

AFTER THE BATTLE

IT HAPPENED HERE

The Venlo Incident

At the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, the British Intelligence Service had reliable information that there existed in Germany a secret military conspiracy against Hitler. Once war had been declared it was essential that contact be made with the opposition to find out if there was any hope of developing the liaison to bring about a quick ending of the war.

Captain S. Payne Best, a British Intelligence Officer, resident in Holland, controlling a British undercover ring known as 'Z' (later MI6), was detailed to investigate the possibilities. The Germans, on the other hand, dealing through an intermediary Dr. Franz, wanted to be sure that if they appeared at a meeting, they would be dealing directly with a responsible British officer.

Captain Best's first meeting with Dr. Franz and a Luftwaffe Officer Major Solms, was held in neutral Holland, in a small hotel in Venlo, at the beginning of September 1939. A second meeting was held again in the same hotel. It was learnt that a German General was anxious to make contact with the British but needed to be convinced that Captain Best really was a British agent. Captain Best was asked to prove his bona-fides by arranging to have a certain news item broadcast by the German Service of the BBC. This was duly transmitted on October 11 and, reassured, the Germans requested a third rendezvous in Zutphen on October 20.

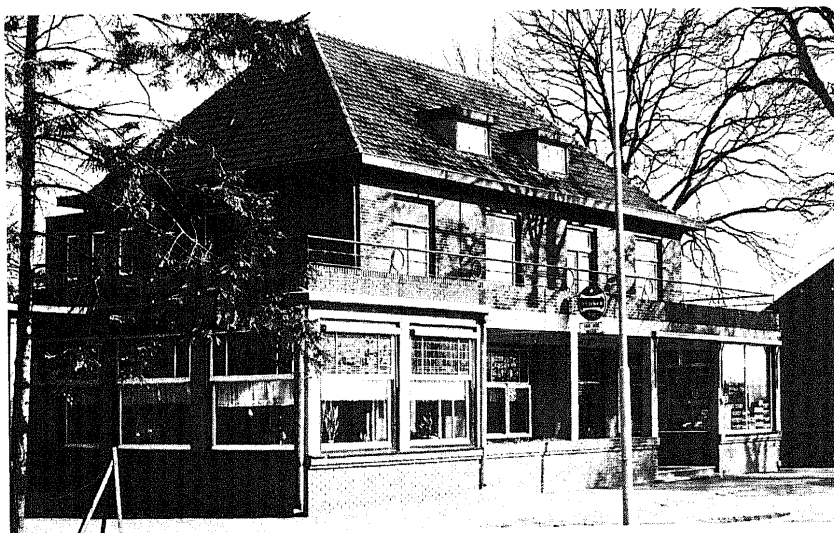
By now it was evident that more help with the negotiations was needed and a British Intelligence officer, Major R. H. Stevens, who, under the guise of the British Legation's Passport Officer in The Hague, controlled another network of spies in Holland and Germany, was instructed to assist Best and incorporate 'Z' into his own organisation. Then, in order to facilitate further secret meetings in Holland, the Dutch Military Intelligence provided Lieutenant Dirk Klop, equipped with the necessary permits, to



