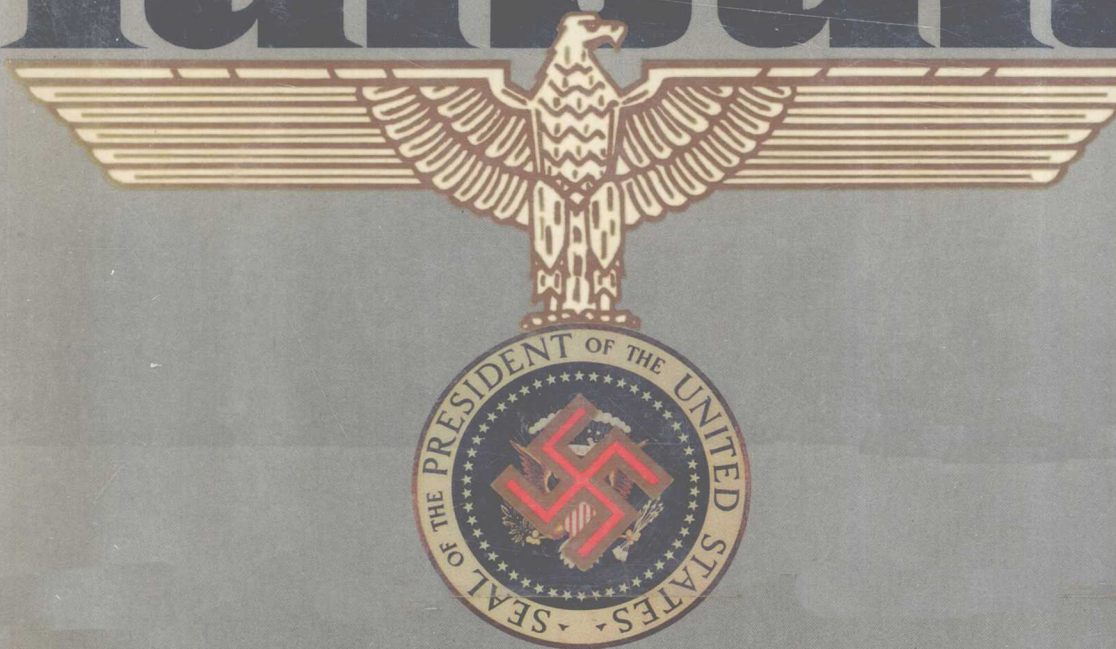
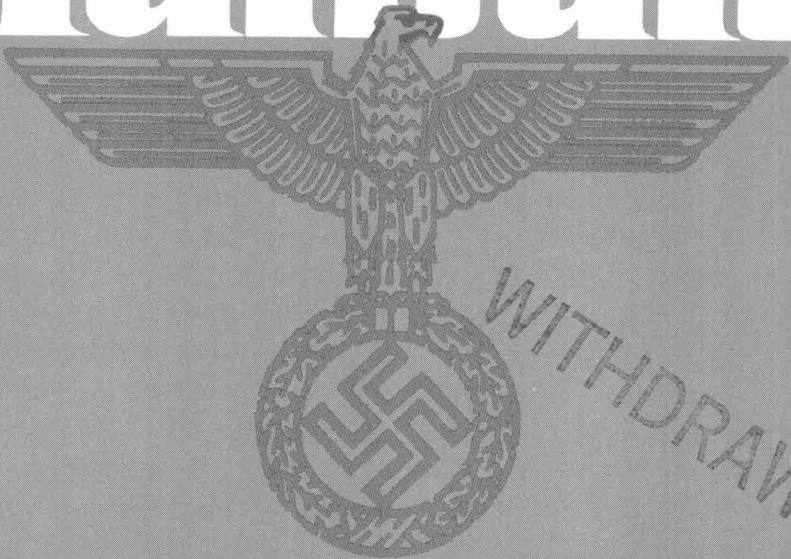


Pursuit



James Stewart
Thayer

Pursuit



WITHDRAWN

James Stewart Thayer

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First Edition

To my wife

PATRICIA WALLACE THAYER

Thanks to

Judith Wederholt and John Coyne, who put this on track,

and to

John D. Reagh III, John L. Thayer, M.D.,

Joseph T. Thayer, Mark Gadsby,

David DeLuca, Stan Sims, David Teitzel, and

Emily J. Miles

PROLOGUE

BY THE SPRING OF 1944, THE OUTCOME of the war was bitterly clear to the German High Command.

