

1945 June 4 - 10

Exploring the Eagle's Nest

In this week's edition of the *Bangor Independent*, two of Alton Erickson's letters home are printed in full. In them, he describes visiting a concentration camp and visiting Adolf Hitler's [Eagle's Nest](#) retreat at Berchtesgaden in Bavaria.



The Eagle's Nest as it appeared in May 1945
(World War II Memoirs-3rd Infantry Division)



The Eagle's Nest as a tourist attraction
([Rick Steves Europe](#))

This week, we will step back and let the primary source tell the story.

LETTER DESCRIBES VISIT TO HITLER'S HIDEOUT

Two very interesting letters received by Mr. and Mrs. Edward Erickson from their son Alton in Germany reflect the feelings of the G. I.'s who visited the German concentration camps and give a very graphic description of Hitler's mountain hideout in Bavaria.

Germany
May 5 1945

Dear Mother:

I'm really sorry that I've not been able to write much lately, but we've really not had the time or the proper conveniences lately for letter writing on the scale that we usually have had.

As you have no doubt noticed, we have come quite a long way during the past few weeks and haven't been in any one place for very long. Sometimes it's just a few hours and then it may be a day or two. I think it should be entirely okay to say now that we crossed the river (Rhine) at Worms and went on into Germany a few miles north of Mannheim. Among other numerous places we have seen Wurzburg, Augsburg and so on.

Had a chance the other day to accompany my C. O. on a visit to one of the numerous concentration camps through this area. I can't say that I was too anxious to go but I felt that I couldn't turn down this chance to actually see for myself. The camp we visited is located somewhere south of Augsburg on a highway that, I believe, runs on into Austria and probably to Innsbruck. From the highway as we approached the camp, we could see a few low, one-story barrack-like affairs and these were placed partly in a dense grove of evergreen trees so that only a little of the camp was actually visible from the highway. But as we drew nearer, we could see a stockade and the guards' towers at each corner, as in any prison. The first thing that met our eyes when we got close was several burned or partially burned barracks and behind this, several long, low, barrack-like affairs that seemed partially underground. I don't know if this was supposed to be a shelter from air raids or not but I saw little sense in protecting these people who would have been much better off with a merciful killing by bombing.

The next thing we saw was the rows and rows of dead people, lying in the prison courtyard. (As our armor approached the camp, the Germans had hurriedly moved most of its 3000 inmates to a new location but these 200 had been too weak, from malnutrition, to be moved. So—they placed them all in the barracks (assumed them to) poured fuel oil on the buildings and burned the whole thing. These dead that we saw were only partially burned and some not at all—they had suffocated. Our soldiers had forced civilians to take them from the building and lay them in rows. Later, civilians were rounded up to dig graves (some women in good clothes, ha) while our M. P.'s swore and threatened and said, "Dig."

Some of the people who were placed in the barracks had been enough alive to try an escape and these were found, about 25 of them, killed in nearby woods by small arms and bazooka fire. It was a sight I'll never forget and I had a feeling during the whole thing that made me want to clear my throat and spit—nauseating—in other words.

These Germans certainly deserve no sympathy. How on earth a people that in every other respect seem so much like us can sanction or do these frightful things in this day and age is beyond me. True a good many of these people may be innocent enough but I can't help but feel that they were certainly foolish to let an outfit like the Nazis get in control as they did.

God, it's almost time and I must get going if I want to eat. I hope this finds everyone at home well.

As ever, Alton.
Germany
May 9, 1945

Dear Mother:

Well, yesterday was V-E day, and though that marked the end of hostilities over here, we have actually had our own V day for several days in our own particular sector. So to us it seemed a little like repetition, perhaps, since we had been feeling relieved for several days. The let-down is really terrific and it seems to me that I've been tired ever since. Maybe that's just because we have relaxed so much.

We celebrated official V-E day fittingly yesterday, I thought, but by that I mean only a small group of us who were really lucky. Five of us made the trip to the town of Berchtesgaden and did see the place made famous as the favorite Bavarian retreat of Hitler's. We got there about noon and had Hit-

KILLING FROST DAMAGES GARDENS AND CROPS

The latest killing frost on record in this territory did considerable damage to gardens and farm crops. A temperature of 29 degrees was recorded in La Crosse.

GARVES-HATZ

Elmer Allan Hatz, son of John G. Hatz, and Joyce Lorraine Garves, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Leslie Garves, were married Wed., June 6, at 3 p. m. in St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran church by the Rev. C. W. Siegler. They were attended by Frances Johnson and Robert R. Meyer.

CARD OF APPRECIATION

The annual Burns Cemetery Association dinner was a big success and we wish to thank the public for their fine support and all those who helped in any way.
Burns Cemetery Association.

ler's lookout pointed out to us by some U. S. soldiers who were stationed there. It looked very high and appeared really small on top of the mountain, looked like a stone block house from that distance and really, that's about what it is. His own private house, which we saw from a distance, is much farther down the mountain slope and is surrounded by a number of military barracks, all of which are at quite a respectable distance from the house, however. It appeared to have been a rather low and rambling structure but it was rather hard to tell anything definite on it since it had received several near bomb hits and perhaps a few direct in addition to which were several bomb craters throughout the entire area. We didn't spend much time around the house but headed for the top of the mountain and the eagle's nest, as it has sometimes been called.

We drove to within a couple of miles (by road) of the top. At this height, however, we encountered snow drifts from 5 to 15 feet in depth and had to walk the rest of the way. It took us about an hour and one-half to gain the top from that point. After much sweating and puffing and slipping and resting, we finally made it at about 1400 hours and sat down to rest on a rock wall there at the top of the mountain, outside the lookout building. I had a camera along and took several pictures of the exterior and managed to include some of the mountain peaks in the distance, between which were floating several clouds of mist. This lookout building, which was built especially for Hitler, is one of the most fantastic things I have ever seen in my life and I can't see how anyone could possibly consider himself or anyone else important enough to rate such a luxury which was built at such a prodigious expenditure of labor and human life, to say nothing at all of the cost, which must have been enormous.