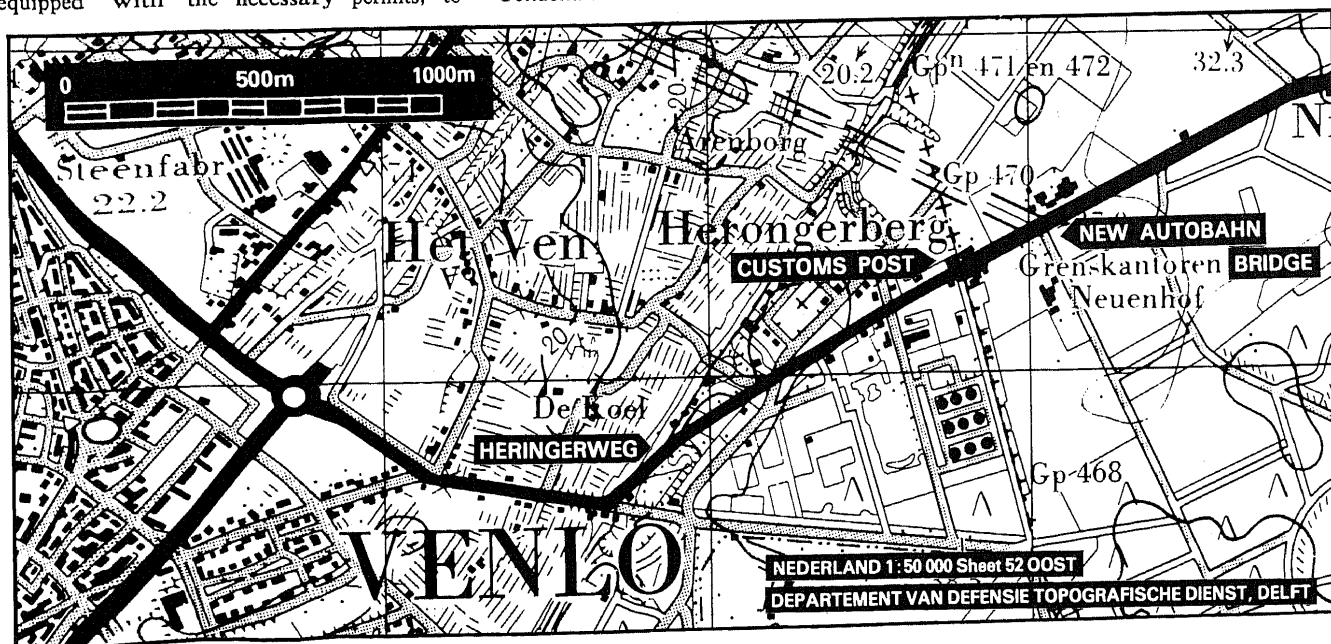
The monocled Captain Best, a British Intelligence Officer in Holland, photographed in the late 1940s.



Major Richard Stevens had served in the Indian Army before being appointed to run British MI6 agents in Holland.



Above: The Backus cafe, just yards inside Dutch territory, used by Major Stevens as a rendezvous with Gruppenfuhrer Walter Schellenberg who was disguised as a 'Major Schaemmel'.



enable the party to pass through the various road-blocks which were numerous in the border area.

After the Germans had been met at the border at Dinxperlo and brought to Zutphen, Captain Best arranged that talks be carried out in the privacy of a friend's house at Arnhem, some ten miles away. However the Dutch gendarmerie became suspicious and surrounded the house and it was only by the efforts of Lieutenant Klop that the police were persuaded not to raid the building.

Major Stevens did not want a repetition of the fiasco at Arnhem and for the next meeting on October 30, arranged for Lieutenant Klop to bring the Germans to The Hague. When the three Germans arrived, they were introduced as Lieutenant Grosch, Colonel Martini and Major Schaemmel. It appears from Captain Best's own account of the affair that they did not recognise Major Schaemmel as SS Gruppenfuhrer Walter Schellenberg (who later displaced Admiral Canaris as head

of the Abwehr, the German Secret Service), but as both Major Stevens and Captain Best are now dead, confirmation cannot be obtained on this point.

We do now know that Heinrich Himmler, Chief of the SS and Gestapo, had been attempting all along to find out through the British, the identity of the real German plotters. One of his up and coming officers at Dusseldorf, Walter Schellenberg, had been instructed to make contact with British Intelligence and had successfully done so using the name of a real, living, major.

To facilitate communication in the future, Major Stevens gave Major Schaemmel a British secret radio transmitter. Using this, arrangements were made for the next meeting to be held at the original rendezvous—the hotel at Venlo, as the nearby customs post, Heringerweg Zoll, was more suitable for an unobtrusive border crossing than Dinxperlo.

