come about and then I shall join the party which approaches me first. It makes no difference which." As for himself, Hitler added that he would then fulfill the personal ambition he had nourished from the beginning of the war, retiring from active duty in order to "observe and influence the fate of the German people from a distance." This was on April eighteenth. Thirteen days later the German radio announced his death. To Wolff, intent on quitting the sinking ship, Hitler seemed as unconscious of the realities of his disintegrating situation as a sleepwalker.

Back in Fasano, convinced that there was little more to fear from Hitler and Himmler, Wolff finally persuaded General Vietinghoff that the sands had run out. On the twenty-fourth, Wolff



SS General Karl Wolff, who narrowly escaped death at the hands of Heinrich Himmler.

reached Lucerne with the emissaries, Lt. Col. Viktor von Schweinitz, of Vietinghoff's staff, and his own aide, Maj. Max Wenner. The parliamentarians were in borrowed civvies, Wenner wearing Wolff's shooting jacket, an aggressively checked tweed. The German party was secretly installed in the villa of Maj. Max Waibel, of the Swiss general staff, who had been a participant in Sunrise almost from the start.

The presence of Wolff and the plenipotentiaries in Lucerne confronted Dulles with a problem. Upon receipt of word that Wolff was at last delivering what he had promised early in March, the American had notified Caserta, London and Washington. Dulles and his principal aide, the German-born American Gero von S. Gaevernitz, reasoned, rightly as it turned out, that the High Command would not have halted the

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Maj. Max Waibel (left), of Swiss staff, an intermediary in the negotiations almost from start, talks at Ascona with Allied major generals in mufti: Lyman Lemnitzer (center) and Terence Airey.

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conversations had they known the Germans to be on the point of capitulation. Caserta took that view also, and Field Marshal Sir Harold Alexander urgently cabled the High Command to reconsider. From Caserta came word likewise to hold the Germans in Lucerne. Yet under terms of the order terminating the parleys, Dulles could not communicate directly with Wolff. Fortunately, Switzerland also having a vital interest in the outcome, Major Waibel was willing to bridge that hiatus.

The High Command was slower to resume than they had been to interdict the negotiations. Hence, for nearly four days, while Alexander and Mark Clark were driving toward the Po with rising fury, the emissaries idled in Lucerne. Wolff got out earlier. The sweeping advance of the Allies threatened, as he thought, his escape road back to his headquarters, which were in process of being moved, along with Vietinghoff's, to Bolzano, in the Dolomites, under the Austrian border. It seemed to Dulles, as well as Wolff, that the general was needed in Italy to redeem his promises regarding destruction of property and the safeguarding of prisoners and hostages, as well as to effectuate the surrender when signed at Caserta. Furthermore, Wolff was concerned, unnecessarily as it turned out, over reports from Milan of mysterious activities of Mussolini. As soon would become known, with peculiar force to Wolff, Il Duce was merely planning his ill-starred getaway.

A more compelling reason for Wolff's speedy return developed before he left Lucerne. The evil spirit of the Northern Italy undertaking, Heinrich Himmler, had again been moved to action. Obviously reflecting Hitler and Kaltenbrunner, he had telegraphed Wolff at Fasano, saying, "It is more than ever essential that the Italian front hold and remain intact. No negotiations of any kind should be undertaken." The order was read to Wolff by telephone while in Waibel's presence. To the Swiss he said, "That no longer counts; Himmler has played his last card." Yet Himmler, through the Gestapp, was still in a position to cause harm. Two of his most lethal hatchet men were, as Wolff knew, circulating in Italy.

Between the Lines

Crossing the border at Chiasso without incident, Wolff soon found his way south blocked by resistance groups. The patriots, thinking liberation at hand with the great drive of the Anglo-American armies, had poured out of the mountains, occupying Como and other northern towns and blocking the highways. This was on the afternoon of April twenty-sixth. That morning a squad of partisans had caught Mussolini, fleeing north along Lake Como with Clara Petacci, his mistress, and the infamous pair were slain. Partisan blood was up, and Wolff, the supreme SS police chief of Italy, would have been another rich catch.

Taking refuge in a villa near Cernobbio, Wolff soon found himself again thwarted. The patriots surrounded him, too weak as yet to attack, but rapidly gaining reinforcements. Happily for him, the telephone still worked.

A call to Major Waibel brought Gero Gaevornitz at once to Chiasso, where, luckily, he encountered Donald Jones, of the O. S. S., an old hand with the partisans who had just returned from a visit with their leaders in this district at Como. Jones agreed that prompt action was vital. There could be little doubt that once in partisan hands Wolff would be shot forthwith and, from our point of view, that would be bad. With Wolff gone, the whole long maneuver might easily fall to the ground.

