

**GEORGE JUSKALIAN**

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Editor - Oflag 64 Item  
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Dear Bob:

Pursuant to Bill Warthen's letter of June 12 to former POWs who were at Hammelburg, the following is submitted. It is an excerpt from a book published in 1996, *TRIUMPH AND GLORY - ARMENIAN WORLD WAR II HEROES*, which includes a chapter about me.

We eventually reached our march destination, Parchim, some 80 miles northwest of Berlin, around the first of March. We had started the long trek from Oflag 64 in Schubin, Poland with about 1,400; we ended it with less than 500. A large number had managed to escape and reach the advancing Russians and thence home via Odessa. The remainder became incapacitated along the way and were moved by various transport to POW camps in Germany.

After a layover of a few days in Parchim, George Juskalian and his buddy, Peter Mirakian, and their fellow POWs were put in boxcars and taken to Oflag XIII B in Hammelburg. Their stay there was brief but eventful. On March 27, 1945, General George S. Patton sent in an armored task force from the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division to liberate the camp. It was a reinforced company-size unit commanded by a Captain Abe Baum.

Amazingly, the task force was able to slash its way some 60 miles through enemy territory in one day to reach Oflag XIII B at dusk. The German guards fled. The camp had been liberated; but as it turned out, not for long.

The task force did not have anywhere near the number of vehicles needed to carry back the number of POWs in the camp, which included a sizable group captured during the Battle of the Bulge. It made little difference, however. Most were dubious about getting back to friendly lines by means of the task force. They reasoned that while the task force had been able to reach the camp in daylight under surprise conditions, the enemy meanwhile had been alerted and would likely bottle up all escape routes. It proved to be an accurate estimate of the situation.

Notwithstanding, Juskalian and Mirakian decided that they would have a go at it. Along with half a dozen other POWs, they climbed aboard one of the leading tanks and waited. It was after midnight when the task force pulled out under conditions of almost total darkness. Juskalian and Mirakian knew it was a long shot but at this stage felt it was worth the gamble.

The tank column inched slowly along a forest road for the first couple of hours until it came to a hard surface road. It no sooner debouched from the forest when it ran into a roadblock and came under hostile fire. The lead tank and possibly the second tank, also were knocked out by anti-tank weapons. (Juskalian and Mirakian were on the third or fourth tank.)

Baum, the task force commander, quickly turned the column about and retraced the route back to the vicinity of the camp. There he established defensive position. At this point the POWs accompanying the task force had three choices: return to the camp, stay with the task force and fight, or take off across country to make good the escape. Most chose to return to camp; a half dozen or so chose to stay and fight; Juskalian, Mirakian and a few others chose to take off. Here is how Juskalian described what followed:

“Pete and I decided not to go back to camp. We’d had enough of captivity. As for staying with the task force, we figured ‘prudence was the better part of valor.’ It was going to be futile - and murder to boot. So we opted to strike out through the woods to try to reach friendly lines some 60 miles to the west. The trouble was that woods in Germany are not like most of the woods back home. There’s no underbrush; the Germans keep their woods clean as a scrub board. Daylight was upon us. There was no place to hide!

“We wanted to put distance between us and the task force because we knew the task force would draw the enemy to it. Unfortunately, we didn’t get very far. Suddenly, ahead of us a squad of German soldiers popped up out of fox holes leveling their rifles at us. We learned later that we were in an infantry training area with many previously prepared fox holes. My first impulse was to turn and run, which would have been suicide. Luckily, Pete grabbed my arm and warned, ‘Don’t be a fool.’ So ended our short flight to freedom.”

**Bob, this really concludes Hammelburg and you may wish to end it here, but if you can use more copy, here’s the continuation:**

“Several days later, we and about a dozen others who had been recaptured joined the main body of POWs which in the meantime had been moved from Hammelburg and was being marched south. We rejoined them near the outskirts of Nuremberg where we not only witnessed an air raid of American bombers but ourselves became targets as well!

“The column - POWs, guards, horse-drawn soup wagon and all - were approaching a railroad marshaling yard when the air raid sirens began screaming. Almost simultaneously we saw the bombers overhead, pointing toward the marshaling area. They flew in flights of three, each flight in an inverted ‘V’ formation. Flight after flight blasted the target while we on the ground, unheard, cheered them on. The last flight was about to pass overhead when someone shouted, ‘He’s dropping his flare,’ which was the flight leader’s signal for the flight to drop its bombs.

“The bombs rained down upon us with the terrifying roar of a thousand locomotives. We hit the ground. In the split second that followed, my thoughts were of my mother. There she was at home waiting for my return. With Allied victory assured, she had every expectation that I would be back soon. The end of the war was at hand. And to be killed now, and by one’s own planes! How horrible; how ironic. There would be two deaths, not one: mine and my mother’s.

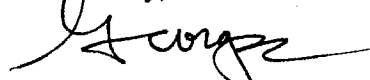
“Fate was good to Pete and me. We came through unscathed. But back home there were some 40 other mothers and wives who would wait in vain. ‘Why them and not me?’ is a question which haunts every soldier who survives.”

After the shock wore off for the men and their guards, who also suffered casualties, and the dead and wounded evacuated, the column assembled and resumed the march south. At the stopover that night, Juskalian and Mirakian feigned a whiplash injury as a result of the bombing and got away with the subterfuge. The Germans sent them back to a POW camp in Nuremberg. There they were liberated in less than a week by the U.S. 45<sup>th</sup> Division commanded by Major General Robert T. Frederick, one of the Army’s most intrepid division commanders. The ruse had worked; the two of them had been freed a month earlier than those who had remained with the column marching south.

END

Pete Mirakian stayed in the Army and retired in the grade of colonel. He died about five years ago. I regret that I shall not be at the reunion in Las Vegas. I had another heart attack a month ago which has taken much of the steam out of me, but I am getting back to a degree of normalcy - but slowly. Anyway, my compliments on the fine job you are doing as editor. And best wishes to you and all who attend the reunion for a grand get-together.

Sincerely,



George Juskalian