

A high-contrast, black and white image of a person's face, possibly a woman, with a very dark, almost black, complexion. The image is heavily stylized, with the background being white and the subject being black. The person's eyes are closed or looking down. Overlaid on the center of the face is the text "STAUFEHREND" in a bold, red, sans-serif font. The text is slightly blurred and has a glowing effect. The overall image has a grainy, high-contrast quality, similar to a photocopy or a low-resolution scan of a photograph.

STAUFFENBERG

The story of how one man nearly toppled the Nazi German regime
on July 20th, 1944

Jane Bürgermeister

ONE

It was barely after noon and already the temperature was soaring into the forties. The sweat was raining down his back. His tension had reached fever pitch. He walked out of the narrow, dark confines of the bunker passage, up some steps and came face to face with the dazzling sunlight. The air was on fire. The forests seemed to dance in the flames.

Irritatingly, there were mosquitoes everywhere, obscuring his field of vision. They formed clouds in the sunbeams which had penetrated the pine trees towering up on either side of the path. Through the dark and constantly moving specks of mosquitoes, he saw Field Marshall Wilhelm Keitel and General Buhle about 130 metres ahead, walking together to the conference. About 100 metres further on, the glint of a

chain link fence flashed. Two soldiers with gleaming coal scuttle helmets and rifles were standing at the gate of the innermost security zone, the Sperrkreis Ia. One of them was holding a water canteen in one hand, and swatting mosquitoes with the other.

The forests in Rastenburg in East Prussia were hotter than hell in summer, and the countless lakes and bodies of water made the place an ideal breeding ground for mosquitoes. Rittmeister Leonard von Möllendorf had offered him repellent when he had joined him for breakfast in the shade of an oak tree outside the Kurhaus Görlitz in Sperrkreis 2, showing him the painful-looking swellings and red spots covering his hands and neck. He wished he'd accepted. He thought he had prepared himself mentally and physically the best he could for his attempt to kill Hitler. He felt ready for everything, ready even for death. He had imagined different situations and thought about what he'd do. He had even taken steps to stop dehydration in the heat, drinking plenty of water when he joined Möllendorf for breakfast in spite of the many interruptions and telephone calls. He knew from his experience in command of a Panzer Division belonging to the Afrika Korps in Tunisia how a lack of fluids negatively affected his concentration. But he had not been prepared for the plague of mosquitoes. They had driven him crazy during the briefing with Buhle. They had even managed to infest Keitel's underground office deep inside a massive bunker, humming in the shadows left by the neon light. Mind you, the mosquitoes were the least of his problems, he thought to himself as he started to walk down the path. Next, he heard boots hammering behind him.

"Can't I carry that briefcase, Stauffenberg?" asked Major Ernst John von Freyend, catching up.

John made to take the briefcase.

The 36-year-old Stauffenberg had been seriously injured in combat in North Africa. He had a black patch over his left eye. One of his tunic sleeves was empty. He had lost his left hand and two fingers of his right hand. An Iron Cross and other combat badges were pinned to his silver-grey tunic filling John with awe but also impatience.

“No need.”

Stauffenberg wrenched his briefcase away.

“We’re late already ...” John muttered.

The whites of his eyes flashed in the shadow of his peaked cap with the imperial Wehrmacht eagle badge.

“You know how the Führer hates it when people are late for a conference. And today we’re really pressed for time. Mussolini is arriving in just two hours and the Führer plans to greet him with a ceremonial guard at the station. I just don’t know how we’re going to get through half the things on the agenda.”

“So let’s get a move on. Field Marshall Keitel’s almost at the gate.”

Clamping his briefcase under his left arm, Stauffenberg walked off. He had managed to prime a 950 gram packet of plastic explosives secretly with the help of his ordinance officer in a room in Keitel’s bunker minutes earlier.

He had prepared himself mentally for the event. He had even anticipated that the time of conference could be changed at short notice, as had indeed just happened. He had prepared a pretext, and he had just used it -- the need to change his shirt -- to split away from Keitel and prime the bomb. But he had not anticipated Keitel’s Oberfeldwebel pushing his way in to report a phone call.

Only quick reflexes had averted disaster. The Oberfeldwebel had seen the papers but no trace of the bombs or the pliers.

Stauffenberg had broken open the acid capsule and detonate one of the bombs when John had called him. The fuse was set to explode in 30 minutes. In warm weather, the detonation could occur in 15 to 20 minutes.

There was a 300 metres walk over to Hitler's bunker in the inner most security zone, Sperrkreis 1a. He had only one final obstacle to get through – the gate at the end of the path.

