

Dear Major Baum:

I am honored to be asked to share my impressions of what happened at Hammelburg. I am also deeply appreciative of your heroic efforts to liberate us and have gathered many articles and books concerning the event.

I was one of the enlisted men of Oflag 64 who made the march from Poland and ended up at Hammelburg. I served as Colonel Goode's runner and also managed the staff message center at both camps. The following account of the raid, for the most part, is taken from my memoirs written almost 25 years ago. Interjections to introduce and clarify my story are in italics.

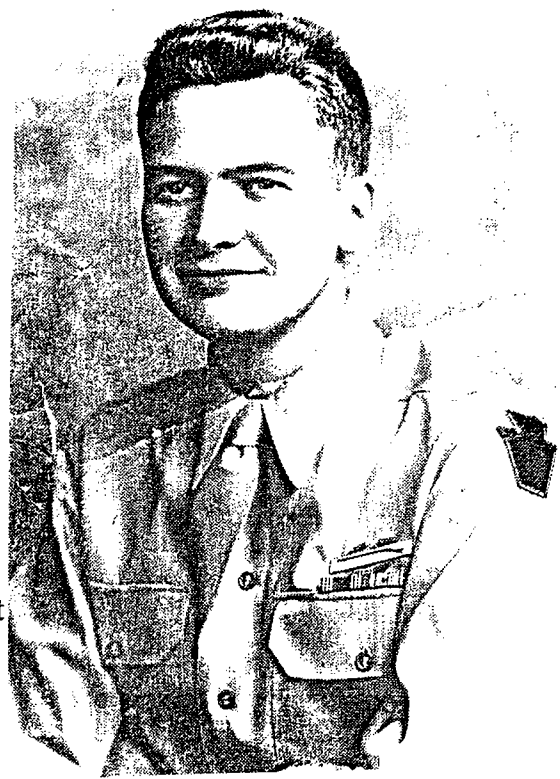
*At the end of our march from Poland we went to Parchim on March 6, 1945 to board a train for Hammelburg.* Just before boarding, a remarkable and puzzling incident took place. We were given a standard POW postal card and were told to write to our next-of-kin the following message verbatim: "We have arrived from Parchim from Oflag 64 and are now going to Stalag XIII B, Hammelburg, Wehr Kreis XIII. I am safe and in good health." The message *with its dates and places* seemed to contradict every security rule that the Germans had held us to so strictly in the past and made us wonder what was happening. The full significance, *or more correctly, consequences*, of their breach of security did not become known to us until three weeks later to the day, more of which later.

*On March 25 at Hammelburg Colonel Goode reported to the Swiss representative on his inspection visit to the camp that examinations conducted by our medical doctors revealed that deaths from malnutrition could be expected shortly.* But March 25 is remembered by those of us who were at Hammelburg for a much more important reason. That afternoon the officers from one of the Balkan countries in the compound adjacent to ours called some of our strolling men to come over to the barbed wire fence and told them that the Americans were coming. *From our secret radio* we knew that Third Army was about fifty miles away and moving fairly rapidly, but we didn't have too much hope of their catching up with us, knowing the Germans' scheme of moving prisoners around as bargaining pawns toward the end of the war. When our men smiled and said, "Sure they're coming! The war will soon be over!" the others replied, "You don't understand, they're coming to Hammelburg." The idea was dismissed with a laugh, only to be repeated the next day.

Rumors started throughout the camp and hopes began to rise. There had been so much discouragement and despair, anything positive was grabbed onto. Colonel Goode had heard the rumors, too, and tried to get confirmation from the Germans, but to no avail. He had me go around to tell the barracks leaders to "cool it" and not let the men get excited.

Around noon on March 27 we began to hear the distinct rumble of gunfire. We assumed it to be heavy artillery, although it appeared to us that the battlelines were really too far away for that. Maybe it was just a bombing raid somewhere. No, insisted the Balkans, your American army is on its way here.

A couple of hours later as the sound became more distinct, the armored officers agreed it was tank fire - and American at that! Next the sound of heavy motors could be distinguished and finally a Sherman's turret appeared over the crest of a field a mile or so away. As it caught sight of the camp it began to zero in carefully on the peripheral guard towers. The Germans returned fire with mortars, but they were no match for the tanks' guns. Rifle and machine gun fire next



joined the battle until it became quite a fire-fight.

When it had first started we had cautiously hugged the outside walls of our barracks and other compound buildings, but then the guards fired some warning shots at us which sent us inside. We watched from the windows until strays and ricochets started to hit the buildings and then we hugged the floor, happy for the solid masonry construction of the walls.

Just before I left the window, I saw Lt. Col. John Knight Waters, General George Patton's son-in-law and a long-time Kriegie, going down the street waving a white flag, evidently either to try to negotiate a surrender or else to warn the Americans of our presence in the barracks. A few moments later I heard some shouts outside, took a quick look again, and saw Col. Waters being carried back toward the infirmary. Later I heard he had been hit by rifle fire, but I don't know whether it was American or German.

Shortly the fire began to slacken and then the tanks knocked down the barbed-wire fencing and the American GI's began pouring into camp in their half-tracks and jeeps. Task Force Baum had arrived from the 4th Armored Division of Patton's Third Army. Hammelburg was liberated!

