MY ANCESTRY is German and, despite the dubious distinction of heading the team of scientists that developed the V-2 rocket used on England in World War II, I have been entrusted with the job of leading the U.S. Army's Ballistic Missile Agency which, in my opinion, is the greatest rocket development team in the world.

When I was a schoolboy I decided that man could conquer space and that I wanted to help make that dream come true. That my interest in rockets is scientific rather than military is best illustrated, perhaps, by my arrest by the Nazis, who charged me with saying, "It's a shame we must use our rockets to kill people" and with sabotaging the war effort.

I was later freed to carry on my work as head of the Peenemunde Rocket Base, where the V-2 was perfected, and was told by high Nazi officials that our rocket was the only weapon the Allies couldn't stop. But, although we didn't say it out loud, many of my colleagues felt, as I did, that we were using our rockets to hit the wrong planet.

A falsehood I would like to nail is the one that asserts that most of the Peenemunde scientists, the pioneering men who developed the famous V-2 rocket of World War II, went over to the Soviet Union at the war's end.

The cream of the Peenemunde team came to America. Most of the others who went to Russia did so as the result of a heartless ruse. Let me tell you about it.

Toward the end of World War II, the U.S. Army captured the huge V-2 mass production plant at Niedersachsenwerfen, south of the Harz Mountains. By international agreement at Potsdam, it belonged in the Soviet zone. Thus, about eight weeks after the end of the hostilities, it was turned over to the Red Army.

Promptly, the Russians announced that it would be re-opened, staffed by German technicians, and the quantity production of V-2s resumed. Good salaries were paid. Men with families were provided with comfortable homes whose "amenities"...
owners were evicted. Within a few months the plant payroll included a colorful assortment of university scientists who had helped in some phase of our V-2 program, production engineers from component parts factories, and even soldiers who had served on launching units.

At the end of a year the Russians gave a big party for their German employees. There was music, dancing, and a fine display of comradeship. The fun ended, after speeches and toasts at midnight. At three o'clock that morning, the Red Army struck. All the employees of the V-2 plant were seized, hustled unceremoniously into trucks and driven to a nearby railroad.

Not a home was missed, nor a person spared. The dragnet swept up the aged, the newborn, even maids and visitors. Two long freight trains carried them away to a secret destination deep in Russia.

That was the rule that gave the Soviets their start in the ballistic missile business. On the other hand, we rocketeers from Peenemunde, where the V-2 had been developed, had set our own secret course months earlier. It happened at a closed meeting held in a German farmhouse in January, 1945. As we met, Russian guns could be heard in the distance.

"Germany has lost the war," I said. "But let us not forget that it was our team that first succeeded in reaching outer space. We have never stopped believing in interplanetary travel. We have suffered many hardships because of our faith in its future. Now we have an obligation. Each of the conquering powers will want our knowledge. The question we must answer is: To what country shall we entrust our heritage?"

We were a unique bunch, our laboratory and model shop heads, our test-field directors and "senior" scientists. Compared with the scope of our operations and responsibilities, most of us were very young. We never considered our V-2, spectacular as it was, to be more than the modest beginning of much greater things to come.

But things had changed at Peenemunde. After the 1944 attempt on Hitler's life, the Nazis viewed every army officer with savage suspicion. This, in addition to the fact that the former Army establishment had been converted into a private corporation for administrative reasons, had deprived us at this critical moment of the seasoned leadership of our former commanding officer, General Walter Dornberger."

How I missed him! Dornberger and I had met when I was a teen-age rocketeer and he an army captain. Through our 13 years of association, he was my fatherly friend. In those years he had transformed me from a dream-eyed, moon-struck youngster into a sober-minded engineer and program administrator.

There was not one dissenter. Our decision was unanimous. We would surrender, it was agreed, to the American army.

Contradictory orders had come to me from each of the overlapping commands under which we tried to do our work. The general of the army group assigned to defend the area ordered us to pull down our tools, join the Volkssturm, and die before surrendering an inch of the Fatherland.