Virtually insurmountable security protected the Wolf's Lair, Hitler's military headquarters, in an isolated rural location in East Prussia. The Masurian lake district formed a natural defensive barrier to the east of the camp . A single access road traversed the installation from West to East. The complex, sprawling over six square kilometers of primeval forest, was divided into three security zones. Stauffenberg had familiarized himself with all the security barriers by studying secret maps. Along with five-meter-high fences, watchtowers at 200-meter intervals, minefields, anti-tank ditches and concrete bunkers, there were also checkpoints along the only access road with elaborate security checks. Everyone had to show a valid ID and a special day pass to be allowed to move through the gates from security zone to security zone. The guard duty officer recorded the identity of visitors as well as the time of their arrival and reported them to the relevant unit by phone. In addition, sophisticated camouflage concealed the Wolf's Lair from enemy air planes. The living quarters of Adolf Hitler and other Nazis like Martin Bormann were located in gigantic bunkers -- bunkers number 13 and 11 respectively -- made of reinforced concrete and located in the most protected zone, Sperrkreis 1.

An SS division, the Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler, modeled on the Praetorian Guard set up by the Roman emperor Augustus, had been established to act as the Nazi dictator's permanent personal body guard. Six thousand soldiers were stationed in whatever headquarter Hitler happened to be at with the rest serving at the front. That July, 1944, all twelve thousand soldiers belonging to the Leibstandarte were garrisoned in either the Obersalzberg or the Wolf's Lair, Hitler's two main headquarters. The Russian army was only 100 kilometers away from the frontier of East Prussia. The Allies had landed in Normandy in France on June 6th. The endgame for Germany was approaching. Security around Hitler had been stepped up.

Five days earlier, Hitler had left his luxurious chalet, the Berghof, in the mountains of Bavaria to take charge of operations on the crumbling eastern front, making his journey under top security. In the middle of the night and pouring rain, his Mercedes limousine had driven down from the Obersalzberg Mountain as part of a convoy of fifty vehicles. The convoy had crossed a bridge and entered the village of Berchtesgaden, taking the narrow, cobbled side streets to the station where an armored train was waiting to bring him overnight across Germany to East Prussia and the Wolf's Lair. After inspecting two thousand soldiers on the platform, Hitler had entered his carriage and sat down to dinner in an oak paneled dining room together with his personal staff while guards double checked the locks and fastened metal shutters over the windows outside. At a signal, the train composing twenty carriages to accommodate the Leibstandarte soldiers and protected by artillery pieces mounted in wagons set off on its journey across the heart of Germany to Prussia.

There was only way to get close enough to Hitler to assassinate him. That was to be invited to attend a military conference by him. Stauffenberg had managed to get just such a summons as newly appointed chief of staff of the Home Army. This was his fourth visit in as many weeks. He had been issued with a special pass for that day, July 20th. He was to report to Hitler on the new divisions to be formed to reinforce the crumbling eastern front.

Assassinating Hitler was only the first part of his mission. Toppling the Nazi regime by launching a coup from his base in Berlin using a secret code word was the second part. That meant he had to get out of the Wolf's Lair immediately. The alarm would be raised in a matter of minutes of the explosion. The camp would be put in lock down.

Stauffenberg saw Keitel stop by the gate to show his ID. The purple stripe of his breeches tucked into his high boots, and the golden leaf brocade on the shoulders of his tunic and cap stood out among the drab grey uniforms.

The SS Sturmbahnführer standing beside a concrete post holding up a chain-link fence took Keitel's ID and examined it carefully. Next, he took the ID of Buhle and examined it in the same serious and pedantic way.

Buhle and Keitel stood talking to the sentry for a couple of minutes, something which made Stauffenberg nervous.

His heart started to race as he walked up to the sentries. He didn't expect his briefcase to be searched. But nothing was certain. Hitler had said an unpredictable routine was the key to his security. He was known to leave conferences without warning.

Stauffenberg clamped his briefcase under his left arm, imagining how the Sturmbahnführer would react if he found out what was inside. The

SS divisions were subjected to systematic racial and ideological brain washing. Its members believed the propaganda portraying Hitler a kind of savior, and the last hope to avert total defeat.

The thought of what would happen to his wife and children was especially scary. His close family relations would all be put in concentration camp under Sippenhaft.

The mental strain of being under constant scrutiny, of having to control his every emotion was taking his toll on him. He had to use all his will power to keep his face blank as he stopped together with John in front of the sentry.

His coalscuttle helmet gleamed above his red face glistening with sweat. His sleeves were rolled up at the elbow. His tunic was open at the neck. Baggy field grey trousers hung around combat boots. The combat patches on his breast showed he had done tours in Russia, where some of the worst racially and ideologically motivated war crimes had been committed. A belt with a pistol and a water canteen was fastened around his waist. Like all members of the SS Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler, he was also equipped with a dagger for ceremonial purposes but also for hand to hand combat.

