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CHAPTER ONE

The Reinberger Incident

AN INVITATION TO DISASTER

At ten o'clock in the morning of January 10, 1940, Luftwaffe majors Erich Hoenmanns and Helmuth Reinberger walked across the tarmac of Loddenheide airfield near Münster, Westphalia, and climbed into a waiting Messerschmitt-108 "Typhoon." They quickly took off into a brilliantly blue winter sky.

Hoenmanns, who piloted the plane, was a veteran of World War I. Denied a combat role in the new conflict because of a mild cardiac condition, he had been given command of the airbase at Loddenheide. Reinberger, who sat in the passenger seat behind Hoenmanns, had been in charge of the paratrooper school in Stendal before he was temporarily assigned to the planning staff of General Kurt Student's Seventh Air Division. Unknown to Hoenmanns, in the yellow pigskin briefcase that Reinberger clutched tightly on his lap were the top-secret plans for Hitler's invasion of western Europe.



Hoenmanns and Reinberger had met only the night before in the officers' lounge at the air base. Over a few drinks, Reinberger had explained to Hoenmanns that he was on his way to Cologne, some eighty miles distant, to attend an important meeting at the headquarters of the Second Air Fleet. Coincidentally, Hoenmanns's home was in Cologne. Eager to see his wife, as well as to get in some flying time, Hoenmanns offered to fly Reinberger to the Rhineland city.

Reinberger hesitated before accepting the offer. He realized only too well that members of the planning staff were prohibited from traveling by

plane and were liable to severe punishment if they did. The nature of the plans he was carrying only added to the risk of flying. Yet he was equally concerned that train tie-ups, which were now frequent because of the movement of German troops and supplies to the western front, might make him late for his meeting. After weighing the risks briefly, Reinberger concluded that the danger of flying with Hoenmanns was much less than the probability of arriving late in Cologne. He accepted the pilot's offer.

THE CRASH

The flight over the Ruhr Valley went well. The sky formed a deep blue dome; a brilliant coat of white that sparkled in the golden early winter sun covered the landscape below.

But as the two German airmen were enjoying the snow-covered scenery speeding by beneath them, a layer of dark gray mist suddenly appeared on the southern horizon. Within a few minutes, the Messerschmitt was engulfed by the thick vapor. Reinberger glanced anxiously at Hoenmanns, but the pilot did not seem bothered by the changing weather. However, as the mist thickened and visibility dropped to zero, Hoenmanns became increasingly nervous as he realized that he had lost his bearings. After setting a course for the south-southeast, a direction he thought would take them toward the Rhine, Hoenmanns decided to try to get below the cloud deck. As the plane descended, the mist thinned and the snow-covered ground appeared once again, but the Rhine was nowhere in sight.

Now Hoenmanns panicked. He again altered course, trying to find the elusive Rhine. Suddenly, on the white horizon, a black winding ribbon of water was visible. Hoenmanns thought it must be the Rhine. But before he could confirm this assumption, disaster struck. As the pilot raised himself out of his seat to get a better look at the approaching river, he accidentally hit the plane's fuel switch and cut off the engine's gasoline supply. While he feverishly tried to correct his error, the engine coughed, sputtered, and finally stopped altogether. The Messerschmitt dropped rapidly toward the ground, nearly out of control. Narrowly missing two high-tension wires, the plane swept between two poplars, shearing off its wings before the fuselage finally slid to a rest in a snow-covered thicket.

Although badly shaken by the crash, both Hoenmanns and Reinberger managed to free themselves from the plane with only minor cuts and bruises. Still clutching the yellow briefcase, Reinberger for the first time revealed the nature of its contents to his now flabbergasted companion. There was, he exclaimed in desperation, no way he could escape a court-

martial. Finally composing himself, he asked Hoenmanns where they were. The pilot responded that they must be somewhere on German soil.

"On German soil!" Reinberger raised his voice in astonishment. "I should hope so!"