Our Berlin bosses told us to move with our most important research equipment south to the Harz Mountains and continue our work. We liked that—because it might place us in the path of the U.S. Army.

But it was a wide-open question as to whether or not we could move through the rear areas of the same general who wanted us to fight. We soon found out. An officer at a roadblock answered that question clearly. "No more civilian traffic in this area," he said.

He and I faced each other like bulldogs. He obviously did not know much about us, but his instructions were clear. So were mine. I talked about our wonder weapons.

"What do you call your outfit?" he asked.

I made up a name. "We're the Project for Special Dispositions," I said.

"Make up stickers and signs for your vehicles," he finally replied, "and I'll authorize my men to let you pass."

The initials for the German translation of my imaginary project were VZBV. We painted them on every one of our trucks and cars, and sewed them on armbands.

We said good-by in the villages where we had lived, and I took time to make a last visit to the Baltic farm of some relatives. One of them was a blonde teen-ager named Maria who shared my enthusiasm for water sports.

I had watched her grow from a gangly kid to ripe maidenhood in innumerable week ends. We parted briskly with no word of romance between us because the hour was so desperate, but it was much in our minds.

Next day our VZBV convoys began to roll south piled high with people, supplies, and equipment.

In the Harz Mountains we established ourselves wherever we could find suitable quarters, and by early spring we were back at work.

But I had suffered an accident during the move. Working around the clock, nobody got enough rest. We dared travel only after dark as Allied planes strafed cars and trucks without mercy. During one midnight dash my exhausted driver fell asleep while I catnapped in the adjacent seat. When something jarred me awake our car was diving off an embankment at 60 miles an hour.

When I regained consciousness I was in a hospital bed with bruises, cuts, a shattered shoulder and an arm broken in two places. The doctor wrapped much of my torso in a plaster cast and sent me back to our headquarters.

The military commander of our Harz Mountain area was a scared SS general. Several concentration camps were under his harsh rule. Anticipating that a liberating army would probably liquidate him, he decided to

(Continued on following page)
bargain for his life. We would be his hostages. He told me, "You will select 500 of your key men and have them ready to embark on my special train tomorrow. No families will be permitted. I'm sending you where you can work without fear of being overrun."

We were taken to an army camp near Oberammergau in the foothills of the Alps. The scenery was magnificent. The quarters were plush. There was only one hitch—our camp was surrounded by barbed wire!

One day we overheard a conversation between two guards that added to our worries. They were wondering why we were locked up. Could it be that we knew too much to be allowed to fall into Allied hands? They concluded that we were being held for extermination.

Watching Allied planes that bombed and strafed wherever they wished, I got a desperate idea. I called on the jittery SS officer and said, "Suppose one of those bombs fell on this camp. It would wipe out our whole secret weapon project and you'd be held responsible." I suggested dispersal to quarters among nearby villages where no accidental raid could annihilate all our personnel. He got the point.

"I'm ordered to support your work and I'm held responsible for your well-being," he said. "If you lived outside, I couldn't do that. I have no transportation."

We had trucks, motor cars and fuel in abundance because all our research equipment had been trucked down to Oberammergau from our Harz stopover. I promised him a private sedan and all the gas he needed. Next day he escorted the 10 or 15 small groups into which we split up out of our barbed wire cage and to lodgings in the surrounding villages.

Unfortunately for us the American Army was still a long way off. General Patton's tanks apparently had less gas than we. During those next weeks our situation became desperate. As the one who had instigated our flight to the west, I felt responsible. We undertook a campaign of bluff and conniving. Placing our trucks with new VZBV signs, dusting off the top-priority orders that had served us well at Peenemunde, we descended like locusts on one army food depot after another.

It worked. We carted away tons of food and distributed it among our 500 men.

Presently it became apparent that I must attend to my broken arm. The hospital I chose was celebrated for its success in doctoring the fractured limbs of skiers and Alpinists. Its chief surgeon said, "You need two operations, about four days apart."

