

# D R A F T

## The Hammelburg Raid – 2003

By Oberstleutnant Peter Domes

Ever since reading the book *Spessart und Maingebiet im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Spessart and the Main Region in the Second World War) by Dr Alois Stadtmüller as a boy of 14, I have been fascinated by the story of Task Force Baum and the Hammelburg Raid. The story also prompted me to use my limited budget to build up a collection of literature about the subject.

Since the summer of 1999, I have been studying the Hammelburg Raid in detail — an undertaking motivated in no small way by issue No. 91 of *After the Battle*, which came out in February 1996. The development of the Internet led me to make specific use of this medium for my research. A homepage was created (<http://www.taskforcebaum.de>) which has gradually increased in size and become more comprehensive. With the passage of time, valuable contacts and friendships have been made in both Germany and the USA. This was how I had the good fortune to link up with Hauptfeldwebel (Staff Sergeant) Martin Heinlein, who was then at the Infanterie-Schule (Infantry School) Hammelburg. We decided to co-operate and, with the view to organising our research more effectively, joined forces with a number of others to set up the ‘Task Force Baum Working Group’ in the spring of 2001. At the time of writing, the group consists of six members.

In the meantime, the scope of our research has increased considerably. We have established good relations with men who took part in the raid, and also with living witnesses on both sides. Fortunately, the flow of information shows no sign of drying up.

Through a member of our working group in the USA — Bob Thompson of Tulsa, Oklahoma, a former POW in Oflag XIII-B Hammelburg — Phil Beron of the National D-Day Museum in New Orleans contacted me about a proposed battlefield tour to Germany by some 30 persons in March 2003. The main focus of the trip would be the Hammelburg Raid. News of our research had reached the USA, and Phil asked me to act as guide for

this section of the tour. A hint that an actual veteran of Task Force Baum would be in the party finally clinched it — my mind was made up and I accepted his offer. Fortunately I was able to count on Martin Heinlein, who was keen to join me in organising the tour. Martin was currently on a posting abroad in Bosnia, but luckily he managed to get leave for this period. Shortly afterwards, Beron got in touch again with the news that other interesting people wanted to join the party, including Bob Zawada, who had been a radio operator on the raid. And to our great surprise, Abraham J. Baum, the commander of the task force, had also signed up for the trip. Pat Waters, the son of John K. Waters (General George S. Patton's son-in-law whose presence in Oflag XIII-B had triggered Patton's motivation for the raid), had also expressed an interest, but unfortunately had to cancel at the last moment.

Beron gave me a free hand as far as preparations for the tour were concerned. I planned the following weekend: Saturday March 22 for the route from Aschaffenburg to Hammelburg, and Sunday March 23 to be spent at the Hammelburg Military Camp and Training Area. The latter would also be accessible, as there is no firing at weekends. During our years of research, we had established good connections with local historical societies and eyewitnesses, and I decided to give those concerned the opportunity to meet Abe Baum, and tell the story of the raid from a German perspective — that of locals on the ground.

In preparation for the tour, I drove round the route once more with my son, Philipp, to see if it presented any problems for the coach. Of all places, just between Burgsinn and Weickersgrüben — Baum's forced detour around Gemünden — the road went under a bridge with a clearance of just 3.5m. The bus was 3.62m high, and so I was obliged to leave out a really interesting section, forego an on-the-spot presentation and make do with a description of what had taken place. Needless to say I was glad to have found out about this in advance. During this occasion, we also visited, Roland Seubert, of the Geschichtsverein Laufachtal (Laufach Valley Historical Society), and Karl-Heinz Schroll, chief of the history section at the Volkshochschule (Further Education College) in Lohr, who would both be involved with the tour.

A further conversation with Beron revealed that the party would arrive at Aschaffenburg, our departure point, on Thursday March 20, and wanted to visit the

Wehrtechnische Studien-Sammlung (Bundeswehr Ordnance Museum) at Koblenz on the Friday. I suggested that the group should also visit what remains of the Remagen bridge — an absolute must for every American WW2 veteran — and offered to accompany this leg of the tour as well. This was no problem for me since I am stationed in Remagen, and Koblenz is only half an hour's drive. 'Great idea!' commented Beron.