The SS Sturmbahnführer examined their passes minutely. He treated Stauffenberg with respect but there was no doubt he considered him to be a second class soldier as a member of the Wehrmacht.

After handing back the pass, he raised his right arm in salute.

“Heil Hitler!”

“Heil Hitler!” said John.

As a member of the Wehrmacht, Stauffenberg was not required to give the Hitler salute. But he could not afford any extra attention.

“Heil Hitler!” he said.

He walked on past the concrete posts, into the innermost security zone, Sperrkreis 1a. The main building was the monstrous concrete Führer bunker. It looked surreal, like some temple in a South American jungle, lurking among tall leafy trees and camouflage nets. A few clouds had blown in from the north. A storm was brewing.

Stauffenberg made a systematic scan of every segment of the area around the bunker starting with the area nearest where the potential danger was also greatest. He couldn't see any soldiers on the path ahead of him, and continued his scan, sweeping a 240 degree arc with his vision. Keitel and Buhle were about 30 metres ahead walking on the path leading to Hitler's bunker. A truck painted in splotchy green stood outside the bunker entrance under a piece of camouflage netting held up by poles. Some soldiers were carrying boxes from the truck through the door of the bunker. He scanned the bunker at higher elevation. He spotted an artillery piece on the roof partly concealed by camouflage netting. He detected some soldiers positioned behind it. There was a gleam of a helmet, a slight movement. More soldiers manned machine guns. Their muzzles were turned towards the dense forests.

All of a sudden, Keitel and Buhle turned off the main path and followed a side path, heading towards a barracks located about 70 metres away and shaded by trees. Had there been a change of plan?

Stauffenberg scanned the single story cabin made of timber and painted white barracks and immediately realized that most of the force

of the blast from his briefcase bomb would be dissipated through the timber walls and the windows. There were about ten, and all of them were wide open. Sun shone on the pale blue shutters of the windows and played over the roof, covered with leaves and other forest camouflage. There was a real risk Hitler could survive the blast. He had chosen a type of bomb which was designed to kill by pressure waves and not by shrapnel in expectation that the conference would be held in Hitler's bunker and the concrete walls would retain the blast's force.

The adrenaline rushed to his head. His heart started to beat wildly.

"So the conference isn't going to be held in the bunker," Stauffenberg muttered to John, trying to sound as casual as he could.

"Didn't you hear?"

"No."

"There's been a change of venue. The heat, the heat! It reminds me of Africa. Twenty four people are attending today, too many for the little room in the bunker. The Führer bunker's air conditioning systems aren't working," said John, pointing over at the monstrous-looking grey bunker visible through the trees. "All military conferences are going to be in the barracks over there until the weather gets cooler."

Stauffenberg drew a sharp breath. What now? They were only about 30 metres from the barracks. He had perhaps a minute or two to work out a plan. To maximize the chances of killing Hitler, he would have to place the briefcase bomb directly beside him. But how could he place a briefcase at Hitler's feet without attracting attention? There was real a danger that if he tried, he would be observed, stopped, questioned, especially if he left the room shortly afterwards. He rapidly reviewed his options.

Next, there was a flash of light. An idea came to him. As he put his boot on the first step, he stopped and turned to John.

Patches of sun played over the blue shutters of the log cabin and on some wild flowers which had grown up in the cracked, dry ground close to the steps leading to the door.

“Could you please place my briefcase as close to the Führer as possible? I’ll need to have the documents within easy reach,” he said, holding up the handle with the two remaining fingers of his left hand.

There was a gleam of surprise. John hesitated.

“I wish you’d make up your mind, Stauffenberg. One minute, you are ripping it out of my hand when I offer to help and the next, you are pushing it at me.”

“The heat is getting to me.”

A look of shame appeared in John’s eyes.

“Of course, Stauffenberg!”

John took the briefcase and hurried off. His face was full of anxiety, worry and stress as he vanished through the door. The only virtue he recognized was blind obedience to Hitler. To please Adolf Hitler was the surest way to move higher up the career ladder.

After walking through the door, Stauffenberg found himself in a dark and insufferably hot corridor. The sweat rained down his forehead. He waited for a second for his vision to adjust to the darkness. He observed John enter the conference room at the end of the corridor with the briefcase.

When he reached the ante room, Stauffenberg stopped. The door to the communications room was open. He took off his peaked cap and hung

it on a peg in a prominent place. He unfastened his belt with his service pistol and hung it high up for everyone to see. He glanced at his watch. It was 12:35. He estimated the bomb would explode in five to ten minutes. The heat would cause the acid to eat through the wire very fast. His heart was beating wildly. The blood rushed to his head. He drew a sharp breath. He walked into the conference room with an impassive expression and closed the door quietly behind him.