However when Lieutenant Klop met the Germans at the frontier, they said they were

frightened of venturing too far over the border. Lieutenant Klop telephoned the message to Major Stevens and Captain Best, waiting five miles away at Venlo, and suggested they come out to the frontier where a convenient cafe, The Cafe Backus, a few yards inside Holland, would make an acceptable meeting place to the Germans. (Captain Best describes it as being 200 yards from the border; we were assured when we visited the cafe that it had not been moved and is still, as it was then, only five yards over the frontier!).

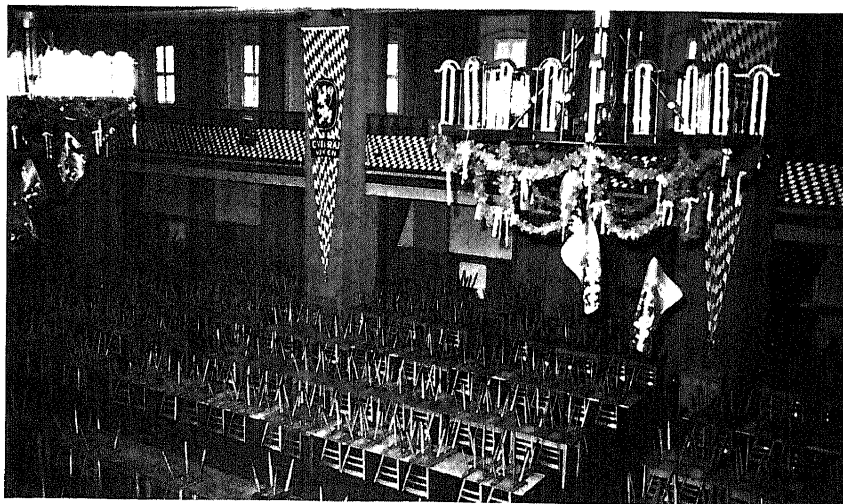
A fifth meeting was arranged for the following afternoon, Wednesday, November 8, the Germans promising that the German General, leading the plotters, would attend. However when Major Stevens and Captain Best arrived at the cafe they were met again by 'Major Schaemmel'. He apologised that the General had been held up in Munich and could not reach Holland before 4.00 p.m. the next day.