Reconnaissance flights confirmed that two million Allied soldiers were ready to cross the English Channel. OKH's Third Branch reported that 350 warplanes were arriving in Britain from America every week. The Foreign Armies East Office estimated that Russia that spring had more than three hundred divisions—five million combat troops—grinding ever closer to the German heartland. The rebuilt Soviet armaments industry was stamping out a T-34 tank every five minutes. To all but the mystics, the war was lost.

But the mystics held sway in Berlin. And the hand of Frederick the Great crossed the centuries to steady them and offer them hope. Frederick the Great. The brilliant military campaigner. Resolute, courageous, and visionary. His portrait was the only ornament in the Fuehrer's bunker. Most nights Goebbels read to Hitler from Carlyle's massive biography of Frederick. The cult of Frederick seized Germany's leaders during the last year of the war.

• P U R S U I T •

Frederick offered salvation. In 1761, he and fifty thousand soldiers were surrounded by the armies of Russia. With his troops threatened with annihilation, Frederick was suicidal. His reign would end in slaughter and disgrace. Then, unexpectedly, his archenemy Empress Elizabeth died on the Russian Christmas Day. Her nephew, Czar Peter III, was a lifelong admirer of Frederick, and within hours of his ascension to the throne, he ordered his Russian troops home. Frederick was saved.

The miracle of Frederick's rescue entered German folklore. His lesson was simple: the death of one person can stop armies.

There is no doubt Hitler believed.

The death of just one person could save the Reich.

If only it could be arranged. . . .

Part one

THE ESCAPE WEST

1

AN ORDER OF TOAST WOULD SOON give him away. The Berlin office would never learn of it, but after six months of training, his life would end because he could not properly order toast with jelly.

He had been walking since midnight. His shoes had dried hours ago, but not before the damp leather raised blisters on his feet. Sand worked its way up in his clothes, and every mile or so he stopped to swat his coat and pants. He ran his hand across his forehead and along the bridge of his nose, looking for black-face he might have missed when he had washed in the salt water.

He walked awkwardly, matching his gait to the railroad ties. He was traveling north on Atlantic and East Carolina Line tracks about thirty miles inland from the North Carolina coast. The Neuse River was somewhere off to his right.

Dawn seeped into the eastern sky, and a few lights blinked on in the distance ahead of him. That would be New Bern, a fleck of a town at the confluence of the Trent and Neuse rivers. Its citizens were waking up. Because of the man walking on the tracks into their community, New Bern's farmers and merchants would remember this April morning as long as they lived.

• P U R S U I T •

He carried only two bags, a scuffed Samsonite suitcase in one hand and an Abercrombie and Fitch mountaineer's pack over his shoulder. The pack was too bulky, even suspicious, but Berlin had assured him it was the least noticeable way to take his equipment in. The backpack was the only expensive thing about him, as his clothes carefully matched the products of a rationed America. Berlin had studied Regulation L.85, the Ration Board's "no fabric over fabric" rule. His pants had no cuffs or back pockets. His coat was unlined and did little against the chill of the dawn wind. There were no pockets on his flannel shirt. Berlin had also learned from an article in the *Atlanta Constitution* that hats had recently become unavailable in the Southeast, so his head was bare. In his wallet were a Virginia driver's license and a draft card. Both identified the man as Paul Jacobs of Arlington.

He strode quickly from tie to tie. The meager glow of false dawn gave way to a peculiar slate-gray morning light, a color unknown in the northern latitudes of his homeland. It eerily flattened the land, robbing it of perspective, and making the steel girders of the bridge ahead of him seem insubstantial.

Wisps of fog drifted along the Trent River's edge. Dead tree branches poked through the haze and bent low over the river. Florid, broad-leafed plants, appearing tropical and sinister, quite unlike anything he'd ever seen before, grew out into the water. He shivered, surely from the wind.