Hitler was standing just a few feet away. He had his back to him. His figure bent and stooped, Hitler was peering down at operations maps of the eastern front which had been spread out in front of him on a huge oak table. He was holding a pencil in his right hand and staring rigidly at the map oblivious to the bomb briefcase which John had just a couple of feet away from him while listening to General Heusinger give an update about the latest developments on the eastern front. There were more than twenty officers crowding around the table.

Nets managed to keep the mosquitoes out but not the stifling breath of summer.

General Korten furtively wiped his forehead with a handkerchief.

Next, Stauffenberg heard a hot and the distant chug of a locomotive chuffing through the Wolf's Lair to head to Mauerwald.

General Heusinger pointed at a spot on the map.

“The Russian forces are set to unite here and are going to cut off the North Group unless we can get reinforcements,” he said.

Stauffenberg noticed John mutter a few words into the ear of Oberst Brandt. Brandt nodded, and stepped aside to allow Stauffenberg to come closer to the table – and Hitler. Stauffenberg took two steps forward. He glanced down and saw his briefcase under the table,

leaning against a table leg. He moved his right foot out and pushed the briefcase as far as he could towards Hitler as discretely as he could, then took a step backwards.

That second, Heusinger caught sight of Stauffenberg. The impressive appearance and terrible injuries of the colonel filled him with awe. He immediately stopped talking.

Alerted, Hitler angled his head towards Stauffenberg. A lock of hair fell across his face. He raised a trembling hand to push it aside.

He fixed his hyper vigilant, pale blue eyes on Stauffenberg. Beneath his brush moustache, his razor lips were twisted down in sharp angles of malice. He ran his eyes over Stauffenberg's uniform of a silver-grey tunic and black breeches with a scarlet stripe tucked into polished black boots.

Field Marshall Keitel coughed.

“Colonel Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg is present to report on the new blocking divisions, mein Führer,” he said.

Twenty four pairs of eyes turned on Stauffenberg. He didn't like to play the servile lackey but he had made up his mind to stay cool and show no emotions. He straightened himself and peered down from his great height at Hitler, standing opposite him and so close he could see the beads of perspiration on his face.

Hitler put down his pencil. The room was so hushed, they might as well have been on the mountain top in the desert.

It was so quiet that Stauffenberg could hear Hitler's heavy breathing. He observed an odd-looking creature with a puffy white face standing so close to him. Two bright blue eyes -- the palest blue he had ever seen -- stung him with a vicious look.

Rumoured to be the illegitimate son of the banker Rothschild, Hitler's father was a customs official in Austria. A high school dropout and a corporal during the First World War, Adolf Hitler was one of the most unlikely person to be made Chancellor of Germany in 1932. Even more unlikely was the amount of support "this man of the people" enjoyed from the country's most powerful bankers and industrialists. The chief of the German national bank, Hjalmar Schacht, and other illustrious names in banking and industry had written a letter appealing to the President Paul von Hindenberg to make Hitler Chancellor in 1932 after the country had been ruined by austerity to pay for the banker bailouts spite of the fact that the Nazi Party had managed to obtain only a little over 30% of the vote and other coalition combinations were possible.

Once appointed Chancellor by Kaiser Wilhelm's most loyal general, Hitler moved fast to seize total power and turn Nazi Germany into a gigantic military camp and prison camp.

A gigantic system of lies, propaganda and false religion was a monument of his efforts to seat himself upon the throne to rule the earth. He had had symbols of his religion, the bent cross incorporated, into army uniforms and all aspects of the government and daily life. Worship of Hitler was required.

The muscles in his brow contracted as Stauffenberg came face to face with the most evil man in history, a man who's racially and ideologically motivated crimes of mass extermination on an industrial scale had no parallel in history. He felt a chill run down his spine, hot though it was. On one level it was a meeting between two men. On another level it was an unprecedented cosmic showdown. He was confronting a force of absolute evil. The evil around Hitler was just

palpable. For a second, he was sure he was standing in front of Satan himself.

The way Hitler was dressed was not as someone might expect from Satan. People might expect Satan, the prince of darkness, to appear in pomp and splendor, a golden child of fortune, handsome and charismatic, enjoying honours, pleasures and wealth. But the opposite was the case. Hitler was the most ordinary of men. He had a lean and hungry look of those whose souls are a spiritual wasteland and who cannot enjoy any of their power or wealth. Not even Hitler's brush moustache was enough to turn him from a mundane clerk or gambler into a dreamer.

The devil was a pasty white gambler from Austria devoid of all charisma, all life, all light.

The devil was a nonentity decorating his drab, grey tunic with crosses and awards to make himself look important.

It scared the hell out of him to think Hitler was the most powerful man in Germany and had been elected Chancellor. The evil of Hitler scared the living daylight out of him. He had never experienced so much fear in his life. It was not death he was afraid of. It was this metaphysical force of evil, which Hitler personified. It was palpable in the room.

