




Valkyrie: The Real Col. von Stauffenberg

The man was Claus Philipp Maria Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg, the driving force behind what became known as the July 20 plot and the main character in *Valkyrie*, the recently released movie about the event. The film seeks to acquaint the audience with this hero and the conspiracy of which he was part, yet it depicts the machinations better than the man. And this is a shame, because quite a man he was. 

Claus von Stauffenberg was born of aristocratic stock in his family's castle in what was then the Kingdom of Bavaria on November 15, 1907. He was the youngest of three brothers, and his Roman Catholic family was one of the oldest and most distinguished in southern Germany. Claus was a gifted boy and excelled in both academics and athletics. He gravitated toward literature, becoming a lover of poetry, and he learned to speak fluent Russian, French, and English, and was also semi-fluent in Greek and Latin. His equestrian skills won him a place on the German Olympic team. Nevertheless, he chose a military career, joined a cavalry regiment (horses were relied upon for many transportation duties even during WWII) in 1926 and four years later was commissioned a second lieutenant. In 1933, he married Nina Freiin von Lerchenfeld, and they ultimately would have five children together.

That same year Hitler rose to power in Germany. But von Stauffenberg would not become a Nazi and early on expressed misgivings about the regime, feelings that would become more intense as the National Socialists increasingly displayed their true colors. For example, he was appalled by the November 1938 *Kristallnacht* (Night of the Broken Glass), when in a single night the Nazis ransacked thousands of Jewish businesses and homes. He considered *Kristallnacht* to be a stain upon Germany. In fact, owing to this atrocity and many others, that year he became completely disillusioned with the Nazis. And he wasn't alone in his feelings.

Von Stauffenberg found kindred spirits in the German resistance movement, which, although comprising small autonomous groups, existed throughout the Nazi reign (1933-1945). This is not to say he was as yet an official member of the resistance — the most significant part of which was found in his milieu, the military — but he did have contact with some of its members and was well-aware that conspiracies to overthrow the regime existed. It was at this point that he started pondering effective ways to launch a coup. This included entertaining thoughts about assassinating Hitler.

The next year von Stauffenberg participated in the invasion of Poland, and then later in the Battle of France and Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union. Witnessing more Nazi atrocities during these campaigns, his resolve to topple the regime stiffened. Then came a fateful year that would mark a turning point in his life: 1943.

It is this year that von Stauffenberg is transferred to Tunisia to fight in General Erwin Rommel's *Afrika Korps*, and it is there, on April 7, that he is severely wounded during an Allied air offensive. Coming close to death, von Stauffenberg ultimately survives and recuperates quickly, but shrapnel has extracted its price: he loses his left eye, right hand, and fourth and fifth fingers on his left hand. But his convalescence in a Munich hospital gives him much time to think, and during this period his resolve is



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cemented: he decides to thoroughly devote himself to the task of destroying Hitler and his henchmen. Consequently, while he could have retired as a decorated officer, he instead informs his superiors that he intends to resume his duties come autumn.

Insofar as his conspiracy aims go, his wounds are a godsend as much as a cross. The imposing six-foot-three von Stauffenberg, already a lieutenant-colonel, is now a legendary figure. And by September 1943 he is stationed in the General Army Office in the Bendlerblock military building in Berlin and appointed as chief-of-staff to General Friedrich Olbricht, a fellow conspirator. Now von Stauffenberg has the opportunity to breathe new life into a disheartened resistance and becomes its heart and soul, its animating force.

Then, on July 1, 1944, von Stauffenberg is promoted to full colonel and appointed chief-of-staff to the Reserve Army commanding general, Friedrich Fromm, a man who is aware of the conspiracy and lukewarm toward it (the film portrays him as hostile to it). This is a stroke of luck for the conspirators, as von Stauffenberg, who once exclaimed to a colleague, "Is there no officer over there in the Führer's headquarters capable of shooting that beast?!" will now have his chance. His new position affords him the opportunity to meet Hitler face-to-face.