### **FRIDAY MARCH 21, 2003**

The big day had arrived. My comrades at the Logistikzentrum des Heeres (Army Logistics Command) in Remagen sensed my nervousness and did their best to reassure me. 'It'll be fine. After all, you're well prepared.' At 1000 hours I set off for the Remagen Bridge Peace Museum. The weather was looking good, with a promise of it staying sunny and warm for the whole weekend. After a delay — during which I was getting more and more nervous — the big white coach pulled up. On the windscreen was a big sticker — 'Happy Few Group'.

1100 hours: I boarded the bus and made the acquaintance of a bunch of really nice guys, who greeted me with a big, 'Hello'. After I had briefly introduced myself, we walked over to the historic bridge ramp where I spoke for about half an hour, describing the fighting and the taking of the bridge. My audience was extremely eager to learn — there were many questions about the conduct of the war in March 1945. Cameras clicked, video cameras whirred, and I found myself staring into dictaphones. After my briefing, it was off to the museum, and my first opportunity to talk to Abe Baum.

1230 hours: After many questions about the bridge and its construction, we returned to the waiting coach and on to our next port of call — the Wehrtechnische Studien-Sammlung at Koblenz. I asked Abe Baum to sit next to me — an offer which he gratefully accepted — and so I had another chance of a very interesting conversation.

1300 hours: The veterans were greatly taken with the exhibits in the museum. The Panther tank was impressive, as was the Sturmgeschütz III. Standing in front of an American M5 Stuart light tank, we had our first opportunity to discuss the Hammelburg Raid itself. Baum explained that Lieutenant Colonel Creighton Abrams had let the 10th Armored Infantry Battalion have one of these tanks for the battalion's command group. Abe had been in it quite a few times — it was fast and had a good radio. The command

group's tank had also gone on the Hammelburg Raid on March 27, 1945. So now I knew why six light tanks had taken part — it was promising to be an interesting weekend. As far as the task force's assault guns were concerned, Baum confirmed that they were in fact Sherman tanks equipped with a 105mm howitzer, and not the M7A1 self-propelled howitzers (see *After the Battle* No. 107, page 8). With the aid of some plastic models which were on display, we were able to compare the Ferdinand — the type of German SP tank destroyer often mentioned in American books — with the Hetzer, which was actually there on the day. Over and over again came the question, 'Where do they have a Hetzer here?' — 'All in good time! We'll be seeing one soon enough', I replied. Time and again I had to give details about the weapons and vehicles — 'What's a muzzle-brake?' . . . 'How does a bore evacuator work?' — and so on. The veterans showed a keen interest in German arms technology.

At 1430 I used the public address system to call the 'Happy Few Group' back to the coach — it was late and the veterans had not yet had their lunch. I said goodbye for the day, and they continued along the Rhine and past the Lorelei rock. I went back home and then set off with my family for Burgsinn. There followed a number of telephone conversations with those who were to go into action on Saturday — everything would go according to plan, just as arranged.

### **SATURDAY, MARCH 22, 2003**

Punctually at 0800 the regional express train drew into Gemünden from Würzburg. Martin Heinlein, my son Philipp and I were relieved it was not late — everything went according to plan. We had arranged to meet the American group in front of Aschaffenburg main railway station at 0845. The short drive gave us the chance to run through the programme again.

We spotted some veterans on the station concourse, and once again there was a big 'Hello'. At 0900 we arrived at the day's first stop — the Nilkheim railway bridge, just south of Aschaffenburg. At the time of the raid, this bridge was very important because without it Combat Command B of the US 4th Armored Division would not have got across the Main river so easily. The German officers in command had opted to surrender to the Americans.

A nice young lady and a photographer from the *Main-Echo* newspaper were waiting for us. During the preparation phase we had promised the local press that they would be fully involved — the raid is still a matter of some importance in the Unterfranken region. In the space of half an hour, Martin and I did our best to explain the events leading up to the raid, and describe the situation around Nilkheim and Schweinheim on March 25, 1945. Bob Zawada — then a platoon radio operator in Company A of the 10th Armored Infantry Battalion — remembered the crossing. As he went over the bridge in his M3 half-track, he was feeling pretty uneasy. When the lady journalist asked Baum how he had come to be given the mission, he related with great amusement the story of Lieutenant Colonel Harold Cohen and his piles. This was the signal for much laughter from the veterans.