The horror of war spilled into Stauffenberg's mind. It was like he was there again, in the middle of the horror. It was all so vivid. He could smell the cordite. He could hear the sobbing whispers of the wounded in the light wind which played with the net curtains of the barracks; their screams of all those blown up, shot, impaled, lynched, executed, imprisoned, gased, burned, suffocated, starved, drowned, raped, tortured, poisoned, vaccinated with diseases and toxins, seemed to be

carried on the breeze. Their deaths had been in vain. Millions of deaths had been pointless. The lives of countless people had been sacrificed for the egoism of this man. The knowledge aroused strong emotions of outrage in Stauffenberg and an angry feeling at his heart.

He knew he had to turn inside him for the strength, the energy, the force to carry out his mission. Inside him was the fountain of light, energy, creative inspiration that would allow him to succeed in his task. And so when his nerves started to go, he turned his attention to this interior force, until the spark turned into a fire.

Next, Hitler picked up his pencil. He ran it over the map and looked at Stauffenberg as if to say: “Here, are the kingdoms of the world. The glory of ruling them I will give to you if you fall down and worship me like the others do. You will be a general, a Field Marshall if you just acknowledge the supremacy of me, the prince of darkness. You will have grants of money and land. Not even when Germany collapses will it affect you, so great will your wealth be. The crowds will bow down to you, the conqueror.”

Hitler tapped the pencil on the map. Stauffenberg glanced at it. He saw the vanity, the futility of ruling all the kingdoms of the world. The folly and vanity of being a Field Marshall in any army of darkness.

Hitler was used to servility, flattery, to being called the savior of the world as his subjects competed for privileges and tokens of his favour. He looked at this extraordinary man and felt awe but also fear. There was an honesty about him which made the elderly dictator, full of evil schemes, greed and aggression, suspicious.

Hitler’s lips started to quiver and his eyes to well up with disappointment. “You don’t worship me, do you? You don’t really

adore me, after all, do you? You don't believe I am a superman Well, I've found you out! You traitor!"

An impulse seized Hitler to leave the room. An inner voice told him he was in danger.

They were engaged in a silent duel.

"Look, Stauffenberg. All the men in the room have succumbed to the temptation. To get money and power, they have been ready to serve me with blind obedience. They have pledged an oath of allegiance to me, their loyalty to me, the Fuhrer, the leader, the emperor, styled the savior like a deity. Vast numbers have given their loyalty to me and even if this kingdom of mine crumbles and new kingdom will rise again ruled by the prince of devils. I give them the power to go out and kill and they go out and they kill."

Stauffenberg stood opposite Hitler without any sign of fear. He did not try to impress him or ingratiate himself or please him.

Hitler noticed his fearlessness and his suspicion increased. The way Stauffenberg had overcome all kinds of difficulties and obstacles, including near death and crippling injuries to return to duty indicated a man of unusual physical and moral strength – and that was the kind of man he was most terrified of. That was the man who could come into the temple of his power, to the room from which he ruled the kingdoms of the world, and blow it up.

His very presence, so evidently warm-hearted and sincere, offered comfort and lifted the spirits of everyone. There was nothing of the arrogant conqueror about him. He looked more like someone who would protect and support the weak and helpless. But he was also not someone to be messed with. He was far too imposing for that. He had

joined the army long before Hitler had come to power – and a cavalry regiment in south Germany that kept alive something of the spirit and ethos of old military traditions of chivalry and honour.

“Can a man like that really be trusted?” Hitler asked himself.

Hitler had studied a dossier compiled by his secret police on Stauffenberg. He knew all about his brave actions at the front and his great achievements in the army staff. He had won the sword of honour at cadet school and come top of his class at the elite military staff college in Berlin. He was as strong as an ox, disciplined, hard working and efficient. He also had the rare but vital ability of military leaders to inspire genuine enthusiasm in soldiers. Keitel had pointed out his evident sincerity to serve his country and persuaded Hitler to promote him...

“What am I worried about?” Hitler thought to himself.

“Who is this man? A no one! A mere colonel! Look at his injuries, too. What can someone like him do to me? He might despise me in his heat but he would not dare to take on someone like me. I am the supreme commander of the German armed forces. There are 22 generals in this room and a division of SS guarding me. I control the Gestapo. I am the lord and master here.”

Hitler straightened himself up, puffed out his chest. His thin lips turned upwards. His cheeks turned to two apple shaped balls as he chuckled.

He reached out his hand and picked up the pencil. He tapped the pencil on the map.

Heusinger resumed his report. Stauffenberg was forced to stand and listen to Heusinger for a minute - and a minute or two was all he needed to take in the entire sordid scene.