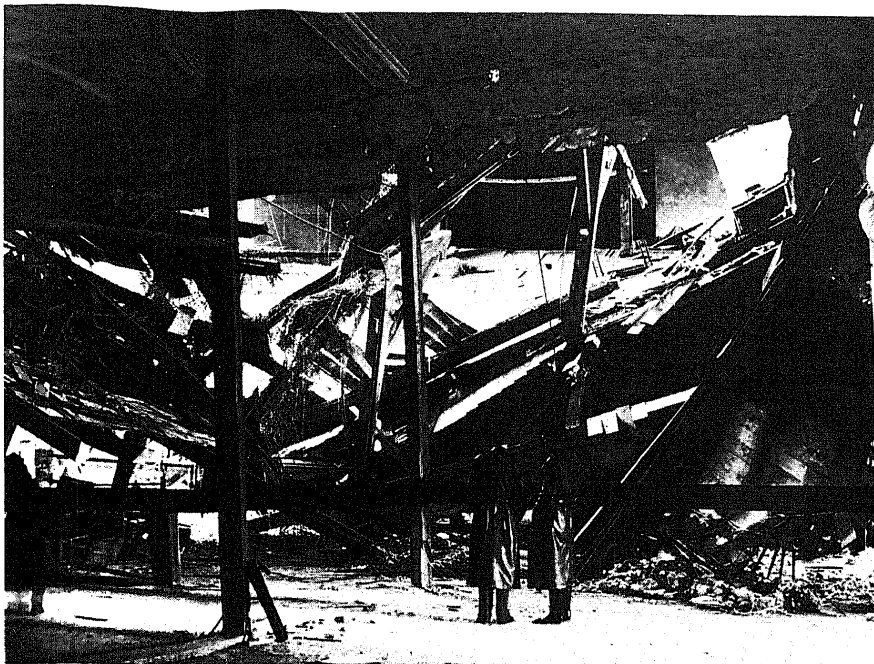
MUNICH

That same evening 300 miles away in Munich, Adolf Hitler was at the yearly reunion of the 'old guard' commemorating the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch. It had been Hitler's custom in former years to linger over beers and reminisce with his old comrades after making his speech. However this November, as soon as he finished speaking, he promptly left the Burgerbraukeller. Twelve minutes later, the pillar behind the speakers' rostrum exploded, killing seven persons and wounding sixty-three others. The next morning, Hitler's own newspaper, the Volkischer Beobachter announced to the world the story of the attempt on the Fuhrer's life. It blamed the British Secret Service. Hitler's anger fell on Himmler and his organisation. Himmler acted. He telephoned Walter Schellenberg in Dusseldorf ordering him to cross the frontier into Holland and capture the two British Secret agents responsible for the bomb attempt. Schellenberg in turn detailed one of his SS agents Sturmabfuhrer Alfred Naujocks.

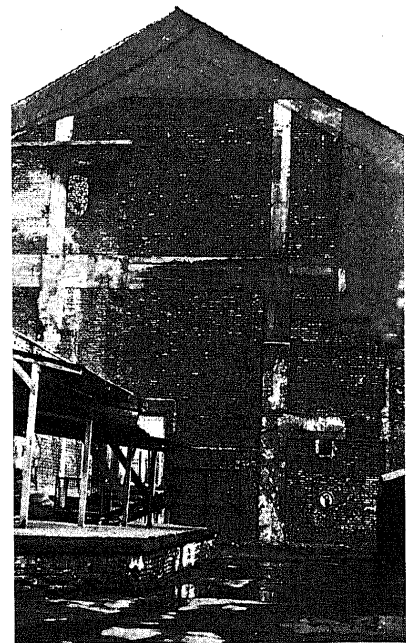
What happened on the afternoon of



Top: Wednesday, November 8, 1939. Even as Adolf Hitler speaks to the 'old guard' in the Burgerbraukeller, the bomb planted in the pillar behind him is ticking away, ready to explode minutes later. Above: The rebuilt 'grosse Halle' today.



Above: The morning after. Two German officials examine the wreckage of the Great Hall (Associated Press). Right: A comparison today is difficult—this is the outer wall showing signs of repair.



Thursday, November 9, 1939 is told in Captain Best's own words (from 'The Venlo Incident').

I got up shortly after five although I felt very tired and much disinclined to do so, but through these daily trips to the frontier I had been forced to neglect all my other work and there were some things which I could put off no longer. As I shaved I could not help wishing that I could somehow or other dodge having to go to that beastly frontier cafe again. There had been something about it the previous evening which had made me feel most uncomfortable; the feeling of being completely cut off from the outside world in that little side room where we had our talks with the Germans, those big glass windows which looked out on to a wall of dense undergrowth.

It was a dull morning and much colder than of late; the sky was overcast and threatened rain. When I got to the office I just had time to glance at the morning paper. It carried a stop-press notice about an attempt on Hitler's life which had been made at Munich the previous day. Hitler himself had escaped as he had already left the place before the explosion, but many others had been killed and injured. Very curious, and I wondered whether this attempt had anything to do with our people and, if not, what effect it would have on their plans.

Then I plunged into my work and it was after ten before I was free to join Stevens at his house, Klop had not yet arrived.

Stevens produced some Browning automatics and we each loaded and pocketed one — just in case. Then Klop came in. He apologized for being late but there was a bit of a scare on and he had been kept at the office. Some news had come in to the effect that the Germans might march into Holland at any moment. The story was unconfirmed and Klop did not believe it himself; nor did it agree with any indications which Stevens and I had. As we were all feeling rather tired I asked my driver, Jan Lemmens, to come with us so that he could bring the car, a Lincoln Zephyr, back in case we wished ourselves to return by train.

We had made such good time that we were able to stop for a quick lunch at a little roadside cafe near s'Hertogenbosch.

