

World War II, Korea, Viet-Nam & Today

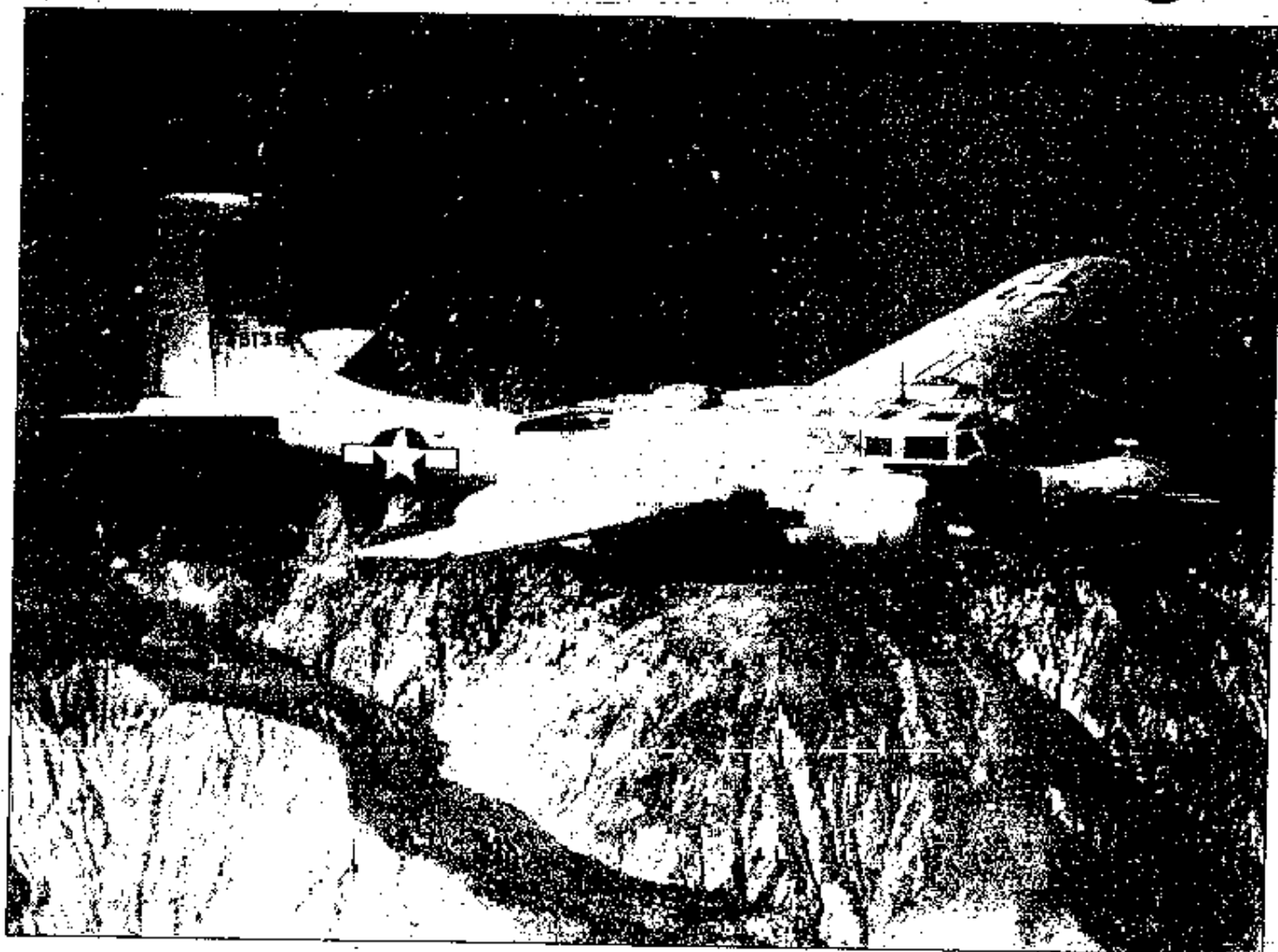
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American troops liberating Oflag 64 in Hammelburg. Photo: National Archives

The Hammelburg Raid

Herndon Inge, Jr.