0945 hours: We crossed the Main and briefly pointed out Castle Johannesburg, which at the time was the headquarters of Major Emil Lamberth, the Kampfkommandant leading the defence of Aschaffenburg. In Schweinheim we turned onto the Althol-Strasse, which took us onto the route followed by Task Force Baum. We could not use the original stretch from the Bischberg hill down into the town, as it was closed to all traffic. What with parked cars and on-coming traffic, the narrow roads caused a few problems for the coach, but this gave time to describe the fighting in Schweinheim and explain TF Baum's breakthrough there. Before Haibach, we reached the B8 and glanced across at the two remaining military barracks, which the task force had passed at some distance. I described the events as we retraced the route — small-arms fire from the Germans, casualties among the American armoured infantry. The townscapes had changed considerably over the past 58 years, but some of the churches looked the same, as did some individual houses. Between Keilberg and the Aschaffsteg, the road had taken a completely different route since the war — luckily we had come across a 1937 map during our research. Near the Weiberhöfe (a hamlet east of Hösbach railway station) we reached the B26 — the direct route to Lohr and Gemünden.

1015 hours: There was someone already waiting for us in front of the railway station at Laufach. Roland Seubert of the Laufach Historical Society — a member of our working group — climbed aboard and told us what had taken place in Laufach in the early hours of March 27, 1945. 'It was three o'clock in the morning and my mother, who

was a 15-year-old girl at the time, saw an endless column of tanks going by. They were 20 metres from her and she thought the war was over. Some soldiers asked another girl — an 18-year-old by the name of Josefine — for food and coffee. She replied that she hadn't got enough food for herself, and as for real coffee — well, she hadn't seen any of that for years. The landlord of an inn offered the soldiers some watery beer late that night — they didn't think much of it.'

We drove on to what had then been the last house in the village, and Seubert explained it was here that the task force's leading tank got damaged by a Panzerfaust and was towed along for a short distance. (The fact that a tank had been hit at Laufach was unknown when *After the Battle* published the story of the raid in 1996.) There is some dispute about what really happened but, as Seubert pointed out, in some cases history needs to be corrected. The Americans were up against 15 German soldiers — and not 400 as American sources have it. Nevertheless the story went round Laufach that quarters had been sought for 400 German soldiers. One American and five Germans were killed during this exchange. The American casualty was left behind by the viaduct at Hain, his body covered with a blanket and with a spade nearby. He is said to have had red hair and freckles, but his identity is unknown.

We drove on through the Spessart — the largest continuous area of forest in Germany. At the crossroads known as Siebenwege, I explained what had happened at 0400 at the headquarters of the German 7. Armee, then located at Heigenbrücken, just five kilometres north from the B26 road. A change of command had just taken place there when, from a distance, the sound of heavy vehicles could be heard moving eastwards. At Bischborner Hof — at the time of the raid a camp of the Reichsarbeitsdienst (Reich Labour Service) — we explained about the German soldiers who are said to have been surprised by the task force during their morning PT. We were now fast approaching Lohr, and at a spot called the Wasserhauskurve (Water House Bend) I told the story of Albin Geist, who was shot to bits by the task force's light tanks while driving along in his (wood) gas-powered truck. At this point some of the veterans opened issue 91 of *After the Battle* in anticipation of our walk through the 'Hänsel and Gretel' town of Lohr.

1130 hours: A small group of people, including reporter Inken Kleibömer of the *Main-Echo* and *Main Post* regional newspapers, were waiting for us at a car park in Lohr

not 100 metres from where the road-block (created by felling poplar trees) once stood by the Felsenkeller Restaurant. Karl-Heinz Schroll, chief of the history section at the Volkshochschule (Further Education College) in Lohr, got on the coach and greeted the veterans. Herr Schroll explained that the Americans are greatly respected in Lohr and that every child in Lohr in particular knows three names. The Military Government officer in charge of the town after its capture, Captain Edward Kelly, had done a lot for the town after the war. One of his staff, Sergeant Edward Koch, later became Mayor of New York. However, the most interesting person is Abe Baum, who raced through the town towards Gemünden on March 27, 1945. The way the townspeople of Lohr remember it, no tanks were knocked out at the roadblock . . . and its barrier had not even been closed. The Americans were taken aback by a member of the Volkssturm (Home Guard) but all he did was willingly point the way to Gemünden. Actually, it is our theory today that the Sherman tank said by the Americans to have been destroyed at the entrance to Lohr (which none of the locals remember) was in fact knocked out at the eastern exit of Laufach (where, as we have seen, the locals do remember such an incident), the more so since both versions have one American tanker killed.