Until we stopped for lunch Jan had sat next to me, and Stevens and Klop behind. When we started off again, Stevens came and sat by me and we had a chat about what might happen if the Germans made a sudden attack on Holland and we discussed what measures would be best for the safe evacuation of the legation and other Britishers still in Holland.

I never like to talk when I am driving and always find that it slows up my speed appreciably; in any case, when we reached Venlo it was already four o'clock, the time set for our meeting. Although we stopped so that Klop could call at the police station and arrange about our guard, we could not wait until the men had cycled the five miles to the frontier, but pushed on ahead of them.

All the way down from The Hague we had noticed that military precautions had been intensified and we had been held up at every road block and tank barrier. Even now, between Venlo and our cafe, we were stopped twice. The first time the sentry said something about having orders to allow no cars to pass and although Klop showed him his authority insisted that he must first go to the guard room and speak to the N.C.O. in charge.

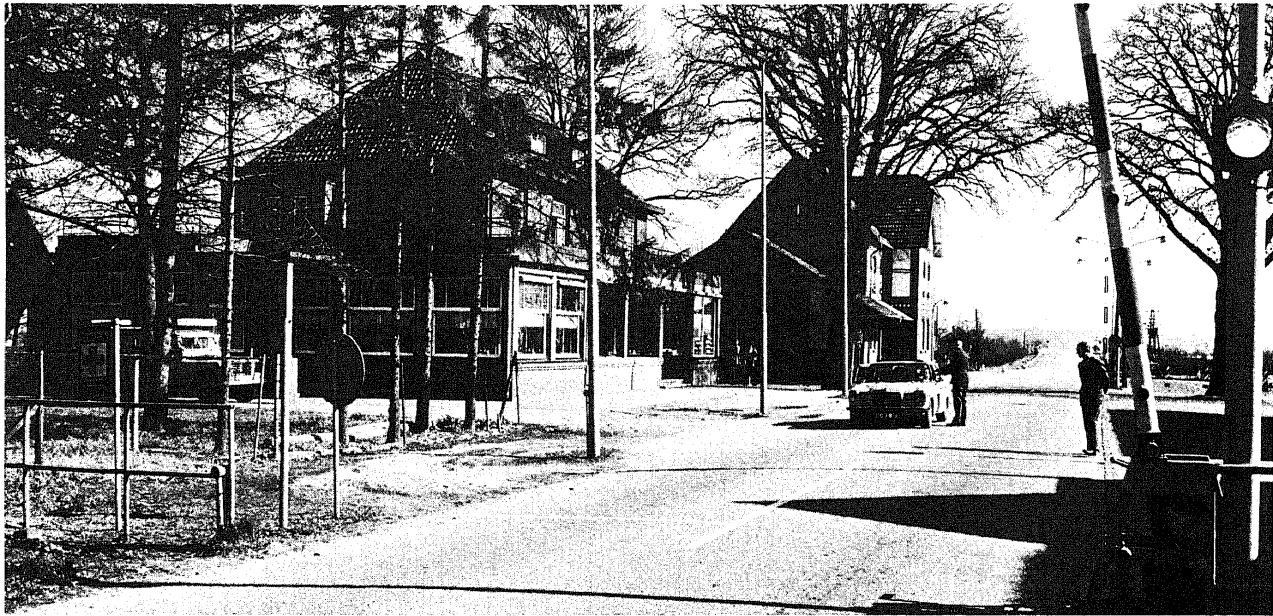
The second sentry did not actually stop us, but only made signs that we should drive slowly. He was stationed at a bend in the road just before we entered the straight along which one had a view of the frontier. Somehow or other, it seemed to me that things looked different from what they had on the previous days. Then I noticed that the German barrier

across the road which had always been closed, was now lifted; there seemed to be nothing between us and the enemy. My feeling of impending danger was very strong. Yet the scene was peaceful enough. No one was in sight except a German customs officer in uniform lounging along the road towards us and a little girl who was playing at ball with a big black dog in the middle of the road before the cafe.