Looking like a sordid gambler, Hitler stood at the table, gripping his pencil and staring rigidly at the map in front under the thrall of a compulsion. The very fact that he was so full of such a strong desire to win caused him to

gamble again and again, and waste the lives of millions of lives.

Stauffenberg knew the operations Hitler was planning on the eastern front were pointless. The war was lost. The German army did not have the men or equipment after five years of ferocious war to fend off the Allies in the West and the Russians in the East. Any rational leader would have surrendered and ended the senseless slaughter of millions of people at the front in concentration camps. But Hitler's love of himself, his naked desire to live at all costs and fear of death made him willing to gamble away the last life.

But worse was the perverse pleasure he seemed to detect in Hitler. His cold blue eyes with an intense beam of light appeared to brighten whenever he heard of the deaths of soldiers at the front. He had pleasure not when divisions but when whole armies suffered a violent death.

The ugliest feature of the mob around Hitler was the humility with which they stood around the table watching him planning the destruction of millions. They were all anxious to falling over themselves to show their respect to the cold-blooded killer.

Even John had succeeded in pushing his way to the front of the table, in meantime, and was standing with his hands on the table listening

with rapt attention in order to have a better chance to show their dedication to Hitler.

Worse was the beaming face of Field Marshall Keitel who actually seemed to believe the delusion that Hitler was a great commander who would lead them to victory and who suggested ever more reckless operations in the hope of ingratiating himself even though others would pay with their lives for his reckless

Suggestions. It was Keitel who had proposed recruiting boys as young as 16 for the new blocking divisions for the eastern front.

Next, Stauffenberg heard the hoot of the locomotive.

A voice said to him: "Go now."

Stauffenberg glanced at the clock. It was 12: 42. He took a few steps back from the table. Hitler was too busy pouring over the maps to notice. John saw he was about to leave the room and came up to him.

"I have to go and make a call," he muttered

John looked surprised. He knew that Stauffenberg could be summoned by Hitler to make his report any moment. But Stauffenberg opened the door walked outside and John followed him.

"I am expecting some important information for my report to the Führer from General Fellgiebel. I need to call him," said Stauffenberg.

"This way," said John, pointing to an open door.

Stauffenberg walked inside. Sunlight streamed through the branches of the pine trees outside the window into the room.

A corporal belonging to the signals division was pinning a piece of paper to a cork board.

The dark green collar of his a grey uniform tunic was open at the neck. The breast eagle on the right hand of pocket, his patches and decorations glinted in the sunlight.

He immediately assumed the position of attention, clicking his heels together.

“Connect Colonel von Stauffenberg with General Fellgiebel,” John ordered.

“Yes sir!”

The corporal picked up a phone and dialed a number. He handed Stauffenberg the receiver.

John looked at his watch and then walked back out, his boots hammering on the wooden floor.

Stauffenberg took the phone.

“Oberleutnant Sander is expecting you after the conference,” Fellgiebel said on the other end of the line.

Stauffenberg understood the code and put down the phone without saying a word. There was no time to hang about. The corporal looked at him with surprise. Stauffenberg ignored him and walked out of the room. He saw his cap and gun and holster hanging up, but he did not stop to collect them. He did not want to arouse suspicion. He walked back down the corridor and out of the barracks. It took a moment for his vision to adjust to the brilliance of the sunlight. He walked down the steps, his boots clattering on the wood.

His collar felt tight. He found it hard to breath. The sweat was raining down his forehead. His eye path was irritating him. The pain was excruciating. The adrenaline was rushing through him and he felt the impulse to just make a run for it. A man running away at top speed

would immediately attract the attention of all the guards. He had to force him to walk at a steady pace towards the gate.

The high strength steel barbed wire glinted between the poles.

He walked past the SS Sturmbahnführer. He saw his look of surprise, He ignored it. It was possible that he had to collect a document or file.

Army trucks and vehicles were moving along the network of roads.

Through the fence topped with concertina wire he saw his adjutant Werner von Haeften talking to General Fellgiebel and Oberleutnant Sander.

50 meters further along, he saw an eight- cylinder Mercedes cabriolet standing in the shade of a tree on the edge of the wood.

He walked up to Haeften and Fellgiebel.

Haeften was holding the briefcase with the plastic bomb that they had not managed to detonate. He looked very nervous. Sander was smoking a cigarette in the shade of a tree.

“Conference over already?” he asked, wearily.

“I have to catch an urgent flight to Berlin. Where’s the car?”

Stauffenberg asked Haeften.

Haeften looked alarmed and then ran over to the Mercedes. The driver was standing close by.

Stauffenberg looked through the fence over at the barracks. They would soon notice his absence. That thought scared the living daylights out of him.

Next, there was a roar like thunder. It was a crazy explosion, like an artillery shell he had heard so often on the Russian front.