He removed my cast and re-broke the first fracture. When I was back in bed, he ordered, "Don't move. I'm not putting you into a cast until after the second operation."

Four days, the man said. The radio reported that the Allied armies were moving again, but the evidence was convincing enough, even without radio. Allied fighters and bombers roared overhead without hindrance. Bombs fell all around my hospital and the seriously sick patients were removed to the basement.

On the afternoon of the third day a soldier with a Red Cross armband walked into my room. "Get dressed quickly," he said. "I've brought an ambulance for you."

"Who sent you?"

"General Dornberger," he said. Dornberger, the man who had hired me for the army when I was still a kid, 13 long years ago! Dornberger, who had rammed the V-2 program through against disbelief and bureaucracy,
WERNHER VON BRAUN (with broken arm) posed with his colleagues at the time of their surrender.

who had snatched me from the Gestapo jailers when my head was at stake!

Despite his enforced separation from his beloved Peenemundens he had kept track of us and promptly swung into action when we needed help.

"The French Army is less than an hour away," the soldier added.

That did it. To be captured apart from our team when all others would be captured by Americans would undoubtedly lead to unpredictable developments. Our surrender plan was jeopardized. In a few minutes I was speeding toward the Alps.

Finally we reached a charming Bavarian sport hotel at Oberjoeh. General Dornberger rushed down the path to greet me. At his heels were two dozen old friends, and my kid brother Magnus.

How we talked! Sitting in the sun we talked about the best fuels to reach outer space, or how to return a man from an orbit. Now, at last, I could tell my fatherly friend of our plan to surrender our whole development team to the Americans.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"Do you think I would have sent for you, were I not convinced that this is the right course to take? The war is over. Now it is our obligation to mankind to place our baby in the right hands."

Waiting at Oberjoeh, I reviewed our prospects. Several weeks before, Mussolini had been killed by Partisans in Italy. Presently we learned from the German radio that "Hitler had died a hero's death in the Battle of Berlin."

Most of all I worried about my parents who were now deep behind the Russian lines. Sigismund, my older brother, had been in Vatican City when the American Army took Rome and was safe and out of the war. As far as Maria, I knew only that her parents had planned to evacuate to a town near the Dutch border.

Presently an official radio announcement proclaimed the armistice. We waited three or four more days in our peaceful Oberjoeh ski hotel and finally we decided to take the initiative and establish contact with the U. S. Army. Of all our group, brother Magnus spoke the best English. We sent him down the mountain to arrange our surrender. Hours later he climbed back.

"It is arranged," he said matter-of-factly. "I've got passes for six cars. They're sending an escort to take us to their intelligence outfit."

General Dornberger organized the party swiftly. We piled into sedans and began the steep descent. I asked Magnus, "How did it really go? Do they know we're from the Peenemunde rocket station?"
"The first guards I ran into didn't know a thing, of course," he answered. "But they phoned— their headquarters in the valley and those guys seemed to have specific instructions to look for us."

The whole war provided no better news. I slid down in my seat, relaxing. We rounded a shoulder of mountain and I saw a jeep with guns pointing our way. "Look out," I shouted.

Magnus said, "They're our escort. They came as far as they dared in this snow."

The Americans did not smile but, as we approached, their jeep slid sideways into a snow-filled ditch. Our convoy stopped.

The Yanks got out and pushed in vain. Somebody yelled, "Let's lend a hand." A dozen of us waded to the jeep and put our shoulders against it. I had only one good arm but I used it for all I was worth and the vehicle was soon back on the road.

Going down the mountain I began to feel good. Up ahead, two straight backs represented the army to which we had vowed our secret surrender back at Peenemunde. The long agony was over and life could begin once more. Maybe there would even be room in my future for my cousin Maria.

I had a wonderful thought. We had just now met the Americans, yet we had already stood with them in mud and snow, shoulder-to-shoulder, working on a common task. It was a good omen.

NEXT WEEK: Dr. von Braun will tell about his marriage, his busy life as our top rocket expert, his hopes for America's future in space—and for a world in which war is unthinkable.