

Peter Heath

THE LAST HOURS OF THE OKW

recollections

Net-Bog-Klubben
(autografisk manuskript)

Bestillingscenter på demand: www.csbnet.dk/net-bog-klubben
BETAL

ISBN: 87-90511-84-0
Copyright: Peter Heath
år: 1998
Server: Cybercity

Advarsel: Enhver erhvervmæssig kopiering eller overdragelse er ulovlig og vil blive retsforfulgt med krav om erstatning.

Print-on-demand må kun forhandles af forhandlere, der er autoriseret af Kunstbiblioteket.

Antal sider: 8

It is not every junior lieutenant in a wartime army who gets to tell off a Field Marshal, even from the opposite side. Yet, by the mere accident of time and place, this, or something like it, is what actually happened to myself. I once had the opportunity of issuing orders to the commander of the Supreme Headquarters of the German armed forces (the OKW), and the satisfaction of seeing them carried out. Even this, of course, is strictly mere boasting and exaggeration; the orders were not mine, for I was only acting as an interpreter; and at the time they were issued, the OKW commanded practically nothing except itself. Nevertheless, and despite its anticlimaxes, the tale is true; and here, as best I can remember them, are the details of how it came about.

World War II in Northern Europe ended, on May 9th 1945, with the surrender of the German army to General Montgomery at Luneburg, south of Hamburg. It also happened to be my 23rd birthday. At the time I was an intelligence officer on the staff of the 11th Armoured Division, which, after a lengthy and erratic journey across Normandy, Belgium, Holland and the Westphalian plain, was then resting outside the old city of Lübeck, on the Baltic. My chief preoccupation at that particular moment was the problem of what on earth we were to do with some 100,000 prisoners of war who had recently surrendered to the Division, and were sitting in a vast encampment off the local Autobahn. We did not want them and nor, it seemed, did anybody else. Amongst them were two or three dozen of miscellaneous generals, air marshals, admirals, SS generals, gauleiters and Nazi officials, together with an immense troop of German traffic policemen, who, because of their gaudy uniforms, were constantly getting arrested and brought in as persons of great, and probably sinister importance. But even generals were a drug on the market just then. Nobody was interested in sho-

oting or interrogating them, and they tended to get upset about this. So it was rather a relief to hear that the Division was under orders to move north, and take over the province of Schleswig, on the Danish frontier, which was still unoccupied by allied troops, and one of the few corners of Germany where no fighting at all had occurred. It seemed like a pleasant place to be ending the war.

Before the move, I was sent for by the divisional commander, General Roberts, and told that I was to accompany him, as an interpreter, on a rather peculiar assignment. It appeared that the remnants of the German government, and the military high command, were still in existence at Flensburg, on the Danish border, and although nominally under radio orders from SHAEF, were still putting on the airs of sovereignty, flying swastika flags and patrolling the town with small bodies of armed troops. Our business was to pay a call on Grand Admiral Doenitz, Hitler's designated (though reluctant) successor, and Field Marshal Keitel, head of the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, and to make it clear to them that in all local matters they were under orders from us, pending the arrival of a special mission from SHAEF.

We set off for Flensburg in the general's enormous stolen Mercedes, accompanied only by a half-troop of armoured cars from A Squadron, The Inns of Court Regiment, commanded by Lieutenant Hector Munro. Upon arrival we soon found our way to the small naval barracks where the so-called government had established itself. Since we were not expected, a certain amount of confusion then ensued, but we were eventually shown into the presence of Field Marshal Keitel, a portly, rather fishy-eyed old gentleman, whose resplendent uniform gave him the appearance of having strayed out of an operetta. A small cast of senior military and naval officers