But killing the beast is not enough. The conspirators know that unless the whole Nazi hierarchy can be neutralized in one fell swoop, their efforts will be in vain — another beast will just take Hitler's place.

It is in presenting the logistics of the operation that the film *Valkyrie* does its best job, and it is in limiting itself to this that we find its greatest defect: a profound lack of character development. Germans may be known for stoicism, but the movie reduces the principals almost to automatons. Tom Cruise portrays von Stauffenberg as having the personality of the Terminator — and not the quite lovable robot in *T-2* but the instrument of death in the original. The actor seems to spend the entire film wearing the same expression, a stone-faced scowl; I can honestly say it's the only look I remember on his face. Is this the von Stauffenberg whose eldest son, Berthold, professed love for and called "our always-cheerful father"? Is this the man who, after suffering those horrific injuries that robbed him of most of his digits, quipped to friends that he had never really known what to do with so many fingers while he still had all of them anyway? I think not. Even when the film's von Stauffenberg meets Hitler for the purposes of coaxing the Fuhrer into signing revised Operation Valkyrie implementation plans that would serve the conspirators' ends, he sports the same looks-could-kill countenance, staring the leader down with V2 rockets firing from his one remaining eye. No guten tag upon meeting, no danke upon departing, no signs of respect. Is this realistic? OK, Mr. Singer (director Bryan Singer), von Stauffenberg really, really, really hates Adolf Hitler. We got that. But don't you think that he was at least a little bit clever? Don't you think that since getting the leader to sign the altered plans was integral to the coup that maybe, just perhaps, he might have decided to be more Oscar Schindler than Charles Manson?

Even more significantly, little is said about von Stauffenberg's deepest motivations. What brought a career army officer to the point at which he was willing to undertake such a radical act? What were his moral conflicts and struggles with conscience? What was the evolution in his thinking? Perhaps this is thought obvious; I mean, who wouldn't want to kill the man now regarded as the Devil incarnate? Yet this man was one of the few who tried and in doing so risked death for himself and his family. Something tells me his was a conscience worth exploring.

This oversight seems even more egregious when considering that von Stauffenberg was driven by some very strong religious convictions, a motivation hinted at with only the vaguest symbolism in the movie.



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Is this because secular audiences wouldn't cotton to religious content? Or is it because secular creators believe such convictions to be more incidental than instrumental? Whatever the case, it's obvious that faith provided the moral capital to commit what von Stauffenberg called "high treason," to transcend the bounds of fear and fidelity.

Von Stauffenberg's religiosity made itself apparent in many ways. For example, he became intimately connected with the "Kreisau Circle," a religious-philosophical dissident group that aimed to create a future Germany based on the development of small communities and Christian values. The group was led by von Stauffenberg's cousin Count Helmuth James von Moltke and was deeply involved in the July 20 plot. But we needn't divine the existence of his religious motivations based on association, as he expressed them quite clearly. As Nigel Jones writes in his piece ["Claus von Stauffenberg — The Man Who Tried to Kill Hitler"](#):

The decision to topple Hitler weighed heavily on Stauffenberg. Was it right, he asked a relative in mid-1943, to sacrifice the salvation of one's own soul if one might thereby save thousands of lives? He concluded that it was not only right, but imperative. Around that same time, he told several people, including Margarethe von Oven, a Replacement Army secretary who typed the orders he drafted, that he was consciously "committing high treason." He added that, faced with such an evil regime, he had had to choose between action and inaction, and as an active Christian there could only be one decision.

Yet the film allows religious motivations to be a casualty of war, either the war on Christianity or war-movie priorities or both. Thus is von Stauffenberg, the brave soldier, witty friend and father, philosopher, and faithful Catholic — a true man for all seasons — reduced to a mere instrument in the assassination plot, much like the bomb he carried. It's a defect that prevents the audience from forming the kind of emotional connection with the character that a more soulful treatment would engender.