Jones, therefore, volunteered to rescue Wolff. No better man could have been found. Known to the patriots as Scotti, Jones had for two years been going and coming among them, arranging communications, carrying in currency and playing the part of a Dutch uncle to them all. First telephoning Wolff that his men should hold their fire when his motorcars arrived, Jones set out with a strange cavalcade hastily assembled. In the leading car he placed two German officers who had managed to get away from the villa together with a large white flag. Jones followed in the second car, shining his headlights on the flag ahead. In the third car he put trustworthy partisans armed with automatic weapons.

A Pawn in the Game

While rolling out of Chiasso the motorcade was fired on by a partisan band. Calling a halt, Jones courageously left his car and walked unarmed into his headlights with the hope that someone among the band would recognize him and put a stop to the firing. So it happened. An old friend ran from the cover, crying "il amico Scotti," the firing stopped and the expedition resumed its way. At Como a friendly prefect armed Jones with a pass through all partisan lines. Often halted, but not again made a target, the party finally reached Wolff's villa. Wolff was in full uniform. While he changed to mufti, members of his staff offered Jones some Scotch, and American cigarettes, which they assured him had accompanied them all the way from North Africa. Wolff was delivered by Jones to Gaevornitz at Chiasso, taken from there across Switzerland to Feldkirch on the Austrian border, from which he could reach the new headquarters at Bolzano by way of the Vorarlberg.

Before departing from Chiasso, Wolff uttered a new set of pledges to Gaevornitz. His life having been actually saved by Jones and the O. S. S., the SS leader put genuine fervency into his promise to arrest Himmler should he show up in Italy bent on destructive ends. While at the villa, Wolff reported, he had telephoned Rauch, his SS commander at Milan, renewed instructions to avoid fighting and pillage, ordering him to surrender even to the partisans if necessary. Gaevornitz had put these directives in writing, later entrusting them to Parrilli for delivery to Milan. Wolff further agreed to take forcible measures against any military leaders who should attempt to block surrender. As we shall see, this promise was fulfilled.

The High Command reversed its instructions on the twenty-seventh, and Schweinitz and Wenner got away the next day. These German emissaries crossed the French frontier at Geneva to Annemasse, proceeding at once to the air base at Anney, where an American C-47 picked them up and flew them through the foulest weather of the late spring to Caserta. Although it

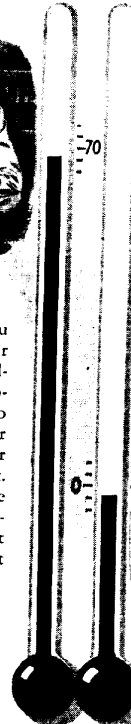
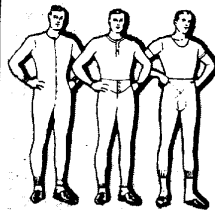
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might well have seemed to the O. S. S. authorities that the worst was over, actually the course of Sunrise from April twenty-eighth to May second at twelve noon, mean Greenwich time—when arms finally were grounded on the Italian front—was checkered, dogged by bad weather, faulty communications, treachery in the German ranks and Heinrich Himmler.

Since the High Command did not see fit to explain its intervention in the negotiations, the files of Sunrise are bare of anything that might account for the motive. It may be surmised with fair assurance, however, that the reason for abandoning the matter on the verge of success, leaving the German parliamentarians dangling for four days in Lucerne, was political and not military.

The transaction ending the war in Italy detained the German parliamentarians at Caserta only twenty-four hours. Gaevernitz fortunately had accompanied them, and when Von Schweinitz, representing General Vietinghoff, raised some minor points concerning procedure, the O. S. S. man was able to persuade him that the surrender had to be unconditional. Back at the Swiss-French border with three copies of the protocol for delivery to Vietinghoff and Wolff, the first in a series of hitches which were to become monotonously disheartening developed. Because of a communications delay the O. S. S. man assigned to meet and assist the emissaries over the border did not appear. None of the party remembered the names under which the Germans were traveling.

In that extremity, Gaevernitz resourcefully stepped across the border and asked the Swiss guards if they would oblige him by identifying his companions as the men who had gone out with him yesterday and allow them to return. This the Swiss did, literally permitting Schweinitz and Wenner back into Switzerland on their faces. As this was the evening of the twenty-ninth, the capitulation being set for three days hence, and they had an all-night drive ahead of them to the Austrian frontier, every minute counted.