World War II in Europe was nearly over when, on 26 March 1945, Gen. George S. Patton, Jr., Commander of the famous United States Third Army, ordered a Task Force from the Fourth Armored Division comprising 294 men and 53 vehicles and composed of Sherman tanks, light tanks, 105 millimeter assault guns, halftracks and jeeps to break through the German front lines at Ashaffenburg on a strange mission. Capt. Abraham Baum was in command of the Task Force whose mission was to head for Hammelburg, 60 miles away, and liberate the American officers who were imprisoned in Oflag XIII B and bring back as many as they could.

Articles and books have been written about Gen. Patton's abortive raid to Oflag XIII B, (Offizierslager), an American officers' prison camp at Hammelburg, in which, it just so happened, his son-in-law Lt. Col. John Knight Waters was a prisoner. The end of the war was in sight and the American Army was fighting for every foot of ground against a defeated, but still potent, German Army composed of the troops that had escaped through

the Falaise Gap after the Normandy invasion and made their way back to Germany and regrouped east of the Rhine River. In addition to the seasoned German troops who had escaped from Normandy, all able-bodied male Germans of all ages were mobilized to make the Americans pay dearly for every foot of ground taken.

Lt. Col. John Knight Waters, a West Point graduate and the husband of Beatrice Patton, Gen. Patton's daughter, had been captured in the fighting in Tunisia, North Africa, in 1943. He was a prisoner in Oflag 64 at Szubin, Poland, with several hundred American Army officers. When the Russian Army troops began to threaten northern Germany, the prisoners in Oflag 64 were marched on the road south in mid-winter. They arrived at Oflag XIII B at Hammelburg in central Germany early in March. The group of officers from the Battle of the Bulge and other officer prisoners captured in North Africa and after the Normandy invasion were at Hammelburg, making a total of about 1,500 American officer prisoners of war in the Oflag.

I was a lieutenant in Company D, 301st Regiment of the 94th Infantry Division and was captured by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge. After forced marches in blizzard

weather and two freezing boxcar rides I arrived at Hammelburg about 6 March, the same day Lt. Col. Waters and the officers from Oflag 64 arrived after their forced march.

Col. Paul R. Goode, one of the Oflag 64 men who had been captured by the Germans in Normandy, became the senior American officer at Hammelburg after their arrival.

The American front lines were east of the Rhine River in mid-March and the German Army was putting up a fierce defense. Gen. Patton claimed he did not know that his son-in-law was at Hammelburg but military intelligence had indicated that the officers from Oflag 64 had arrived there.

On 26 March the Fourth Armored Division Task Force, after a fierce artillery barrage and tank battle, crossed the Main River and blasted its way through the German lines at Ashaffenburg. It headed toward Hammelburg, 60 miles inside the German lines.

We, as *Kriegsgefangenen*, or *Kriegies* (war prisoners), at the Oflag were gaunt and skinny and lacked energy as we milled around the compound. On 27 March we heard the sound of tanks and artillery to the west and black clouds of smoke rose over the horizon. We knew the Americans were on their way and we were excited over the prospect of being liberated.