So it is early July 1944, and von Stauffenberg is about to march into the history books. He and his compatriots have access to their target and a clever plan: Valkyrie. "Operation Valkyrie" actually refers to an official German army operational plan created for the Reserve Army — the force for whose general von Stauffenberg is now chief-of-staff — and approved by Hitler himself. This army was originally intended as a force that could restore order in the event that Allied bombing or some other disruption causes civil unrest. But the conspirators had altered the plan so as to give the Reserve Army the authority to arrest the SS and Nazi leadership in the event of Hitler's assassination. The idea was to kill Hitler, cut communications, and then initiate Operation Valkyrie while claiming that a coup *from within the Nazi Party* had been launched, thereby tricking the Reserve Army into doing the conspirators' bidding. Then, once they had achieved control, they would install a new government.

Now, several assassination attempts had already failed (in total, there were 15 known attempts on Hitler's life). This was mainly because the Nazi leader changed his traveling timetable frequently to ensure that others would seldom know where he would be at a given time, although one failure was attributable to a bomb that was planted aboard his plane but didn't detonate. These disappointments are yet another reason why von Stauffenberg is intent upon doing the job himself. He will see it through personally.

The plan calls for von Stauffenberg to attend his war conferences with a briefcase containing two plastic explosives, which he will set with small pencil detonators that provide a 10 to 15 minute delay. His first opportunity to implement Valkyrie comes on July 11 in Berchtesgaden, but because the conspirators believe it necessary to assassinate high Nazi Party officials Hermann Goering and Heinrich



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Himmler as well and the latter isn't present, the mission is aborted. His second chance is on July 15 in Wolfsschanze, or Wolf's Lair, a German command post near Rastenburg in East Prussia. However, neither Goering nor Himmler is present; von Stauffenberg calls his compatriots and tells them that he will proceed regardless, but when he returns Hitler is gone. Then comes the day of July 20.

Von Stauffenberg is again attending a briefing in Rastenburg. He arrives with his fellow conspirator and adjutant Werner von Haeften and learns that, due to hot weather, the meeting will not take place in Hitler's stuffy reinforced bunker but in a wooden hut nearby. This presents a problem, as it will diminish the effectiveness of the bombs. For while the bunker would contain the energy of the blast, allowing it to kill through expansion, the hut will not. However, it is thought that even one bomb could do the job, and von Stauffenberg has two; he proceeds with the mission. So, making the excuse that he has to change his shirt, he enters a private bathroom to set the detonators. Unfortunately, von Stauffenberg finds himself short on time as the meeting has already begun and, hindered by his handicaps, is able to prime only one bomb. He then enters the conference room carrying his briefcase and places it under the wooden table around which Hitler and his officers had gathered. Then, after a few tense minutes, he quietly excuses himself, saying that he has to make a phone call. He hastily exits the structure.

Von Stauffenberg is about 100 yards from the hut. It is 12:42 p.m. . . . he hears a thunderous blast. This bomb was no dud. Ursula Grosser Dixon describes the event in her piece "Long live our Sacred Germany":

Hitler was leaning across the table when General Heusinger concluded his report: "... and if the army group around Lake Peipus is not withdrawn immediately, there will be a catastrophe." At this precise moment the entire conference room was engulfed in a blinding flash of flame and a sound was heard like a roaring train. The heavy table rose into the air and landed in a corner, with splinters flying in all directions, lacerating and burning almost everyone.

Surveying the devastation, von Stauffenberg is sure that phase one of Valkyrie is a success. He then talks his way past the Wolf's Lair's checkpoints and boards his plane with von Haeften for the return flight to Berlin. He wants to get back to army headquarters posthaste and help direct the operation.

About two hours later at approximately 3 p.m., von Stauffenberg's plane lands in Rangsdorf near Berlin. But to his surprise, there is no car waiting for him. Something seems amiss — and something certainly is. The messages the Bendlerblock received about the assassination were either unclear or indicated that Hitler survived, making the conspirators hesitant to activate the Reserve Army. After all, they knew that if the Reserve Army's officers knew their Fuhrer was alive, the plot was doomed to failure. Von Stauffenberg is convinced that news of Hitler's survival is a bluff, however, and has his adjutant call the Bendlerblock to inspire his compatriots to act.