The surrender party reached Dulles' house in Bern just before midnight, tired and discouraged. None had slept for thirty-six hours. Arriving at Feldkirch the next morning, the German emissaries met another, more serious delay. During the night the Swiss had closed the frontier. As the order stemmed from the highest quarters, the old Swiss friends of Sunrise lacked the rank to get around it. Dulles thereupon appealed to an elevated Swiss functionary, telling him how material was the passage of these men and reminding him of Switzerland's interest in an orderly surrender and the preservation of Northern Italy from demotion. The official, a man of decision, acted promptly, and Schweinitz and Wenner crossed the frontier—the only exceptions made that day.

In Austria and Italy, where the emissaries had only a battered German jalopy instead of the powerful American car that had sped them across Switzerland, they met with rough going, the highways being often blocked by late snows. Although expected at Bolzano by midday, they did not reach there until 12:30 a.m. on May first.

Meanwhile, Dulles was beset with communications difficulties. With the capitulation signed, it was clearly of the utmost importance that it be confirmed by the Germans at Bolzano to the Allies at Caserta, so that the order to cease firing at noon of the second be

co-ordinated. Little Wally, the radio operator secreted in Milan, had been extricated by Dulles when negotiations were broken off. The problem now was to get Wally to Bolzano. To this chore was assigned First Lieutenant Guido Zimmer, the humble author of Sunrise, who previously had taken Wally to Milan and installed him in his own house. Zimmer, who had been stationed at Buchs, opposite Feldkirch, in a switch of courier posts, had succeeded in getting Wally to Bolzano on the twenty-eighth.

At Caserta and Bern, Wally's first signals from Bolzano impatiently were awaited. Bolzano was pocketed by mountains. Could Wally's crystals clear them? Actually, the word from Wally was spotty, he was unable to receive the text of the capitulation coherently, and Caserta's first word that the Germans were going through with the surrender came from clear signals to field commanders from Bolzano ordering them to stack arms at the appointed time.

Fearing communications delays, Dulles had withheld one copy of the

all but Hofer the surrender was regarded as a *fait accompli*. Hoping, as afterward became known, to keep the Tyrol as an unreconstructed stronghold of Nazism, policed by Werewolves, Hofer had insisted that the surrender terms forbid entrance into those provinces to the Allied forces. When he learned that the military had never considered making such a request, knowing its uselessness, Hofer attempted to inject a monkey wrench into the surrender. Although a ring-leader in the Sunrise cartel on the Nazi side, Hofer now turned informer, telephoning Himmler and Kesselring the whole story.

His treachery worked. On Himmler's advice, Kesselring—who had been placed in over-all command of the Italian theater along with Southern Germany since Wolff's visit—at once removed Vietinghoff and his chief of staff, Roettiger, replacing them with an infantry general named Schultz and a Major General Wentzel. In the beginning, Kesselring had been a tower of strength to Wolff and the surrender junta. Only a week before, two officers,

under detention, Wolff talked with the arrested officers for two hours. The most they would concede was their willingness to intercede with Kesselring in behalf of surrender.

The situation that day was not eased by the visit of an Allied bombing squadron. One bomb damaged a building within a couple hundred yards of where Wally was struggling with his crystals in the marble villa occupied by Wolff's headquarters. Wolff took time off from his other labors to prod Wally into hurrying a message of protest to Caserta, asking air headquarters, if they must bomb Bolzano, to aim for the other side of town. An SS officer threatened Wally with extinction if the visitation was repeated. When the operator reported the threat to Wolff, the general ordered the officer summarily punished.

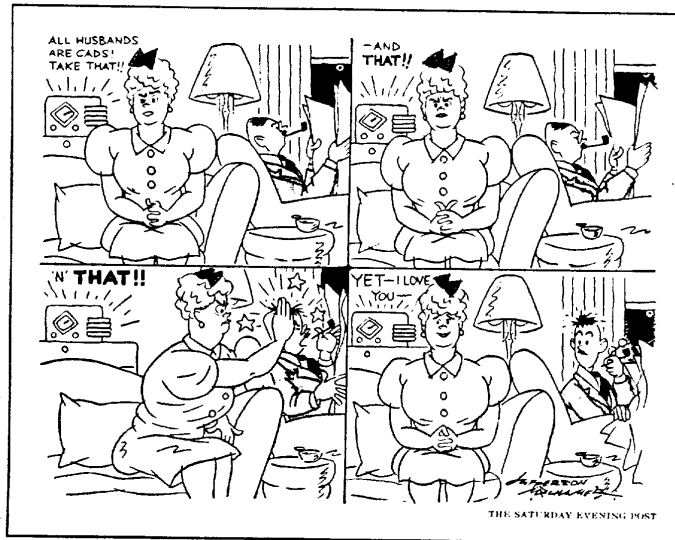
At 8:30 p.m., when Alexander's empty note came, Wolff undertook to force an immediate response from Kesselring. He had no luck. In the field marshal's absence from his headquarters, Wolff demanded by telephone of his chief of staff that Kesselring at once appoint a new *Oberkommandant* with authority to capitulate. The chief of staff promised a reply by ten o'clock. When none arrived, Wolff gained the consent of all the subordinate commanders to send out orders to quit firing at noon the next day. It was these signals that Caserta heard.