Task Force Baum

We saw several American tanks of Task Force Baum appear over the crest

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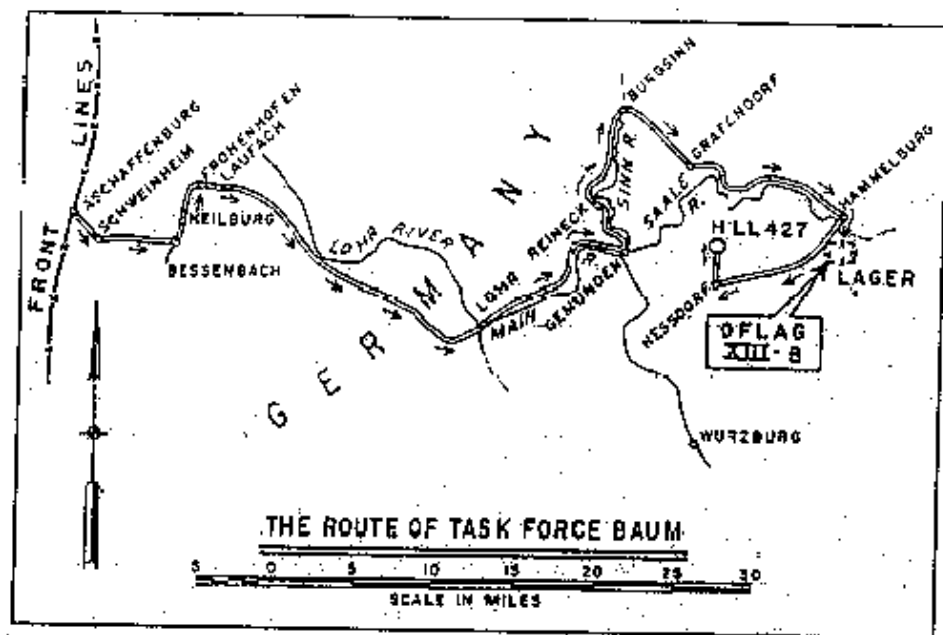
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of the hill to the west of the camp firing their guns in our direction. Some German army vehicles sped ahead of them down the hill and past the prison camp. When the American Sherman tanks at the head of the column approached the compound, the prisoners went inside the buildings as the shells shrieked toward us.

Several of the lumbering American tanks appeared at the Oflag and fired their guns overhead and to each side where they expected opposition. The shells screamed through the air and the deafening explosions echoed among the buildings. Black smoke billowed up over the camp as a building was hit and soon consumed in flames.

About 1430 hours two of the big Sherman tanks broke through the double barbed wire fence, trailing the wire and uprooted fenceposts. The pavement in the street cracked under the tanks'

weight.

The American tanks on the hill were still firing their cannons and shells continued to explode around the perimeter of the camp. A joyous feeling of liberation prevailed among all of the American POWs in the prison camp.

It was almost dark when I walked through the gaping hole in the fence and up the hill. The POWs were gathered around the tanks in small groups as darkness descended. We felt we were free men once again and would soon be back in the safety of the rear areas behind the American front lines. We were a group of jubilant prisoners, but there was not much chance of fighting alongside our liberators since we were weak from our starvation diet during the past few months. Many of the freed prisoners returned to the Oflag.

As it got dark the tanks started to crank up their engines to prepare for the

return to the American lines. While we were standing around, some German soldiers crept up and fired several panzerfaust rockets at the idling tanks. One tank was hit and burst into flames.

I decided to go back to the American lines with the tanks and climbed up on one of the Shermans along with five or six other former prisoners. The deck of the tank was crowded with extra tank tracks, jerrycans of gasoline and water and clusters of 76mm shells. The tank drivers gunned their motors and began to move out. I felt exposed high up above the ground. As we moved out the cold wind blew in my face and I had an exhilarating and wonderful feeling of freedom.

Germans close in

None of us knew that hostile German troops were closing in on the Task Force returning to the American lines. When the German military units in the area learned that the American tank convoy was loose inside their lines they began to close in. The Germans knew the size of Task Force Baum. We had seen a small German reconnaissance plane circling overhead before the Task Force arrived at Hammelburg.

I clung to the top of the Sherman tank as it roared and pulled out of the group and became the lead tank of the column in hostile enemy territory. The column of tanks and other vehicles moved slowly through the dark woods along a narrow road until a log pile road block was spotted about 200 yards ahead.

