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FROM: ORMOND M. HESSLER

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SUBJECT: DO I REMEMBER HAMMELBURG? MAJOR BAUM'S RAID.

The day started like any other. Herman and I were out of cigarettes. Herman had some roll'em type cigarette papers. We had a deal. I would scrounge the streets of Camp for butts which we would recycle into a smoke using his papers.

While busily engaged in this effort somebody yelled to take a look out the window. We did. There were two hay stacks on fire on a ridge just beyond the camp fence. Then lo and behold two big tanks appeared along side the hay stacks. They had big white stars. They were ours! We are free. Well not quite yet!

The tanks rolled over the fences and on into camp. Herman and I stayed in the building because the tanks coming into camp seemed to upset some of the German guards which provoked a bit of a fire fight. Staying in the barracks did keep us out of the line of fire. Then there was a lull and in an act of surrendering the camp down the main street of the camp marched the German Camp Officer, two fellows carrying the American and German flags and in the company of Col. Waters. What a happy day until tragedy struck. Col. Waters was shot. He was badly wounded. Fortunately, in an adjacent compound occupied by Serbians was a surgeon. He helped Col. Waters and probably saved his life.

With the bad news the Serbs get in the news today, this act of mercy does seem a bit ironic.

When things settled down, I left camp to see what I could scrounge to augment our meager rations. In returning to camp, coming up the road from Hammellburg, I saw a young G.I. face down on the shoulder of the road. When I looked he was dead, a bullet through his head. That scene I'll never forget. I often wonder what had happened to him. Since Major Baum's attack on the camp was in the nature of a raid with no follow up forces, I wondered what had happened to him. Who would have picked him up and seen that he was buried.

Much excitement and many rumors were met upon my return to camp.

What to do? Where to go? How to get out and back to our lines?

Late in the day with a large group milling around the tanks and half tracks the word went out that because the Germans had moved forces into the area and presumably controlled the roads that the way out was to move across country. Also that there were not enough vehicles to take everybody (our rescuers found that we were many more than had been reported to them). In addition the half tracks were already filled with the wounded from Major Baum's force. But anybody that could was welcome to hitch a ride as best they could. So we climbed on any vehicle we could and hung on with anything available. I was lucky enough to get on a tank and luckier still to get located just behind the turret. Lucky because of what happened later.

There must have been 30 to 40 guys hanging on when just before dark the column moved out. I must add without any rations. We had stripped the vehicles of any rations they had. At least for once in a long time our bellies were full.

What an adventure. Clouds drifting across the darkened sky and on our way to freedom. Well after a few miles the column descended in a valley and into a small town, where the column stopped. In the dark,

shadowy figures would come up and whisper "viva le American" or hand you a piece of bread, and then they would disappear.

The column then had to reverse itself and we left the town on a road. Not very far along we came under fire. We had hit a road block manned by the Germans with machine guns and bazookas.

Everybody dove for the ditches and got off the tank I was on. But I saw all the tracers flying by and I found protection behind the tank turret so I stayed there, spread eagle on the back of the tank and scared to death. Finally the firing stopped. I believe the second tank had knocked out the road block. I was on the third or fourth tank.

The column then turned around and as I did I heard someone scream. I learned later that it was a Col. Whose name I cannot remember now. His legs were crushed as one vehicle bumped into another.

The column then retraced its steps back up the hill we had come down.

Half way up the hill the tank we were on stopped. The poor tankers were so tired and exhausted that they kept falling asleep. We could hear their radio with voices communicating with each other. Then we heard the noise of vehicles and armor clanking up the hill below us.

We figured we better get these tankers awake and get moving. They got in touch with the rest of the column and headed for the top of the hill.

The rest of the column was DEPLOYED across the hill. We POW's were told that we could stay with the forces and fight with them. Some did, but I did not and joined the bulk of the group and marched back to Lager Hammellburg. (remembering that there is safety in numbers)

Approaching the Camp, it is now near dawn, we heard the noise of very heavy artillery barrage. The Germans had met Major Baun's group and poured it on.

I guess a few escaped from that attack, but it seems most of our rescuers ended up "in the bag" with us. The few I met were pretty shaken up.

Later that morning we were told by the Germans who had now recovered the camp to gather our belongings and line up. We were to head for the railroad station in Hammellburg and be moved to Nuernburg.

A funny picture that remains in my memory is of a German resident near the camp, who had had the upstairs corner of his house blown off in the previous days attack. He stood shaking his fist and yelling and cursing at us. We laughed.

The train was there to take us. This was the train that had brought the anti-tank forces into the area the previous night. Those troops had not taken a bath before they came. The straw bedding in the box cars were full of lice. And from there to Nurenburg so were we.

So that is what I remember.

Please thank Major Baum for me. He gave us something that cannot be valued. Many of us had been "in the bag" for over two years. We had walked out of Oflag 64, Schubin, Poland in the middle of January and walked 345 miles in 40 some days in the middle of winter with little or no food, and were finally put in Lager Hammellburg.

The sight of those two tanks along side the burning haystacks will never be forgotten. Your rescue of us from captivity was not successful and a great price was paid by your men. But in the larger scheme of things your raid probably screwed up the German defenses so there was a successful purpose.

Thank you Major Baum for your raID ON Lager Hammellburg and for a wonderful night of hope you gave us..