As we walked through the pedestrian precinct, the witnesses that Herr Schroll had brought along told us their stories and their experiences on that day, and also of later when the US 14th Armored Division arrived in Lohr and got involved in heavy fighting. An elderly man remembered how his 65-year-old uncle had asked for — and was given — a long black cigar by one of the tank commanders. Abe Baum said, ‘that must have been [2nd Lieutenant William] Nutto — no doubt about it. He was always smoking those things.’ In front of the old town hall, passers-by came up and spoke to the veterans. Baum later said he felt himself overwhelmed by the friendliness and warmth of the townspeople he met.

They were expecting us at the old town hall. The Mayor, Siegfried Selinger, warmly welcomed us to his town, and light refreshments were served. The Mayor presented Robert Zawada and Abe Baum with a copy of the book *Als die Amerikaner kamen* (The Day the Americans Came) as a souvenir of their visit to Lohr.

1430: We left the friendly town of Lohr — it had been quite an occasion for both sides. Along the valley of the Main, with the river to our right and the railway line to our

left, we approached Gemünden. We described the events surrounding the German trains met by the task force, and pointed out the spot where the flak train had been abandoned near Neuendorf. The approach to Kleingemünden followed the new bypass, as the old railway crossing below the Zollberg hill had been removed years ago. The townscape had altered in the Frankfurter Strasse, too, as quite a lot of houses had burnt to the ground during the battle. Here, a glance at issue 91 of *After the Battle* clarified matters. It was somewhat quieter in Gemünden, where we were received by just two people — Albrecht Englert and his wife, who had come along in response to my request. In front of the Huttenschloss — formerly a camp of the Reichsarbeitsdienst and now a transport museum — we found ourselves standing before an impressive type BR44 steam engine, the kind that was used to haul freight trains. I explained that this was the typical freight engine used by the Deutsche Reichsbahn (German State Railways) in the 1940s. The trains which Baum had destroyed must have been pulled by this or a similar type of engine.

Herr Englert — not a native of Gemünden but of Wertheim — had already been very helpful to us in our research, having provided us with material about the events surrounding the blowing up of the Saale river bridge. Oberfeldwebel Eugen Zöller, the engineer sergeant who had witnessed and taken a leading part in that battle, had been at school with Herr Englert and so he knew him well. Englert had been involved in several of the briefings organised by the US Army in Gemünden as part of battlefield tours in the 1980s. During the war he had been a signaller with the 19. Armee in the Upper Rhine area, and had monitored German radio traffic about Task Force Baum and the general confusion in the Mainfranken region.

Abe Baum told us how he recalled the fighting in Gemünden: “Let’s just get the hell out of this place! The worst thing the Germans had was their Panzerfaust, and right here they were even using them to fire at my men!” During the withdrawal from Kleingemünden — probably due to a sense of frustration — the American tanks opened fire on the village from a point level with the present German war cemetery, and set the place ablaze.

Unfortunately we could not go via Burgsinn and Gräfendorf because, as already explained, the coach was too high. Yet this was just the place where we had found a

number of witnesses who could tell us about the various Germans who had been press-ganged by the task force to act as guides. We had also found, and could have indicated, the exact spot where the M5A1 light tank had shed a track and been abandoned in Burgsinn — at the Roten Weg.

1530: The coach now followed the direct route from Gemünden to Hammelburg — the one which had been denied to Baum at the time. We went through Hessdorf and Höllrich, and I was able to point out the tower on the Reussenberg hill (427 metres), which was clearly visible over the top of the bare trees. This was where on March 27, 1945, Hauptmann Rose of the Eisenbahnpionierschule (Army Railway Engineer School) Berlin had sat as an observer and reported all movements of Task Force Baum. As early as 1400 hours he had already reported the column on the main road at the locality known as Hainbuche, just west of Obereschenbach.