Col. Goode quickly huddled with Capt. Baum, the task force commander, and Maj. Alex Stiller, who identified himself as one of Patton's aides and an "observer" on the expedition. Capt. Baum said he was prepared to haul out as many prisoners as could fit into or onto his vehicles, but there was no hope of taking all of us. There was probably little chance of getting any additional support from his parent unit, as he had long since lost radio contact with it and they undoubtedly would assume he was finished.

Capt. Baum was anxious to get started since he knew that he had aroused every army unit in the vicinity of Hammelburg and his only hope of getting back to the American lines was to barrel through the night those 40 miles. He suggested that those who could make it on foot head for Aschaffenburg, where the American lines should be alert to their coming.

I was able to clamber aboard one of the tanks, about the third vehicle in line when we got on a decent road bypassing Hammelburg. As we raced through the night we passed several German soldiers but none of them challenged us or fired shots as we roared by. We began to congratulate ourselves on how well things were going when, about a half-hour later on the way, the lead vehicle was fired upon with a "panzerfaust," or anti-tank rocket. *I have since learned that this was evidently the incident at the Hoellrich intersection with Nutto's probe group.* The column did an about-face and headed back in the direction from which we came. When we got to some high ground, Capt. Baum pulled the column off the road and held a conference with Col. Goode.

He explained that the German army was now aware of our exact location and that there would probably be a battle to the finish. He didn't want the POW's to become involved because there were not enough weapons to go around, and the casualties would be great. He asked Col. Goode to march us back to camp while his troops tried to "buy time" on the off chance that relief might come from Third Army. Our second liberation had failed. *(Our first "liberation" had taken place the second night after we had been marched out of Oflag 64 at Szubin, Poland. Our German guards had taken off around midnight when the Russian army came within a few kilometers of us. However, before we could make contact with them, an SS unit came into the area and regained control of us.)*

During the early morning we could hear the sounds of intense fighting as the task force put up its last gallant effort. By noon many of them were being brought into camp either on foot or, for those who were wounded, by wagon. Our infirmary quickly overflowed and the meager medical supplies were soon exhausted.

Our captors had evidently been hard at work making plans as to what to do with us if we were recaptured, because by three o'clock that afternoon we were on our way down the hill to Hammelburg's railroad station, where a train of boxcars awaited us. We were issued a Red Cross

food parcel for every three or four men, and at 6:00 P.M. our train pulled out in the gathering darkness.

As our train slowly made its way southeasterly the next day, Good Friday, March 29, my family back home in Punxsutawney was finally receiving their first piece of mail from me *four-and-a-half months after my capture* - the card we had sent from Parchim just three weeks before - a remarkably short time for such mail.

While we rode along we began to think back over the past few days. Why did Task Force Baum come to Hammelburg and liberate us? There were other POW camps all over the area. Why did they come with so few vehicles when there were more than a thousand of us in the camp? Why did Gen. Patton send along this aide, Maj. Stiller, as an "observer," outranking the task force commander?

As we speculated, certain thoughts began to fall into place like pieces of a jig-saw puzzle. We could imagine the postal cards from Parchim arriving in Switzerland for forwarding to the United States and the surprise they aroused. American authorities would undoubtedly be alerted and the names eagerly scanned. And there would that of Lt. Col. John Knight Waters. Surely Patton would have been notified immediately. It looked like a good possibility to us that the ill-fated mission was planned primarily to rescue Waters. How ironic it was that with his wound he would not have been able to be brought back to the American lines after all!

*As a postscript to the raid, let me add a few other details about my acquaintance with Maj. Stiller as recorded in my memoirs.* Just before we left our camp at Nurnberg for our march to Stalag VIIA at Mooburg, Col. Goode introduced me to Maj. Stiller and asked me to look after him on the march, since I had had the experience of the "long march" which might get us through again. I had many interesting hours of conversation with Stiller about his experiences with Patton during World War I, when he was his first sergeant in one of the earliest tank companies used by the U.S. Army in France. When the Second World War began, he volunteered and was soon back at Patton's side, this time as an aide.

Stiller got a rough initiation (besides the air attack *which hit us soon after we left Nurnberg*) when we had to spend the first night out in the open in a not-so-gentle spring rain. It was the only time in my whole Kriegie career that I had to stay outdoors overnight!

...Arriving shortly after our liberation at Stalag VIIA was Gen. Patton. Maj. Stiller, of course, was ready to rejoin him and invited me to go with him, but I turned him down. I had had enough of the war!

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I have been back to Hammelburg twice in recent years. On the first occasion I was received by the U.S. Army Infantry School liaison officer who made arrangements for a Bundeswehr officer to escort me through the camp; he in turn offered to guide me through your fifteen hours at Hammelburg attempting our liberation. The second time, with security tight during the last years of the Cold War, I had a more difficult time gaining entry, but my U.S. Army ID card as a colonel opened the gate and I again walked through the compound and my barracks. They were emotional visits!

A few years ago I had the American Ex-Prisoners of War memorial service for Joe Kmetz, one of your sergeants in the 10th Armored Infantry, who was captured in the raid. He was an active member of our ex-POW group at the Highland Drive VAMC, Pittsburgh. There were a large number of 4th Armored men there, since he had been national president of its association.

Thanks again for your efforts so many years ago to gain us our freedom.

Sincerely yours,



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