When von Stauffenberg arrives at the Bendlerblock around 4:30 p.m., he finds that the conspiracy is finally being put into effect. He aggressively takes control of the situation, orchestrating the coup, and hundreds of phone calls are made. The resistance starts to take control of some areas, SS men are arrested and Joseph Goebbels' Propaganda Ministry is surrounded by troops. But precious time has been lost and, therefore, proper measures not yet taken. The most significant oversight is that the resistance had not severed relevant communications, a failure that allows confirmation of Hitler's survival to be disseminated. This causes the less resolute among the conspirators to waver. Most notably, the lukewarm General Fromm, driven by self interest, switches sides and orders the arrest of the other Bendlerblock conspirators; instead, however, they take him into custody.



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It is now 7 p.m., and the steadily deflating coup is still moving forward, but then there is a fateful moment. By this time Hitler has recovered enough to make phone calls, and he contacts Goebbels, who is in danger of arrest. Goebbels puts the commander of the troops surrounding his ministry, Major Otto Remer, on the phone with Hitler, who then orders Remer to crush the resistance. This spells the end of the coup.

At around 10 p.m., fighting erupts in the Bendlerblock between officers supporting the putsch and those opposing it, and von Stauffenberg is wounded in the shoulder during a brief gun battle. By 11 p.m., General Fromm has regained control, and, perhaps in an effort to conceal his involvement, takes immediate action against the plotters. At around midnight, he has von Stauffenberg, Olbricht, von Haeften, and an officer named Albrecht Mertz von Quirnheim executed by firing squad.

In the aftermath of the coup, many would feel Hitler's wrath. He orders that some conspirators be hanged like cattle, with piano wire from meat hooks, and many others are shot. In fact, Hitler uses the event as a pretext to purge the Reich of anyone who has drawn his suspicion and arrests about 7,000 people, of whom approximately 2,000 are executed. Among these victims are Stauffenberg's eldest brother Berthold and his cousin Caesar von Hofacker. Even the calculating General Fromm finds his ruse to no avail and in the end saves his life no more than his honor. Additionally, many commit suicide, and many thousands are sent to concentration camps. The resistance is no more.

The coup was a bit of a long shot from the get-go, but it was no suicide mission. In fact, if matters had unfolded in just a slightly different way, the outcome might have been far different. First, if the war briefing in Rastenberg had been held in Hitler's bunker as planned, the detonation of one bomb might have sufficed. Then, if von Stauffenberg had left the second, unprimed bomb in his briefcase (he took it with him and discarded it), it might have exploded due to sympathetic detonation and provided the force necessary to kill Hitler. It's also said that an officer at the briefing accidentally knocked the briefcase over and, upon picking it up, moved it to the other side of a thick oak table leg, thereby shielding Hitler from the brunt of the blast. Did this make a difference? Perhaps. While Hitler suffered only minor injuries, the explosion did kill four and severely wound many others, so a different positioning of the charge might have slain the beast. Then we have to wonder: would the conspirators have been able to carry the day if they had activated the Reserve Army immediately? A definitive answer will probably always elude us.

But a better question is whether success would have really made a difference. Was the coup attempt just an exercise in futility? After all, late in 1944, Germany was being bombarded and the Allies smelled victory. And after years of sacrificing blood and treasure in history's greatest conflict, they were in no mood for compromise. Thus, unconditional surrender, humiliation, and suffering were to be Germany's lot regardless. Yet we mustn't forget that, in the least, a successful coup would have meant the closure of the death camps, and more children, siblings, and parents could have been reunited at war's end.

Most of all, though, we should remember that if the coup's fate rested on practical considerations, it might never have been attempted. Its real animating force was not the phlegmatic cost-benefit analysis brass but men such as von Stauffenberg, those intrepid souls stuck between history and a hellacious place and serving something higher than themselves, higher than country, higher even than family.

We are told that this man for all season's last words before being executed were "Long live our sacred Germany!" He saw his way clear to commit high treason to do right by Germany, and I suspect this is because while he loved her, he loved the sacred most of all.



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