I must have rather checked my speed, for Klop called out, 'Go ahead, everything is quite all right.' I felt rather a fool to be so nervous. I let the car drift slowly along to the front of the cafe on my left and then reversed into the car park on the side of the building farthest from the frontier. Schaemmel was standing on the veranda at the corner and made a sign which I took to mean that our bird was inside. I stopped the engine and Stevens got out on the right. My car had left-hand drive. I had just wriggled clear of the wheel and was following him out when there was a sudden noise of shouting and shooting. I looked up, and through the windscreen saw a large open car drive up round the corner till our bumpers were touching. It seemed to be packed to overflowing with rough-looking men. Two were perched on top of the hood and were firing over our heads from sub-

The junction of the main road and the Heringerweg turning to the German frontier, down which Captain Best drove the car on November 9, 1939.





Above: Looking across the border into Germany. Our Land Rover is parked beside the Cafe Backus, exactly where Captain Best parked his car. The actual border runs between the cafe and the large house which was the German customs building in 1939. Below: Mr. Franz Backus and his son standing where Lieutenant Klop fell wounded.

machine guns, others were standing up in the car and on the running boards; all shouting and waving pistols. Four men jumped off almost before their car had stopped and rushed towards us shouting: 'Hands up!'

I don't remember actually getting out of the car, but by the time the men reached us, I was certainly standing next to Stevens, on his left. I heard him say: 'Our number is up, Best.' Then we were seized. Two men pointed their guns at our heads, the other two quickly handcuffed us.

I heard shots behind me on my right. I looked round and saw Klop. He must have crept out behind us under cover of the car door which had been left open. He was running diagonally away from us towards the road; running sideways in big bounds, firing at our captors as he ran. He looked graceful, with both arms outstretched — almost like a ballet dancer. I saw the windscreen of the German car splinter into a star, and then the four men standing in front of us started shooting and after a few more steps Klop just seemed to crumple and collapse into a dark heap of clothes on the grass.

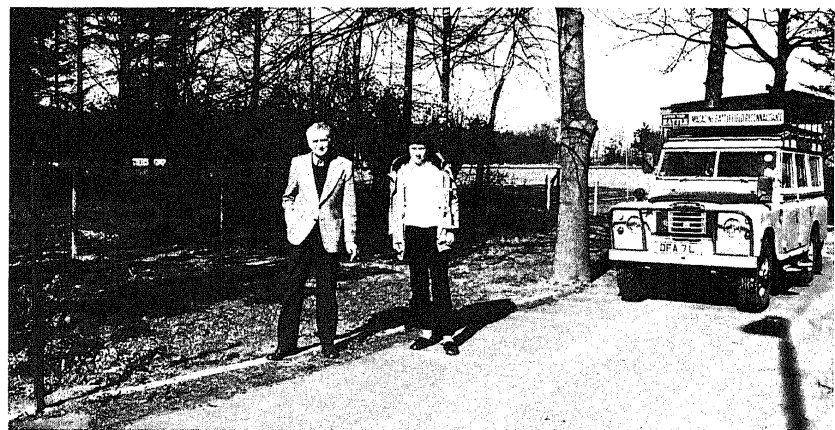
'Now, march!' shouted our captors, and prodding us in the small of our backs with their guns, they hurried us, with cries of 'Hup! Hup! Hup!' along the road towards the frontier. As we passed the front of the cafe I saw my poor driver Jan held by the arms by two men who were frog-marching him along. It seemed to me that his chin was reddened as from a blow. Then we were across the border. The black and white barrier closed behind us. We were in Nazi Germany.

Although a new customs building was opened in July 1971 at the Heringerweg crossing point between Holland and Germany, the original building is still standing beside the Cafe Backus. Further down the road, inside Germany, a bridge has been built to cross a new autobahn, built in 1971. Otherwise the scene is unchanged since 1939.

Early one Sunday in March 1975 we retraced the British Intelligence officers' route from Venlo and turned the bend into the straight piece of road leading to the frontier. As, when they approached it 36 years before, the striped barrier pole was raised. It is only lowered, we were told, if a crime is committed in the neighbourhood.