At Untereschenbach, the wide valley of the Saale now lay before us, and Hammelburg was clearly visible at a distance of two kilometres. ‘Where were the Hetzers positioned?’, my fellow passengers immediately wanted to know. The B27 still follows the same route as it did in 1937. It is only before Hammelburg that the route has changed with the construction of the new bypass. Artur Hurrlein (another member of our working group) and his school friend Georg Schlereth would receive us at the car park in front of the new bridge over the Saale. Unbeknown to us the local newspaper, the *Saale-Zeitung*, had already reported the arrival of the veterans in its Saturday edition, and so around 40 other townspeople had come along in addition to Artur and Georg. As had been the case in Lohr, the Americans were welcomed most warmly. Baum asked me jokingly, “What’s happened to the brass band?” Hammelburg wine was served together with Winzer-Brötchen — special bread rolls. The Deputy Mayor, Stefan Seufert, welcomed the group to his town and thanked key members of the local history society for having made all the arrangements.

Martin Heinlein was now fully in his element. After all he had given enough lectures about the Baum Raid for the Hammelburg Infantry School. With all the experience of a platoon sergeant, he pointed out the relevant terrain landmarks and gave a clear summary of the battle, which had taken place in the Saale valley. Artur Hurrlein and Georg Schlereth also spoke — as 14-year-old school friends they had been eyewitnesses.

Georg told us how he had watched the arrival of the Hetzers at the Hammelburg railway station. 'As the train drew into the station, the crews were already aboard their tank destroyers with the engines running. In less than five minutes, they were thundering out of the station at high speed, and heading up the B27 towards Bad Brückenau. Artur explained how the battle had developed in the Saale valley, and where the knocked-out vehicles had been abandoned. Three American tanks had even made it across the bridge, but had not managed to get into the town. German soldiers planned to blow up the bridge, but the fuse must have gone out. One soldier and a Hitlerjugend boy were lying by the church with a machine gun, but Artur and his brother Hans tried to dissuade them from firing at the tanks. 'You're surely not planning to fire at those tanks with a machine gun!' — 'Shut your mouth or I'll shoot you', came the curt reply. A reaction to the short machine-gun burst was less than a minute in coming. One of Baum's assault guns opened fire and the 105mm shell crashed into the slope in front of the church. But there was no explosion — the shell was a dud. The eyewitness accounts gave us an impressive picture of how the battle must have been on that afternoon in March 1945. The Germans lost their supply trucks and Baum lost half-tracks carrying fuel and ammunition. The American vehicles, which had been under fire, had turned right off the B27 and onto a field to get out of sight of the Hetzers and seek relative safety — but the field was marshy. It must have taken over an hour for the vehicles to assemble on the slope of the Lagerberg (the hill leading to the military camp) and get going again. As Baum explained, 'My orders were to drive fast and not to get drawn into pointless combat with the Germans.' After the battle, the schoolboys rummaged around in the knocked-out American vehicles. Artur filled bottles with petrol, and found a wooden box containing a welding kit — which to everyone's surprise he had brought along with him.

Abe Baum was especially pleased to see Karl Stürzenberger's son again — he had already met him in 1979 while he was researching his own book *Raid*. At the time, Stürzenberger Sr had been made to guide the task force from Weickersgrüben to Hammelburg. He had pleaded to be allowed to stay at home but the Americans had taken him with them. His wife was already in labour and fortunately Baum let him go at the junction of the road from Weickersgrüben with the B27. Baum was also pleased to learn that the birth had gone well.

It was 1700, and we had come to the end of our guided tours. The 'Happy Few Group' went off to a hotel in Morlesau, and Marion Heinlein took us to Obereschbach, where I was to meet my wife, Ulrike. We had got through the first day and were exhausted from the continual presentations. Unfortunately Martin could only manage the Saturday as he had promised to be with his family on Sunday — on Wednesday he was due to go to Bosnia for another two months.