Lifting the pack higher on his shoulder and judging his balance, he cautiously stepped out onto the bridge. The land quickly dropped away from the span. Through the latticework of girders below him, the gunmetal-gray water seemed still. He walked to the center of the bridge, and paused to orient himself.

The WHIT radio tower was visible to the west, just where he had been told it would be. A brick warehouse on Union Point, five hundred meters to the east of the bridge, looked even more dilapidated than it had been in the grainy photo he had studied a month earlier. He scanned the lower profile of New Bern and recognized a few other structures: the water tower and the courthouse and the Episcopal church spire.

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The Greyhound terminal could not be seen from the bridge, but he knew where it was. A short walk. He glanced at his watch. He had an hour before the bus departed for Raleigh, and he was hungry. On the far side of the bridge near the waterfront was a clapboard building with glass-barrel pumps in front. A petrol station. Attached to its roof was a sign of many bulbs that spelled out "EAT," glimmering dully in the half-light of morning. He smiled at the command. His life was a series of orders. He adjusted his grip on the suitcase and began again toward the north end of the bridge. With any luck, he would leave New Bern on a full stomach.

Carolee Palmer had worked at Virgil's Esso Station and Cafe since her husband had gone off to war. He hadn't been much of a husband, Rodney Palmer, as they'd only been married three days before he shipped out. The regulars at Virgil's called her an Allotment Annie, accusing her of marrying Rodney for the fifty-dollar monthly allotment check she received as a serviceman's wife. They were funning her, she knew. She had hardly heard of the fifty dollars, or of the ten-thousand-dollar Army life-insurance policy, before she met him.

Rodney wasn't the only one sacrificing for his country. Carolee read Eleanor Roosevelt's column, "My Day," in the newspaper every time it appeared, and if that wasn't a sacrifice, nothing was. And two years ago she sold her Victrola to buy nylons. She had read that manufacturing a parachute consumed the equivalent of thirty-six pairs of nylons, so she didn't mind their scarcity, she supposed. Even stored in an airtight jar, they had deteriorated rapidly, and now she only had one pair left. She was saving them for Rodney's return, or some other very special occasion that might happen before he came back, if Bill Benson kept stopping by for lunch at one-thirty in the afternoon, instead of at noon like everyone else. Now she tanned her legs as often as she could, and every morning applied a single line of eye shadow down the back of each leg to imitate a stocking's seam.

There were other sacrifices. When the War Board announced

that the Veronica Lake peekaboo hairstyle was dangerous to women working in factories, she had lopped hers off, even though the worst thing that could have happened at Virgil's was getting her blond strands mixed in with the flapjack batter. She had shortened her skirts to the regulation size, one inch above the knee. She collected tinfoil scraps. She pasted a bumper sticker on her father's old Studebaker that read "Praise the Lord, I'll soon be ammunition," and had tacked up a "Pay your taxes, Beat the Axis" poster in the men's room at Virgil's. There was only so much one person could do.

Virgil insisted the griddle be cleaned once a week, so that morning Carolee was doubled over the stove with a tattered sock wrapped around her hand to protect her nails while she rubbed the iron slab with an encrusted Brillo pad. Despite the early hour, her full lips were painted blood-red, almost burgundy. She wore dabs of rouge high on her cheeks, and her eyes were accented with liner to make them appear round and surprised, just as Betty Grable did her eyes, according to *Hollywood Fan Magazine*. She wore a modest red blouse, a skirt without pleats, as pleats had gone to war, and black, pointed shoes. Small drops of sweat formed as she worked the grill, and she ran the back of her hand across her forehead.

Elmer DeLong was invariably her first breakfast customer, and when he entered Virgil's that morning, ringing the tin bells tacked to the door, Carolee did not bother to look up from the stove. His toast was already in the toaster. He sat where he always did, the stool second from the right, and opened that morning's *New Bern Sun-Journal*. He would shortly begin cursing the St. Louis Cardinals, National League pennant winners two years in a row mainly, DeLong believed, because they had more 4-F draft dodgers than any other team, which took some doing. DeLong wore his life in the tobacco fields like a mask. His face was permanently burned a ruddy brown, and his eyes always squinted as if against the sun. He had retired and moved into town several years ago, but he donned his farmer's overalls every day in homage to his years behind a plow.