The column stopped and the tanks ground around with much noise and confusion and headed back in the opposite direction. The Germans at the road block fired several bazooka or panzerfaust rockets at the column as we were turning around. One of the rockets swooshed by my head like a deadly Roman candle as it went past and exploded in the woods. I felt the heat and crouched down and hung on for dear life. If the round had been a few inches closer and had hit the tank all of us hanging on would have been killed.

When the column slowed down, I climbed down from my place on the lead tank and ran back about 10 or 12 tanks and other vehicles in the column and climbed up on the back of a halftrack. Two other lieutenants and I hung on and we stood on the narrow metal flange on the back. I felt relieved



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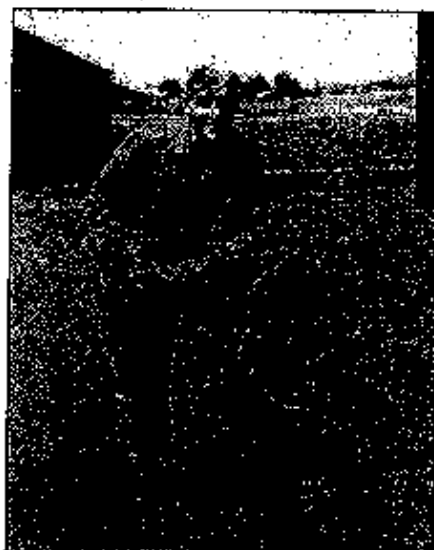
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that I was no longer at the head of the column behind the German lines.

The column of American tanks, half-tracks and other vehicles was hit again with German rockets and panzerfausts as they turned around and headed toward the town of Hessdorf. The column with the liberated prisoners, hanging on headed back to Hill 427 and a large clearing. When the convoy disbursed around a big field, a group of liberated officers milled around the tanks and halftracks that had pulled into the clearing. In the center of the clearing was a stone building and the tanks, halftracks and other vehicles formed a defensive perimeter. It was extremely cold and we could hear the sound of German tanks in the woods beyond.

Colonel Goode

After reaching the Oflag and breaking through the barbed wire and heading back to the American lines with the liberated prisoners who could climb aboard, the tanks blasted their way through the quiet countryside. Those of us who were hanging on were exhilarated and happy at being free and



Herndon Inge, Jr. — 1944

headed for the American lines. I hung on the back of the halftrack for several hours and was totally exhausted.

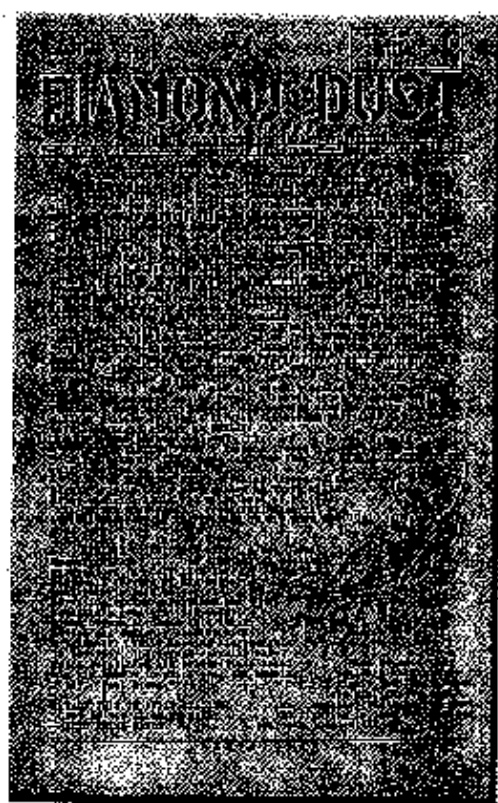
As it began to get light, Col. Paul Goode climbed up on a tank and announced that those of us who had been liberated and who wanted to stay with the task force and fight could do

so, but that he was going back to the Oflag at Hammelburg.