The Cafe Backus is only five yards inside

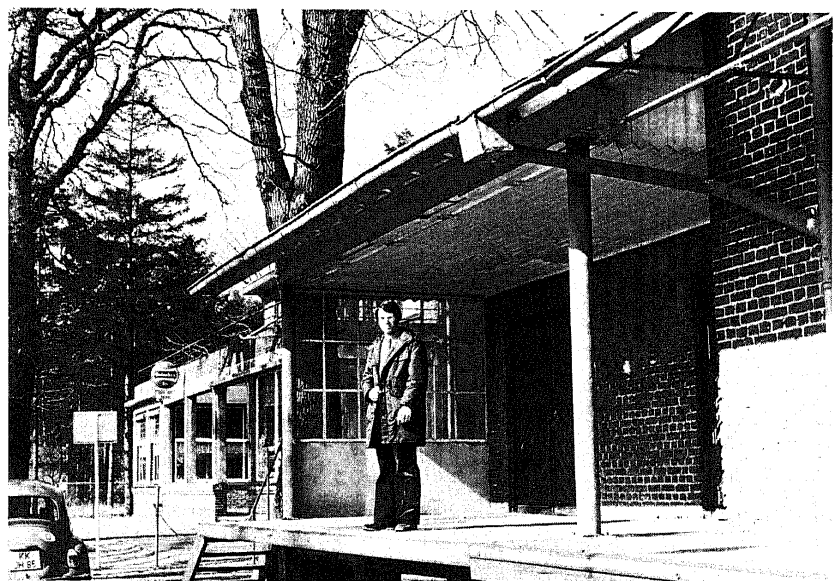
When the British officers were taken across the frontier (marked by the sign on the left), they were searched on this raised platform, still in full view of the cafe.



Holland and we backed our Land-Rover, just as Captain Best had done, beside the building. It is still owned, as it was then, by Mr. Franz Backus. He kindly spoke to us and showed us where Lieutenant Klop fell wounded. We then walked across the frontier

to the old German customs post, still with its raised ramp where Stevens and Best stood with upraised arms, facing the wall.

The new customs building, just inside Holland, is now jointly manned by German and Dutch officials, who made us welcome



and shared their morning coffee with us. We learnt that American CBS Television had re-enacted the kidnapping some years ago and at the time both officers returned to the scene.

After the kidnapping Captain Best spent the next five years in Sachsenhausen and other Concentration Camps together with Major Stevens, who ended up in Dachau. They were finally liberated by Company S of the 2nd Battalion of the 339th US Infantry Regiment on May 4, 1945. Captain Best died some years ago and Major Stevens in February 1967. Lieutenant Klop died in Dusseldorf the same day that he was wounded.

The Dutch authorities made nine written requests to the Germans for the return of Lieutenant Klop and Jan Lemmans, the driver, and demanded an investigation into the violation of Dutch neutrality. No reply was received until, on the following May 10, Hitler justified his attack on the Netherlands partly on the grounds of the complicity between the Dutch and British Intelligence Services.

On October 19, 1944 the SS Agent responsible for the kidnapping, Alfred Naujocks, deserted to American forces in Belgium. He was held as a potential war criminal but was never brought to trial. In 1946 he made a dramatic escape from the special camp in Germany for war criminals and has never been apprehended.

Heinrich Hoffmann, Hitler's close friend and photographer, had been present in the Burgerbraukeller on November 9, 1939. Sixteen years later, in 1955, he described what happened:

That Hitler was uneasy about something was obvious. His speech was much shorter than usual, and when he left, he did not shake hands with his old comrades, as had been his invariable wont every year at this reunion. Some feeling of haste and urgency seemed to be impelling him forward, and 'the old guard' watched with disappointment as he turned abruptly and swiftly left the hall. After his departure the hall swiftly emptied, and within a few minutes I myself had packed up my camera and likewise departed. Only a few of the old comrades and the serving staff were left.