The Escape West

"Mornin', Elmer," Carolee finally called over her shoulder. "What'll it be today?" She knew the answer, and he knew her response.

"Going to have waffles this morning, Carolee, and damned if the Cards didn't take another."

"I'm not slaving away on waffles for you, Elmer, war or no war," she said kindly, putting the toast and a dab of white margarine in front of him. "French toast is what you get, just like every morning."

"Arguing with you about breakfast is like wiping my butt with a hoop," he replied absently. "It's endless." He screwed up his eyes at the box score.

She was dipping bread into batter when the doorbells chimed again, startling her. Old Harold Shaw wasn't due for fifteen minutes. She quickly looked up from the frying pan, and her breath caught.

A stranger would have been unprecedented at Virgil's Esso and Cafe at six in the morning, but a young man—a handsome young man—was nothing short of a Baptist vision. She hurriedly wiped her hands on her apron, then ran them through her hair. She demurely dropped her eyes to the grill for as long as she could—most of a second—then smiled invitingly at the man as he negotiated his suitcase around the door. He returned the smile before placing his suitcase near a stool directly in front of her. He sat down and cast his eyes around the counter for a menu.

"There's no sense printing a menu, what with all the shortages these days," Carolee offered. "But we've got what you want, as long as it's eggs or French toast."

She renewed her grin, but it faltered when the stranger's eyes found hers. She would say later that his eyes were a blue she had never seen before, a blue never before seen in North Carolina. They were—she would pause searching for words—a fiery blue, like a sparkler on the Fourth. They were lit from within.

Elmer was also staring at the stranger, of course. What good were new folks if you couldn't eyeball them? His hair

was a rusty brown, long for a serviceman, although Carolee would remember he had a soldier's bearing, upright and square-shouldered. His nose was large, but thin and turned sharply. His lips were mismatched, the lower one full, while the upper lip was more severe, a thin line. His smile oddly did not soften the harsh angles on his face. The bones of his jaw and cheeks protruded slightly, making him appear hungry. And intense. Every feature of the stranger was immediate. And to look into his eyes required an act of will.

Carolee broke her gaze and dug into her apron for an order pad, unused since her first week at Virgil's. It gave her a moment to collect herself. "Eggs?" she asked finally, almost a whisper.

"Pardon?" the man asked, still wearing his crooked smile.

Before she could answer, Elmer DeLong leaned toward the stranger and asked bluntly, "Why aren't you in the service? You look tough enough."

The stranger turned to Elmer. "I am, in a way. I work for the government."

"You ain't one of them five-percenters, are you?" Elmer asked. "Damn them, anyway."

The man laughed easily. "No, I'm not a government contractor. I'm a dike inspector. I guess they figure they can use me better poking at dirt embankments than carrying a gun. Suits me fine."

Satisfied, Elmer grunted and returned to his scores.

"Can I get you something for breakfast? I'm making French toast," Carolee asked.

"Sounds good. And orange juice if you've got it. It's dried up in Arlington."

She glanced past her pad. He had elegant hands. Slender, lightly veined, and without the grime under the nails that most everyone in New Bern seemed to have been born with. For a moment she let herself fantasize about leaving New Bern, leaving it with this blue-eyed man, getting away forever from hands gnarled with work, from dirt boots and chewing tobacco. A

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delicious, hopeless, and very short dream. She wrestled herself back to the stranger's breakfast. "I also have bacon, but I've got to limit it to one slice a customer."

Elmer looked up from his paper and asked accusingly, "Carolee, have you been holding back bacon on us?"

The man answered, "Sure, if you've got it. I don't want to rob your regulars, though."

She ignored Elmer. "One slice it is, then. You want some regular toast along with your French toast?"

"Please."

"What kind?"

The stranger hesitated, then said quickly, "Excuse me?"

"What kind of toast?"

The man cast the smallest glance at Elmer's plate. "Well . . ."

A tuck of suspicion formed on Carolee's brow. A faint note of falseness, a slight shift away from the normal and expected, echoed in her mind. It was the stranger, of course. After serving the same portions to the same men at the same time for so long, a gust of wind on the door at the wrong moment would cause unease. But, still, there was something . . . something rehearsed about this man.