was in support, and among them, at least, a further operetta-type muddle then took place, due to the fact that General Roberts, wearing ordinary battledress, was neither tall enough, nor old enough, nor pompous enough, to look like a real general at all, so that when I began to translate his instructions by saying that "Der Herr General-Major befiehlt dass...", some members of Keitel's bemuddled entourage proceeded to look wildly in all directions, wondering where on earth the Herr General-Major was supposed to be. Keitel himself, however, seemed to grasp the situation, and was polite, not to say obsequious. He promised without further ado to have the troops in the barracks area disarmed, to put an end to the Nazi saluting that was still going on; to strike the various flags that were still flying, and to evacuate the neighbouring Luftwaffe barracks, in order to make room for our 159 Infantry Brigade, which was due to take over the Flensburg area. Orders were given, and within a few minutes we could see from the window a downcast posse of Wehrmacht, collecting weapons and lowering flags - a scene which, unbeknownst to us, was simultaneously being photographed by Lieutenant Munro. Forty years later, having met my brother John in South America, he recalled having taken these snapshots, and was able, incredibly, to produce them - the sole visible record, presumably, of the last hours of the OKW.

At this point we took leave of the Field Marshal, only to collide unexpectedly in the corridor with Grand Admiral Doenitz. It was explained who we were, and after a brief conversation, there was a repetition from him of the assurances of co-operation already given by Keitel. Doenitz was tall and stiff and worried-looking, which he had every reason to be, in view of the impossible position he had just inherited. The only card left in his hand was the radio command he still exercised over the U-boats that remained at sea; until

they gave up, his little headquarters had a role, of sorts, and this, one imagines, is why SHAEF chose to delay the final shut-down for some two or three weeks, and made no move to take anyone into custody right away.

As we left the building, I studied with interest the typewritten labels on the office doors that we passed: von Ribbentrop, the Foreign Minister; Reichsminister Speer, the production chief; Reichsminister Funk, the economic adviser; Reichsminister Rosenberg, the Nazi "philosopher" who still held the now somewhat empty title of Minister for Occupied Territories; the Finance Minister, Count Schwerin von Krosigk; Colonel-General Jodl, Chief of Staff of the OKW; and others whom I did not recognise, or no longer recall. Evidently a fair proportion of the top brass was here. But where, I wondered, were Himmler, and Goering, and Bormann, the head of the party organisation? Hitler and Goebbels, we knew, had perished in Berlin; but nobody had heard anything of the rest. And how, in any case, had all these people fetched up here?

The answers to these questions - by now so familiar - were not to be had right away; but on later visits to the barracks it proved possible to chat with those, such as Albert Speer and Vice-Admiral Strauss (the deputy Chief of Staff), who combined a willingness to talk with a liking for English cigarettes; and a general picture, thereby began to emerge. The original plan, for a final stand in the Alpine Redoubt, had been foiled in mid-April by Russian penetrations to the south of Berlin. Hitler's subsequent decision to remain bunkered in the capital had convinced most of his followers that their beloved Fuhrer was now out of his mind, and that the moment had come to head for the exits. It split the hierarchy into mutually competitive factions. It led Goering, the official successor, already in Bavaria, to mistime his own bid for supremacy, and to get him-

self arrested by the SS. It led Himmler, after much indecision, to see himself as the potential head of a provisional government, and to reopen the furtive peace overtures he had already attempted earlier, through Count Bernadotte of the Swedish Red Cross. It led Bormann to stay close to Hitler, in Berlin, in the rather-too-obvious hope of achieving a direct seizure of power when the opportunity arose. It led Speer, not only to countermand Hitler's scorched earth policy, but actually to tell him about it, and to scheme ineffectively, in the meantime, against the Fuhrer's life. And it led Hitler himself, already disillusioned by the general's conspiracy of the previous July, to conclude, with some justice, that he was surrounded by rascals and traitors, and that only the Navy was still to be relied on. Hence the otherwise bizarre nomination of Doenitz, a sailor and no politician, as his appointed heir. When the latter moved north, to the naval outpost of Flensburg, he found himself followed, not only by the OKW, but also by the rump of washed-up Nazi politicians whom we had found there, and who were mostly quite unwanted by Doenitz himself.