Shortly afterward, a wiry old peasant with a weather-beaten and heavily lined face came lumbering toward the two Germans. They immediately asked him where they were. The old man said something in response, but neither airman could understand him—he spoke in French!

Once again, this time in broken French, and more softly, Reinberger asked the peasant where they were. The old man jerked his thumb over his shoulder, in the direction of the river, and replied, "The Meuse."

"The Meuse River!" Reinberger exclaimed. Anguished, he realized that they had crashed in Holland or Belgium. The documents in his briefcase had to be destroyed at once.

After watching the two Germans fumble in their pockets for some matches, the peasant offered them a box of his own. Reinberger snatched them from the old man and disappeared behind a nearby thicket.

THE ARREST

Since the beginning of the war the preceding September, the Belgian border guards near Mechelen-sur-Meuse, some eight miles north of Maastricht, Holland, had experienced little excitement. Neither had their Dutch neighbors across the Maas (as the Meuse is called after it flows from Belgium north into Holland). But suddenly the silence of the winter morning was interrupted by the approaching sound of a sputtering aircraft engine. The noise soon became the whistling shriek of a plane falling from the sky, followed by the jarring sound of a crash. The Belgian guards, four in number, quickly rushed off toward the direction of the crash. They soon came within sight of a German airman—Hoenmanns—standing next to the wreckage of the plane. The German promptly raised his hands above his head as the Belgians approached.

However, the attention of the soldiers quickly shifted from Hoenmanns to a cloud of smoke rising from behind the thicket where Reinberger had scurried to burn the contents of his briefcase. The startled German airman tried to run away from the approaching soldiers, but he froze in his tracks after the Belgians fired warning shots into the air. Two of the soldiers stamped out the flames and then gingerly placed the charred remains of the documents into Reinberger's yellow briefcase. After relieving the Germans of their pistols, the soldiers escorted them back to their guardhouse.

There Reinberger and Hoenmanns were interrogated by a Belgian officer, Captain Arthur Rodrique. He wanted to know what the two Germans were doing on Belgian soil. Hoenmanns explained that they had lost their way in the mist and were forced by engine failure to crash land. Reinberger asked the Belgian officer to point out their location on a map and permit him to make a phone call, but Rodrique replied that he could not approve either request until he was authorized to do so by his superiors.

Just then, Rodrique's interrogation of the two Germans was abruptly interrupted by the arrival of the chief of police from the neighboring town of Eisden, who had come to make a report of the incident. The police chief examined the partially charred papers in Reinberger's briefcase. He understood little German, but enough to realize that the documents were important. After completing a preliminary examination, the police chief left the room.

Rodrique began to pack the partially charred documents as well as the Messerschmitt's logbook into Reinberger's briefcase. As he was doing this, Hoenmanns asked if he could go to the toilet. Rodrique nodded and told a soldier to show the German the way. But as the Belgian officer stepped back from the table to allow Hoenmanns to pass, Reinberger, who was sitting sullenly in a chair, sprang to his feet, grabbed the charred papers that were still spread out on the table, and flung them into the potbellied stove that heated the guardhouse.

Almost as quickly, Rodrique knocked Reinberger aside, shoved his hand into the flames, and pulled the documents out of the stove. Flinging them to the floor, he stamped out the flames. His hand badly burned, he turned toward Reinberger and, cursing, violently pushed him back into the chair. "It is always the same with you Germans," Rodrique yelled. "We treat you correctly, and you play a dirty trick like this!"

Rodrique put his revolver on the table while he tried to straighten out the charred documents. Taking advantage of the opportunity, Reinberger lunged for the pistol. Grabbing Reinberger's arm, Rodrique tore the gun from his hand and knocked him to the floor. "I did not want to use the gun on you," Reinberger cried, now becoming hysterical. "I have committed an unforgivable crime! I wanted your revolver so I could kill myself!"

Leaning over his comrade, Hoenmann said to Rodrique, "You must excuse him. . . . It's bad trouble he's in—he's an officer in the regular army."

Disconsolate, Reinberger returned to his chair and covered his head with his hands. He offered no further resistance.