Carolee could have volunteered dark, light, or rye bread. Instead, instinctively, she asked again, "What kind?"

"Whatever you've got the most of. With marmalade, please." The man leaned forward for a glimpse of the back of Elmer's newspaper.

She would say later that this simply wasn't the proper answer, that people always know what kind of toast they like. He had deliberately avoided an easy question. And his bending close to read Elmer's *Sun-Journal* was too smooth. But in truth, the stranger's response only pulled her vague unease closer to the surface. A trace of a suspicion tugged at Carolee. There was a dissonance about the stranger that disturbed her. This fellow just didn't belong. Like everyone else, she had read in the papers about rumored landings near Savannah last month. It had prompted

her to put up another poster, depicting a swastika with an enormous ear, and reading, "The less said, the less dead." But they were only rumors, they all finally agreed.

He pulled a GI paperback from his coat pocket and flipped to a page that had the corner turned down. Carolee needed time to think. She withdrew a thin packet of bacon from the cooler, peeled off a strip, and carefully placed it on the grill. She had been saving them for Bill Benson. Before the bacon's color began to turn, she cut off the fat with the edge of her spatula and flipped it into the collection can at the back of the griddle, which the Boy Scouts gathered every two weeks. The fat was made into glycerin for high explosives. Carolee did this small duty mechanically, occasionally stealing a glance at the stranger. He pulled a Camel from a pocket, scraped a match with his thumb, and inhaled deeply. He returned to his book.

She blushed at her suspicion. Unfounded, even silly. And right here in this cafe she had kidded others for their wild speculation about German saboteurs. One stranger finally visits the cafe, and she has him pegged for a Nazi. She smiled at her foolishness. And in light of her self-deprecating thoughts, what she did next was inexplicable to her, even as she did it. The FBI citation would call it "ingenious and providential."

Carolee dipped two slices of bread into the egg batter, put them on a plate, added the slice of bacon to one side, and pushed the dish across the counter to the man. The French toast was uncooked. In the moment it took him to bend down a new page and put the paperback into his pocket, batter flowed off the bread and settled to the sides of the plate, surrounding the bacon.

"Thank you, miss." The stranger lifted his fork and without another word began eating the soggy bread.

A sudden fear gripped Carolee's chest so tightly she emitted a small animal groan, lost in Elmer's shuffling of his newspaper. She backstepped toward the oven and bit down fiercely, choking off a cry. Her hand found the oven handle, and she steadied herself against it.

This man didn't know what Americans ate for breakfast. Didn't

know that cold, soaking bread wasn't French toast.

Her head lightened as if from shock after a wound. The room shimmered with her fear. The stranger seemed to materialize again before Carolee's eyes. And when he was whole, he was entirely foreign. He was still leaning forward over the counter, was still wearing his friendly smile as he chewed the bread. But now he was utterly alien and terrifying.

Elmer continued to wait patiently for his breakfast, unaware of the transformation. His presence, old and solid and familiar, calmed Carolee. She turned to Elmer and with a voice that to her sounded remarkably level, she said, "I need more eggs. Be back in a minute."

She walked slowly through the door into the garage, and only when she was around the corner near Virgil's rack of patched retreads did she break into a run. A few steps brought her to the garage phone, on the wall over the desk near the lube rack. She dialed zero and after a few seconds demanded, "Hattie, get me Sheriff Henley. . . . Yes, it's Carolee. . . . Hattie, I don't have time for that now. I mean it, I've got to talk to him right away."

An age passed until Ray Henley answered. His voice was blurred with sleep, and the first thing he said was, "This better be good."

"Sheriff, this is Carolee Palmer over at Virgil's. You've got to get here right away. I've got a man here eating breakfast who I don't think is an American."

Henley brightened when he heard who the caller was. "Carolee, how are you, honey?"

"Sheriff, will you listen to me? I've got a foreigner sitting in my cafe eating breakfast."

"Carolee, you aren't listening to that old gummer Elmer, are you? He'll stir you up real good, and have a fine old time doing it."

She fought for control. "Sheriff, please, please listen. This man is a German. I swear to God he is. Please get over here."

The sheriff had never had any trouble with Carolee, and knew her to be level-headed. Maybe a bit hot in the skirt, but she was