

The Wolf's Ravine

Hitler's Command Post for German victory in the west, situated in a quiet Belgian village, has undergone work to enhance the visitor experience as Rob Pritchard reports.

Mention the Hitler Bunker and inevitably his underground headquarters in the beleaguered city of Berlin 1945, springs to mind.

Almost unknown by comparison, but in many ways a far more intriguing story, is the creation of his FHQu (Führerhauptquartier District General Führer) during the Blitzkrieg days of early summer 1940 in the area around the small Belgian village of Brûly-de-Pesche.

It was on May 10 that German troops attacked Holland and Belgium. The French and British had stationed forces in the North to resist the expected push, but the German General Staff chose to focus its efforts on an advance through the Ardennes towards the Meuse. This area was only lightly defended as the hilly and heavily forested region was considered to form a natural barrier, unsuitable for the deployment of the armoured forces of the Wehrmacht. On May 13, the Panzer divisions of General Rommel crossed the Meuse at Dinant (Belgium) and those of



ABOVE: From chalet to the reinforced bunker was just a short sprint that was never undertaken. It is interesting to note that the door could be locked from inside, whether to prevent unwanted visitors from taking shelter there, or whether it is just a standard bunker door design is not known. (ROB PRITCHARD)

BELOW: Hitler makes his triumphant visit to Paris on 23 June 1940. Four days later he had vacated his Command Post in Belgium for good.





General Guderian at Sedan and Givet. A breach was opened and soon the German motorized troops were pushing ahead at full speed toward the Somme and Abbeville with the eventual aim of taking the French capital.

In the expectation that resistance would harden and a bruising defensive war could result it was felt essential for ease of communication that the overall Commander in Chief should establish his headquarters close to the battlefield. On May 22nd, just three days

after the decision was taken a working group of several high-ranking officers and Reichsminister Todt selected the village of Brûly-de-Pesche, which nestles amongst 12,000 hectares of forest in the Philippeville region, and the project codenamed "Waldwiese" commenced.

Being so close to the expected front line, and the local populous not being particularly well-disposed to the Führer, security and safety from ground or air attack were always going to be a key consideration. With this in mind it was

decided that the entire population - 119 people - and that of twenty-seven surrounding villages would be displaced with immediate effect. Under the command of security chief Lt Col Kurt Thomas armed troops spread out across the area and ordered all the civilians to leave the area immediately. In this case "immediately" could mean as little as two hours notice, hardly time to come to a decision as to where they would go and gather just a few essential belongings, loading them onto farm wagons and handcarts. The people left their family homes for generations with no idea when, or indeed if, they would ever be permitted to return. They dispersed, some to friends and relatives in the same region, some to refuges as far away as Bordeaux, around 750km distant.

Hastily work started on the project. Around two hundred workers from Organisation Todt were drafted in and following plans which called for the construction of three Bavarian style wooden lodges and two substantial concrete bunkers with heavy metal doors >>>

TOP LEFT: From a contemporary postcard, Hitler walks Goering to his car which was parked beyond the church

TOP RIGHT: The church as it is today, little changed from 1940 (PHILIPPE MAREE)

LEFT: Hitler's chalet, or rather its replica, now serves as the visitor centre (ROB PRITCHARD IMAGE)





designed to keep Hitler and his staff safe from any air attacks the allied forces might launch. Buildings within the existing village were also requisitioned; the church to be converted into a cinema for Hitler to study film brought back from the front of his jubilant forces so he could approve those to be released as newsreels for the German people, and the village school which served as both accommodation and the map room and for Generaloberst Keitel and Generalmajor Jodl. Also included in the construction were a quiet area in the woods with a pool for Hitler's relaxation and a short strip suitable for use by Fiesler Storch communications aircraft

The village itself sits in a cleared area deep in the forest, whilst the FHQu was well concealed in the trees from aerial reconnaissance. The area around it remained completely closed to civilians and was guarded around the clock by a security detail of almost a thousand troops; 26 officers, 185 warrant officers and 750 soldiers

Incredibly, by June 6th, Hitler was able to move into his new HQ, now renamed Wolfsschlucht I where he would be based for the twenty-two days it then took to defeat the French. The historic document to be signed in the railway carriage at Compiègne was actually written here and typed out in the village church. Chief translator of the text was Paul Schmidt.

Paul Schmidt later recorded: "In the afternoon of 20 June, I was summoned to the headquarters of Hitler. He gave me the text of the armistice conditions which had to be handed the next day to a French delegation

TOP: The resistance display holds many of the weapons employed by both sides and some excellent filmed interview clips of resistance fighters explaining the sabotage methods of Group Hotton (ROB PRITCHARD)

RIGHT: The preserved concrete bunker that Hitler and his staff would have used in the event of an air raid.

in Rethondes. There was also a small group of Italian translators who followed the Führer for a few days in case of urgent translations. We worked all night by candlelight in the church of BrÛly-de-Pesche. I was seized by the strange atmosphere that prevailed in front of the altar veiled in the shadows that filled the nave, while in a corner hushed discussions on the translation of the conditions to be imposed on France could be heard accompanied by the muffled clatter of typewriters."

On 27 June Hitler left BrÛly-de-Pesche for his headquarters in Tannenburg, never to visit again. The concrete bunkers had not been required.

The displaced inhabitants of the area were eventually permitted to return after June 29th and gradually it returned to some form of normality, all be it under German occupation. The region became famed for its active resistance operation, the Hotton Group being particularly notable. At

the cost of some forty-four members killed or missing and another twenty-seven wounded, the group which never exceeded 350 men in its short history from 1943 to the liberation was a constant thorn in the side of the occupiers.

For the 2016 season extensive work has been carried out on the existing museum thanks to the provision of external funding. One of the replica chalets has been equipped as a museum dedicated to the resistance movement, whilst the other houses the visitor reception, a short introductory film show and a scale model of the FHQu as it was. One of the original bunkers sits between the chalets and is also accessible to visitors. At less than three hours drive from Dunkerque ferry port, and on the edge of the Ardennes region, Wolfsschlucht I is a site that justifies a visit from anyone interested in the 1940 Blitzkrieg. Location and up to date opening hours can be found here: <http://bunkerhitler.grottedeneptune.be/en/home/>