The veterans had invited us with our wives to a special evening dinner to mark the occasion. In the hotel, we also met Tony deSanto, who was the personal guest of Abe Baum. Tony lives in Germany and had been a prisoner at Oflag XIII-B — he was one of the freed POWs who managed to make his way through to the American lines. During the course of the evening, Phil Beron thanked Martin and me for the preparation and execution of the tour, and gave us a copy of the book *Twenty-five Yards of War* by Ronald J. Drez. All of them had signed their names, and two veterans even signed the chapters, which referred to them. We had also not come empty-handed. As a token of our admiration, Abe Baum received a framed picture of the front page of the final edition of the *Mainfränkische Zeitung*, which appeared at the end of March 1945 — featuring the 'The Example of Hammelburg' article. In the presence of the veterans, Martin and I also took the opportunity to thank our wives for their understanding and support in this time-consuming hobby — there were two large bouquets — and a thunderous standing ovation.

### **SUNDAY, MARCH 23, 2003**

0845: I waited with my son Philipp at the entrance to the Infanterie-Schule. A car drew up and parked beside ours. The soldier who got out had put on his camouflaged uniform for the occasion — it was Andres Kukuk — another member of our working group. Andreas is a Hauptfeldwebel (Staff Sergeant) attached to the Regional Infantry Training Centre, and knows the training area like the back of his hand. Then in rapid succession we were joined by the others who would be involved in the events of that Sunday. Hanns-Helmuth Schnebel — the Infantry School librarian and member of the Hammelburg Local History Society (Baum had already met him in 1979, when the latter had helped him with the research for his book); Artur Hurrelein and Georg Schlereth, who

did not let the fact that this was a Sunday stop them from joining us; and Hauptmann Johann Bschor — the Commanding Officer of the Hammelburg Military Training Area — and his Hauptfeldwebel Heiko Haas, who would ensure that we had access to the camp and training area..

Hauptmann Bschor had the key to the Large Exhibits Hall of the camp museum, and so I was able to keep my promise to Abe Baum and Bob Zawada — they got to see a Hetzer tank destroyer. (It was actually the post-war Swiss Army G13 model.) Zawada explained the details of the American M3 half-track, which was also on display. Bob Zawada wanted to see the building where he had been taken after losing his leg on Hill 427. In front of the former camp hospital, I explained the set-up of Oflag XIII-B and Tony deSanto told us of his experiences behind barbed wire as a 'guest of the Third Reich'. After this we went past the 'French Cross', the large wooden crucifix that had been erected after WW1 by former French POWs, to the Hundsfeld – Bonnland section of the training area. The veterans were particularly impressed by the Bonnland training village. It looks like a typical village of the Franken region in the 1940s — and is carefully maintained by the Bundeswehr. At the time Abe Baum never made it this far, his advance having been blocked by anti-tank obstacles between Hundsfeld and Bonnland. We drove back to the west gate of the camp and from there over the so-called Kolonnenweg, past the Zinkelsberg hill to the Reussenberg (Hill 427). This was the route, which had also been taken by the column back in 1945. However, we first continued out of the training area towards the village of Höllrich, where I explained how the first attempt at breakout had been thwarted by Hauptmann Franz Gehrig and his officer cadets at the junction of the B27. We then drove back to Hill 427 — the final rallying point of Task Force Baum, and also our final stopping point. At what had previously been a farmstead known as the Reussenberger Hof, I went over the sequence of events in the German attack on Hill 427 and the special role (hitherto largely unrecognised) played by Major Walter Eggemann, a holder of the Ritterkreuz, who organised it. Abe Baum stepped out in front and explained in his own words how the operation had come to an end. There had been no surrender, but rather the departure of small groups from the battlefield. Baum was wounded while being taken prisoner, and admitted to the Serbian Hospital at the POW camp.

1330: Back at the main gate of the Infanterie-Schule, Georg Schlereth was not to be outdone. He gave each of the 30 veterans a bottle of Hammelburg wine as a token of his thanks for what he had learnt from the Americans in 1945, namely the notion of democracy and the right of free speech. We took our leave of the veterans, who thanked us warmly for the trouble we had gone to, and we waved after the coach as it drove off. Monday would be another tiring day for them — off to Leipzig for Colditz Castle and from there to Berlin. The 48 hours at Hammelburg were over. I was exhausted, but very happy.