Discussing the incident a day or so later, Hitler gave his own explanation of his sudden departure:

'I had a most extraordinary feeling, and I don't myself know how or why—but I felt compelled to leave the cellar just as quickly as I could.' (Intuition or implication?)

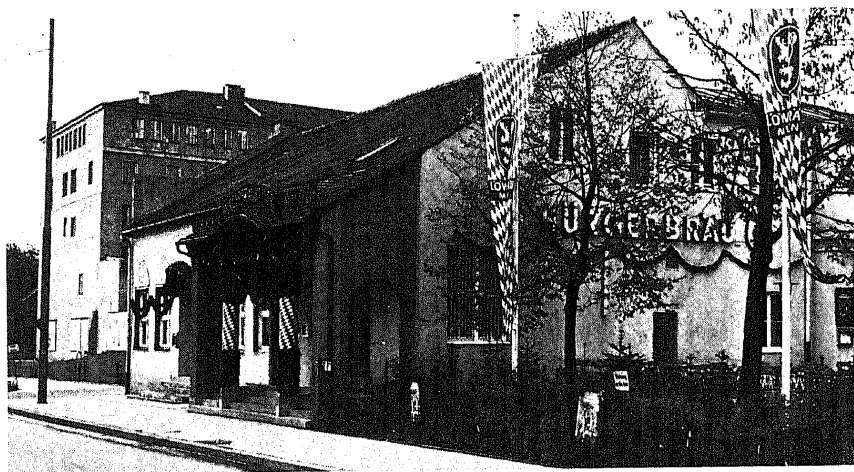
In Munich, repairs began on the Burgerbraukeller, situated on Rosenheimer Strasse with the intention of restoring the building to its original style. However because of the shortage of materials it was never completely finished. During the bombing of Munich, a single bomb hit the large hall at the rear (where the original explosion had taken place), but failed to explode. When American forces entered Munich on April 30, 1945 it was the 'Rainbow' Division, the 42nd Infantry Division, which reached the Burgerbraukeller first. They found the hall filthy, piled with Nazi party records and long unused.

It was opened as a Red Cross Club for American forces who remained there until 1957. In 1958 it was taken over by the Lowenbrau Beer Company which partly rebuilt the premises and it reopened as a bierkeller at Christmas, 1958.

In 1972 the Olympic Games were to be staged in Munich and as part of the planning the city authorities pressed ahead with the construction of an underground railway system. Construction of the escalators emerging on Rosenheimer Strasse, next to the Burgerbraukeller meant the cellar, which had been used for Nazi party meetings, would be affected. It was therefore sealed off and it is now no longer possible to enter it. The large hall at the rear is only opened for large gatherings but permission was kindly given us to photograph the empty room.



Above: Munich has fallen and GIs march past the Burgerbraukeller. Below: Today, considerably revamped, it still stands on Rosenheimerstrasse in central Munich.



Above: In the cellar, Lieutenant-General Lucian Truscott speaks on the radio programme which marked its opening as a Red Cross Club for US Forces in 1945.

Who was actually responsible for the Munich bomb plot? The Germans at the time gave the actual perpetrator as Georg Elser and, as such, he was pictured alongside Best and Stevens in the German press. Although Elser admitted planting the bomb, Allied investigators learned after the war that the Gestapo had planned the explosion, hoping that Hitler's 'miraculous escape' would strengthen his following in Germany. They had promised Elser, who was imprisoned in Dachau at the time for being a Communist sympathiser, his freedom.

When Elser later met Captain Best in

Sachsenhausen Concentration camp, he said he had been approached by two strangers who explained the necessity of doing away with some of the Fuhrer's old comrades. The bomb was timed to explode immediately after Hitler had made his speech. The arrest of the two Intelligence officers seems to have been a last minute effort to link the British with the bomb attempt.

The whole truth will probably never be known. On April 16, 1945 the Gestapo announced, after having murdered him, that Elser had been killed in an Allied bombing raid.