He jumped down from the tank and produced a white sheet and started walking back toward the Oflag at Hammelburg with most of the POWs, including me, following. We walked at a rapid pace down a narrow dirt road in the open German countryside to the Oflag, now retaken by German soldiers.

Although we were weak and had not eaten or had a drink of water or slept for over 24 hours, we followed Col. Goode back toward the Hammelburg Oflag. After we had gone about a mile we heard the noise of a terrific battle taking place. The Germans surrounding the beleaguered Task Force were firing point blank at the tanks and other vehicles with everything they had. We could see columns of black smoke rising up over the trees. We trudged the 11 or 12 miles back to the Oflag and were exhausted when we got there. The German guards who had taken off when the tanks arrived had returned and reoccupied the Oflag.

At 0810 hours on 28 March the Task Force prepared to return to the Ameri-



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can lines. On the command of Capt. Baum the tanks roared to life and began to slowly move out. The halftracks and other vehicles started up and moved in with the tanks.

Germans attack

The German tanks, tank destroyers and heavy guns cut loose with everything they had. The American tanks, halftracks and other vehicles were hit and many exploded in flames.

The German attack was well coordinated. Tank destroyers with 90mm cannons followed by German infantry converged on the surrounded vehicles. The 76mm guns on the American tanks and tank destroyers were no match for the German 90mm guns. Capt. Baum ordered all drivers not to stop at road blocks but to fight their way back to the American lines destroying anything in the way. After Capt. Baum's order to move out, the onslaught by the Germans damaged or destroyed nearly all of the vehicles. Many went up in flames as their gas tanks exploded.

Before leaving, Capt. Baum found a halftrack with a radio and he tapped out his last message to the Fourth Armored Division Headquarters in Morse Code: "Task Force Baum surrounded, under heavy fire. Request air support."

When it appeared that the situation was hopeless, the men in the Task Force and the remaining liberated officers took off into the woods and some eventually made it back to the American lines. Most were recaptured as they went through the hostile German woods and countryside.

POWs again

Those of us who followed Col. Goode



Oflag 64 was liberated for a second and final time on 6 April 45 by the U.S. 14th Armored Division. Photo courtesy National Archives.

returned exhausted to the deserted Oflag where we stayed for several hours before we were ordered to prepare to leave under the watchful eyes of fully-armed and equipped German soldiers.

Lt. Col. Waters, while attempting a truce with the Germans when the tanks arrived, was shot by a German guard. He was taken to the Oflag hospital and a week later after the American lines had moved up, he was evacuated to a field hospital.

The German soldiers who had returned to the Oflag were now armed and equipped for combat. They marched us the couple of miles down the steep road to the rail yards at Hammelburg where we were ordered to get in box cars and were locked in. We were targets of our own P-47 and P-51 air attacks and were

given no food, water or heat. The next afternoon we arrived at Nurnburg at the heavily bomb-damaged rail yards and marched to a prison camp there.

Lt. Col. John Knight Waters remained in the Army and later became a 4-star general. He served the United States with distinction until he retired. He wrote me several years prior to his death that Gen. Patton, his father-in-law, did not know that he was a prisoner at Hammelburg when he sent the Task Force through the front lines to liberate the American prisoners.

Gen. George S. Patton, Jr., "Old Blood and Guts," was soundly reprimanded by both Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower and Gen. Omar N. Bradley for the abortive attack on Hammelburg and the loss of the Task Force. He told correspondents that he did not know until nine days after the Task Force reached Hammelburg that his son-in-law was among the prisoners. He produced his private diaries and said he attempted to liberate the prison camp because they were afraid that the American prisoners might be murdered by the retreating Germans. Gen. Patton later admitted: "I can say this, that throughout the campaign in Europe I know of no error I made except that of failing to send a combat command to take Hammelburg. Otherwise, my operations were to me, strictly satisfactory."

C'est la Guerre.

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