

The day we hung Hitler: A G.I. remembers

BY ROBERT HILLIARD
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We raced through Germany so quickly those last weeks of the war that I'd almost forgotten what town it was where we hung Hitler.

We were on our way to Kaufbeuren in southern Bavaria as part of the Second Air Disarmament Wing, the Army Air Corps unit assigned to disarm the German air force at the end of World War II and ship back to the United States new German inventions such as the Flying Wing, prototypes of the successor to the V-2 "buzz bomb," and atomic bomb and advanced radar experiments. The Second Wing followed the infantry as it pushed toward the Austrian border, and after a town was taken we stopped there until it was time to move on again.

On April 30, 1945, the day Hitler reportedly committed suicide in his Berlin bunker, we were in Ohringen, a small town north of the devastated city of Heilbronn. A block of buildings in the center of town was requisitioned for our living quarters. A large building that had served, I believe, as the region's electric company main office became the wing's headquarters. It faced a major pedestrian street and had a flagpole on its roof.

At lunchtime a rumor that Hitler was dead spread quickly. Spontaneous cheering became boisterous laughter, then relieved sighs. There were five of us together on the chow line when we heard the news. Woody Woodworth and Francis Coward had been with the Ninth Air Corps in England; Ralph Jackson, Ralph Saulters and I had been wounded while in the infantry, with our injuries sufficient to keep us from joining our combat units for the final push through Germany, but not bad enough to get us sent back to the States. We had been put on limited assignment with this non-combat disarmament unit.

Woody suggested we celebrate by hanging an effigy of Hitler from the flagpole on the roof of the building.

"We ought to let the [expletive] Krauts know their beloved leader is dead, if they don't know it already," we agreed.

We divided up the chores: Find the shirt, pants and jacket of a German uniform; locate a pair of German boots; get a pillowcase and stuff it with rags for a head; more rags and straw for the body; borrow needles and thread and, finally, look for crayons to draw a face with a prominent mustache.

We got it all and within a couple of hours had put together a life-size effigy of Hitler. From its neck we hung a sign, "ADOLF KAPUT."

We took it up to the roof while it was still daylight, strung a rope around its neck and hoisted it to the top of the flagpole, facing out to the street so that it could not be missed by anyone passing below or nearby.

We know that Germans walking by saw it, because not too many deigned to look up to acknowledge its presence. Most who did look up shouted in anger — not at Hitler, but at we Americans who mocked the leader they worshipped.

People coming down the street couldn't help but see it from a distance, but as they came closer their eyes deliberately averted it as the act of not acknowledging it might somehow obviate its meaning. This was the pattern throughout Germany during the next few days.

While people throughout most of the world celebrated, people in Germany and large numbers in many other coun-



Robert Hilliard, an wounded infantry soldier, with an effigy of Hitler in Ohringen, Germany on April 30, 1945. COURTESY PHOTO

tries of eastern and western Europe gathered in small, fearful, clandestine groups to mourn — and some to deny. Because they were losing a war did not mean they were losing their beliefs, no more than Americans would have willingly renounced democracy and embraced the philosophies and practices of Nazism had we lost the war.

If anything, the love of and loyalty to Hitler appeared to intensify with his reported death.

So what did we accomplish with our mock lynching — and that's what it was — an act incompatible with our personal beliefs and behavior? At 19, I had started college, had ambitions as a journalist and abhorred violence. Woody was a professional pianist and organist, a sensitive artist. Frank later became a member of the U.S. diplomatic corps. The two Ralphs I remember as quiet and gentle. None of us could be called

jocks or young toughs who looked for kicks in a mock lynching.

Why, then, did we do it?

Probably for many reasons, perhaps in microcosm reflecting the feelings of most of the GIs in Europe. It was our own personal statement of triumph. It was a release of our frustration and anger with war. It was because we couldn't — and wouldn't — destroy every German we came upon as vengeance for the horrors that American soldiers saw in traumatic disbelief as they stumbled upon the concentration camps.

So we hung Hitler as the symbolic target of our hate.

But, perhaps more than anything, it was a celebration, knowing that with Hitler dead, the official end of the war in Europe and our return to our homes and lives in America must be very near. ■

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