He froze and then a split second later he saw what at first looked like a sheet of yellow and blue lightning coming down from heaven. The barracks jumped into the air and collapsed.

Pieces of wood and debris were flying everywhere, soaring through the air, impacting on the chain link fence. He heard pieces of wood whizz inches from his head, hitting the ground, pinging off the vehicles parked close by. He ducked down.

“I wonder what that could have been?” asked Fellgiebel, feigning surprise.

“Probably another deer stepping on a mine, it happens all the time,” said Sander puffing on his cigarette.

Stauffenberg looked and saw the sentries by the gate had thrown themselves onto the ground.

The soldiers guarding the bunker lost it and were yelling and screaming all sorts of things. They had seen the seen a flash, an orange ball of fire blast apart the barracks, and were sure that the Russians were attacking them using artillery shells. The soldiers on the top of Hitler’s bunker fired their machine guns into the forest. Stauffenberg saw the muzzles flash.

“Must catch that flight to Berlin!” he said.

He turned and walked over to the driver of the Mercedes.

The only way in to the Wolf’s Lair was through a series of security posts. Barriers prevented passage through them. Every vehicle at a roadblock was checked. Every person who wanted to enter had to show their ID and their day pass.

“Drive me to the airport.”

The order startled the hell out of the young lieutenant. He looked at Stauffenberg dazed and confused as he got into the back. Haeften got in at the other side.

“Colonel, allow me to report you are not dressed according to regulations.”

“What does that concern you,” retorted Stauffenberg.

The driver got in. The engine spluttered into life. He put his boot to the pedal and the car redlined it straight through the zone of confusion in front of the barracks.

Stauffenberg jumped to his feet in the back of the Mercedes to get a better look.

On the other side of chain link fence, he saw black smoke, an infernal scene, bodies lying everywhere. Medics were shouting orders. The first of dead were being carried out. There was screaming. A wounded officer staggered out. There was blood all over him.

He glimpsed the corner posts of the barracks. The fire had virtually destroyed the timber structure. A large section of the wall was gone, incinerated.

“He must be dead!” Stauffenberg thought to himself. “What an explosion!”

The blue sky seemed to smile down from its great height. All the trees seemed to wave in the wind and telegraph their delight. The bloodthirsty dictator had been killed. The lives of millions of people and the honour of Germany had been saved.

“Hurry up!” Stauffenberg yelled.

There were soldiers running all over the place. Fire trucks and ambulances were careering towards them. They swerved out of the way at the last moment.

The car stopped at the first barrier.

The guard on duty walked up to him.

“I have to go to the airport and catch an urgent flight back to Berlin,” Stauffenberg said.

“Yes, Colonel von Stauffenberg!”

The order was given for the barrier to be raised. The car sped down the road.

They drove down the main access road. There was nothing to see on either side of the road except trees and more trees. Clouds had blown across the sun. The forest looked dark and gloomy. Next, Stauffenberg heard sirens.

He was frantically scanning the road when he saw the second barrier, the main check point through which all the vehicles had to enter the Fuhrer Hauptquartier. The soldiers were jumping over the sandbags and threw themselves down on the ground before scrambling to get into firing position behind machine guns. Others were clambering into armoured vehicles and pulling down the hatches. The soldiers on the watch towers located at intervals along the perimeter fence had manned their machine guns.

An SS Obersturmbahnfuhrer was standing in front of the barrier.

The Mercedes stopped in front. The Obersturmbahnfuhrer walked up.

“I have to get to the airport,” said Stauffenberg.

“No one is allowed out, Colonel.”

All eyes were glaring at him

A dozen soldiers in field grey tunics made of wool with open neck and rolled up sleeves surrounded the car. Their machine guns were pointing at him, scaring the living daylights out of him.

“My plane leaves at a quarter past one. I have to get back to Berlin immediately.”

“No one is allowed out.”

Obersturmbahnführer eyed him suspiciously.

He had obviously heard the news about the assassination attempt.

Stauffenberg felt a chill run down his spine. He looked at the metal barrier blocking the road ahead. He saw chain link fences topped with barbed wire forming a continuous obstacle around the outer security zone. Signs warning of landmines were visible in the undergrowth.

The idea of falling into the hands of the Gestapo scared the hell out of him. He didn't even have a pistol to defend himself.

He sent up a prayer. Please God get me out of here.

In between the trees, he caught sight of the roof of the Kurhaus Görlitz. An idea flashed through his mind.

He recalled how helpful Möllendorf had been at breakfast earlier that morning, offering him mosquito repellent.

He would try to get Möllendorf to issue the order allowing him to leave the Wolf's Lair. It was a long shot but what choice did he have?

“I want to speak to the commander,” said Stauffenberg, getting out of the car.

“No one is allowed to pass, sir. There has been an explosion in the Sperrkreis 1a. The camp has been put into total lock down.