Even less wanted were Himmler and his staff, who had likewise fled northward, apparently, but by this time had gone into hiding, and were thought to be plotting a German resistance movement. For the following two weeks we were plagued with rumours of sightings by the local population, but on referring them upwards, were told not to bother about the matter. Our naive assumption, that Intelligence must know all about Himmler and his movements, proved to be quite mistaken, however, since he eventually crossed the Elbe, disguised as a private soldier, before revealing his identity to an incredulous reception officer and committing suicide at a demobilisation centre in Bremen. The news of this debacle prompted the immediate defection of a horde of disgusted SS men, who

had been lurking in the bushes, waiting to see what their leader would do. The division, I remember, had improvised a small internment camp for minor political arrestees, and the following morning there was a regular queue of Waffen SS at the gate, waiting patiently to be put inside.

Their colonel, a very decent old regular soldier, was no more of an SS man than I am. His first act, on entering the camp, was to throw all the rat-faced Gestapo agents we had collected out of the best and biggest hut, to make room for his own men. He soon had the whole place running like clockwork, with whitewashed stones along the pathways, and fatigue parties everywhere. In a long conversation, he told me how his whole battalion, having fought well on the Russian front, had been converted overnight into an SS unit, as a reward for military valour. He himself had spent four years in the east, and knew practically nothing of affairs at home. Like many another honest and patriotic citizen, he was completely horrified when he found out. So much for the legendary fanaticism of the Waffen SS.

To return to the Flensburg "government", our instructions had been to let them alone, pending the arrival of the SHAEF mission. But before that happened, there was a further mix-up, of some kind, over the accommodation question, which necessitated a second confrontation - this time, if I remember, between Brigadier Churcher, of 159 Brigade, and Jodl, the Chief of Staff. The latter, pink-faced and agile, was very much the brains of the OKW, and clearly delighted at having a problem to resolve. The trivial business of arranging to shift a couple of hundred troops out of a barracks was conducted with a tremendous display of maps, movement-charts and time-tables, and all the panoply of a major military operation, which perhaps he knew to be his last. At one point in the proceed-

ings, he broke off to make a short speech, remarking that he and his staff were well aware that this was not 1918, that on this occasion Germany really had been defeated, and that this time around there would be no hickery, no saying one thing and doing another. He really meant it, I believe. But behind this show of amenity there still lurked, as in so many German minds at the time, a delusive hope that good behaviour and co-operation would soon procure Anglo-American forgiveness - and a rapid re-enlistment of their shattered forces into a new campaign, against the Russians. We had had a naive demonstration of much the same idea that very afternoon, when, walking through the streets of Flensburg, our little party was politely accosted by a ragged young Luftwaffe sergeant. His purpose? To get information on how to join the RAF! And why? To fight the Japanese. We could only thank him for the offer, and advise him to bide his time.

About the only member of the Flensburg group who seemed to be quite free of such illusions was Speer. His intelligence and good judgement had shown him from the start that the attempt to posture as a puppet government was doomed to failure, and that it was only a matter of time before he and his colleagues were all put under arrest. In this, of course, he was perfectly correct. The blow fell about three weeks later, when, on orders from the SHAEF mission, divisional troops arrived at the barracks about 9 am, when German staff officers are still abed, and fetched them all out in their nightshirts. All went well, except that one not-very-important admiral committed suicide, and that a British private soldier, entering the maproom, and seeing a chart still covered with small blue swastikas, indignantly rubbed them off the talc. Thereby, obliterating for the time being, all trace of the U-boats that still remained at sea. After being searched, and allowed to dress, the last remnants

of authority in Nazi Germany were then driven off ignominiously in trucks to the army interrogation centre, on their way to the dock at Nuremberg. I was not a witness to their departure; but even if I had been, I don't think I would have troubled to wave them good-bye.

THE
NATIONAL
ARCHIVE
COLLECTION
SERIALS
ACQUISITION
DIVISION
1000 PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE
N.W.
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20540