An hour later, at eleven p.m., the Berlin radio announced Hitler's death. Curiously, that event, which had been counted upon to ease the surrender situation because it relieved the *Reichswehr* officers of their personal oath to the Führer, produced no such effect. As Wolff and three associates prepared to leave the headquarters, their way was blocked by a crowd of armed and threatening officers. The surrender clique escaped through the air-raid shelter and, back at his headquarters, Wolff ordered out seven tanks and 350 SS men with machine guns to ring the building.

At 1:15 a.m., Kesselring, pursuing his obstruction to the bitter end, ordered the arrest of Vietinghoff, Roettiger, Schweinitz and other *Reichswehr* officers. He also recommended similar action to the *Luftwaffe* and SS high commands in Germany. No arrests were made. Three quarters of an hour afterward Kesselring telephoned Wolff, and after more than two hours of abusive tirades finally yielded at 4:30 a.m. Only seven and a half hours remained in which to effectuate the surrender. Fortunately, the orders that went out at ten p.m. sufficed, except for two parachute divisions with which disciplinary action had to be taken later in the day.

The surrender put an end to twenty months of fighting—often gallant, always dreary—spared Northern Italy the ravages visited on the south, and brought to Dulles from General Lemnitzer, who had supervised the show at Caserta, a telegram hailing Sunrise as a "complete and tremendous success" . . . spelling "the end of Nazi domination in Europe." To General Donovan came a message from General Lemnitzer hailing O. S. S. for its "vital part" in the Northern Italy surrender. Because of O. S. S.'s operations, Lemnitzer wrote, "the war in Europe has been brought to a successful conclusion much earlier than would otherwise have been possible, with the consequent saving of many lives and much treasure."

Editors' Note—This is the second of two articles by Mr. Davis.



protocol. From Caserta he heard of Alexander's urgent desire that the text reach Bolzano expeditiously. For a time Dulles thought of dropping his copy with a parachutist—Tracy Barnes, of the legation staff, volunteering for the job and a Swiss pilot being retained. Barnes, as a parachute officer, had made a daring operational jump in Normandy after D day, being subsequently decorated for it. Fortunately, in as much as the jump into the Bolzano pocket would have been extremely hazardous, this expedient was dropped when it appeared certain the emissaries would reach Nazi headquarters in time.

May Day was one of intense anxiety at Caserta and Bern. No word came from Bolzano, and at 8:30 that night Field Marshal Alexander dispatched a stiff note, demanding an immediate reply if the Germans wished the firing stopped at noon next day. That message got through. The silence at Bolzano covered a frenetic sequence of happenings which threatened, until eight hours before the time set, to nullify the long and tortuous negotiations which had ended at the Caserta ceremonies.

Upon General Wolff's arrival at his headquarters on the night of April 28-29, he conferred until 7:30 a.m. with Vietinghoff, Ambassador Rahn, Gauleiter Franz Hofer and others. To

sent by Wolff to Kesselring, reported the field marshal regretful that he could not join in surrendering before the "impending death," the *bevorstehenden Tod*, of Hitler. The uncertain Kesselring now ordered an army investigation of the surrender enterprise, holding that the sending of Schweinitz and Wenner had been "too far-reaching."

In the explosive atmosphere produced by Hofer's ratting, the emissaries reached Bolzano. At 6:30 a.m. of the first, Wolff got together Roettiger, *Standartenführer* Eugen Dollmann, who had been an early participant in Sunrise, and staff officers, to discuss the terms with Schweinitz and Wenner. The principal fruit of these talks was a decision to arrest the new *Oberkommandant* and his chief of staff.

This was done at seven a.m., Schultz and Wentzel being confined in an air-raid shelter carved out of the mountain just back of the *Reichswehr* headquarters. Roettiger assumed *de facto* command, but Wolff was pulling the strings. Vietinghoff meanwhile had retired to a retreat for high-officer reserves. The telephone circuits to Germany were cut to prevent news of the insurrection reaching Hitler, Himmler or Kesselring. When two army commanders, Herr and Lemmelsen, declined to go along with the surrender as long as Schultz and Wentzel were