“I said I want to speak to the commander.”

Stauffenberg walked over to the guardhouse. The windows were protected by grilles. It was still extremely hot. He grabbed a water bottle when he walked into the guard hut and took a few gulps. He picked up the phone and dialed the number of the operator. The Obersturmbahnführer walked into the hut and stood right beside him.

“Stauffenberg at the south guard post. I want to speak to the commander of the Wolf’s Lair urgently,” he said.

“Yes sir, I will connect you.”

While he was holding the receiver, he scanned the sector outside the window. He saw some of the soldiers peeking around the Mercedes suspiciously.

Next, he heard Möllendorf on the line.

“Möllendorf, this is Stauffenberg. I have to get to the airport at Rastenburg and catch a flight to Berlin at 1:15. But the security detail won’t let me pass.”

“Let me talk to the man in charge.”

Stauffenberg handed over the receiver to the Obersturmbahnführer.

“Yes sir!” he said, after a minute.

He put the phone down and strode out of the hut.

“Lift the barrier!”

Stauffenberg followed him out of the hut and got into the back. The car accelerated away down the narrow road. After a couple of kilometers, Haefen tossed the package out of the car into the undergrowth of the forest.

They drove onto a grassy strip in the middle of the forest. The silver fuselage of a Henkel 111 gleamed in the dull light. A fuel truck stood beside it. The Luftwaffe ground crew who had just finished refueling the plane. Two soldiers were rolling in the fuel pipe. Tents to house fuel, ammo and personnel were hidden inside the forest, which bordered the strip.

The cabriolet drove up to the plane. Stauffenberg jumped out and ran across to the plane. The clouds had gathered. The first rain drops fell. It was going to be one hell of a storm. The humidity had been terrible. A few minutes later, the plane was hurtling down the runway. The plane was up in the air and heading for Berlin.

Stauffenberg was emotionally drained and still shaking. He was thinking how he was lucky to be alive. He had never experienced anything like the roller coaster of emotions of that day. Fear and hope had alternated at incredible speed, leaving him shattered.

At last, he had some time for himself. The last few months had been pretty hectic. He had had to do the planning for the assassination of Hitler and the coup in parallel to his regular duties. The planning had been incredibly hard. The omnipresent Gestapo were ready to punish anyone who so much as breathed a word of criticism against Hitler. The Gestapo had arrested Julius Leber a few days earlier.

The evening before he had gone through the whole plan one last time with the main conspirators in the Bendlerblock. He had dropped into his bed at midnight exhausted. At five that morning, he had been woken up by his brother Berthold. At six the car had come to bring him to Berlin Rangsdorf where he had met Haeften.

The plane had taken off at 8 am after a delay of an hour due to the fog and flown the 585 kilometers to Rastenburg in just over two hours,

arriving at just after ten. A car had collected him and driven him the 6 kilometers to the Wolf's Lair.

It was an amazing moment, finally to have reached the goal he had set himself so many years ago and to have proved himself in action. The thought that he had overcome so many difficulties, obstacles and dangers to assassinate a man who was the most evil in history filled him with incredible pride. He knew that his family would also be proud if they knew what he had done.

Stephan George, the poet, who had inspired him and predicted had the heroic action.

He recalled George telling him he should always live his life as he were one of the greatest people on earth. He should set big goals and chase big dreams, use his imagination and boldly pursue a life of service and dedication to others.

He had come to be convinced that God was real; the universe is a friendly place, designed to support everyone in their search to develop their highest self. The intelligence that had created and ordered the world, nature and human beings was a benevolent one which nourished all living things at every level so they could have lives of adventure, excitement and growth. It was a universe whose beauty and mystery filled him with wonder and awe.

But inside this universe, upon this planet earth, on the continent of Europe, centered on the state of Germany, the Nazis had emerged thanks to the funding of the bankers and industrialists, and erected an empire based on military conquest that was so out of tune with the laws of nature and the universe, and so artificial, so destructive and cruel that there was perhaps not a single person left who could enjoy

the pure, uncomplicated fact of being alive in the shadow of the totalitarian terror state and the carnage of the Second World War.

He, too, had allowed himself to become a tool, a cog in a brutal killing machine that killed millions of civilians, women and children in crime after crime. That July 20th he had finally made amends.

It's very rare that a person had a chance to make an impact for the better on the lives of millions. Yet he had just had that chance and he had used it. He felt cleansed, purged, renewed. He had regained control over his life, removed obstacles to a better future for him, his family and country. But there were some obstacles still left...

By now Fellgiebel should have informed Quirnheim that the bomb had gone off. The first of the Wehrmacht units should be moving out of their barracks under orders to seal off the government quarter in Berlin, confine the SS to their barracks and liberate the concentration camps.