I'm afraid I'm rambling a little now but I meant to describe some of the things about the road that leads to the "hideout"—we call it, resting place of the greatest exponent of international crime that the world has ever seen.

About the time we hit the snow line, we began going through tunnels which were not very far apart—this may convey to you the terrific ruggedness of the landscape. At the mouths of these tunnels, we had quite a line crawling through gigantic snowdrifts. Then, as got nearer the top, the snow completely covered the auto-way and we struck out on top of the snow, almost straight up the mountain. This auto-way is black topped and has concrete curbs on both sides. At some places a low railing is placed on the outside. Finally I reached the spot where cars could go no farther (even in summer time when the snow has all gone) and here was a large circular turning-around and parking space. From the circular parking space, an elaborately carved or sculptured tunnel opening leads to the elevator that cuts down through the heart of the mountain. This is only one of the spots at which Hitler was able to board his famous elevator. Some of these "boarding spots" are a thousand feet from the top—the one I have reference to is probably 300 feet from the top. Over the mouth of the tunnel is inscribed the word "Erlauch" (I don't know what it means unless it means "truth") and under that word is inscribed the year "1938." I took a picture of that tunnel opening, which was almost covered with snow. At this point I was separated from the rest of the fellows who had become "fixed" of mountain climbing, who had taken a different route. I was the oldest guy in the outfit but made the top first and waited 15 or 20 minutes for the first to

No More Proud Sight



ALL THE WORLD looks to The American Flag as the symbol of freedom from aggression and a guarantee that peace and righteousness shall prevail. This, official insignia of the Mighty Seventh War Loan, shows the raising of the flag on Iwo Jima by U. S. Marines. It is the picture that has been most widely used than any in this war, proceeds of which the AP donated to service relief.

come along and help me with picture taking.

The rock upon which this lookout is set is very narrow at the top and is barely wide enough to accommodate the building. In fact, on one side of the building, the foundation and the wall is flush with the cliff, which is sheer and drops away for about 300 to 500 feet. It sort of takes your breath. We climbed up around the upper and back side of the building and entered by what should be a back door. We entered from the back and walked along a porch or covered walk which had large arched openings through which you could look out over the cliff. At a door at the end of this affair we entered a small lounge of about the average house-sized parlor. Two or three steps up from this room brought us directly into the lookout room itself. This room is perhaps 35 feet in diameter and is octagonal in shape. The walls of this room are about 6 feet in diameter and are of cut limestone, I think; at any rate the stone is white. The ceiling was supported by large oak beams which were stained dark, contrasting against the white ceiling. In the center of the room was a circular table about 12 feet in diameter and surrounded by leather cushioned arm chairs not unlike dining room chairs. This table was uncommonly low and one might imagine people sitting around in low lounge chairs. The floor was heavily rugged and the large windows had very elaborate drapes. The ceiling, I forget to mention, was about 15 feet from the floor. The outer wall was lined with a profuse arrangement of overstuffed chairs and lounge seats. In the inner wall was a massive fireplace, mantled with some sort of dark brown, glistening stone or tile. It was three or four feet above the floor level and very impressive. To the right of the fireplace were three or four broad steps that led into an swell dining room, which was about 40 feet long, I imagine. In it was a table that was probably 30 feet long and 12 feet wide and covered with a large, heavy tablecloth of very rich material. The table was surrounded by very nice arm chairs of rigid construction. The room was lined on one side with a large sideboard that contained, among other things, lots of bottles. Going on through the dining room, the next room was the kitchen and it was about the latest thing in kitchens. The walls were of white tile and all of the fixtures were white-enameled with stainless steel finishing and decoration. A door led from the kitchen into a small room with red leather cushioned seats that were permanently mounted in one corner around an average sized table that might have been his sitting place when alone or accompanied by only a few. The house entrance to the elevator was reached by

going through a door only a few feet from the kitchen door. This led into a lounge which served as a waiting room. In the lower floor of this building were the servants' quarters, beds for four altogether. Other rooms downstairs were store rooms and small rooms that contained terminals for the profusion of large electric power cables, connecting boxes, switches, etc.

From this perch on top of the mountain overlooking the picturesque town of Berchtesgaden, Hitler could look out and see very few peaks which were any higher. He could see clouds floating between his spot, and neighboring peaks. He could see far into Austria on three sides and to the north, where only a few ranges partially blocked his view, he could see perhaps 30 or 40 miles of pleasant, rolling German countryside. Looking north and then a little to the left of Berchtesgaden, he could look down at a small lake that lay like a small mirror between two towering mountains. A small river flows through the valley and from the lookout it appears green in color. The scenic view from this mountain top was, to say the least, very nice and covered a lot of territory. I suppose it befitted the perspective of the strange mind that imagined it could plunder and spoil the world and force the poor victims to the depths of despair and weakness while he and his rotten riches gathered the riches for themselves. Only a man with a fanatical mind and insane ego would expect any people to spend men and material for the construction of such a vain thing as this "hideout" for the world's most costly fool.

The weather here lately has been the balmy spring variety with everything freshly green. The fellows are really enjoying the weather and are sunning themselves, playing ball and so on. Back at our headquarters I found a very nice Red Cross club the other night. They are situated in a very nice building and coffee is served continually. German girls are employed as waitresses, and there's a magazine room, game room and so on. Love to all.
As ever, Alton.

Jeff Rand
Adult Services Librarian
La Crosse Public Library
jrand@lacrosselibrary.org