

JAY- This is an account written by Col. John Ray
It was given to me by a mutual friend

PATTON RAIDS THE POW CAMP AT HAMMELBURG

I am going to talk about the raid on the German POW camp at Hammelburg. I was there and it was exciting. For those of you who have not heard about it, in March 1945 General Patton sent a task force 60 miles inside the German lines to liberate the POW camp which, among others, included his son-in-law, Lieutenant Colonel John Knight Waters who, as a member of the 1st Armored Division, was captured at the Kasserine Pass in North Africa. It is a good story, but before I get into it I thought I'd give a brief review of how I got there in the first place.

After four years of college and one year of graduate school I was drafted in August 1941 to serve in the Last Good War, and it was a good war despite Paul Fussell's unfortunate diatribe. There was basic training at Camp Croft, S.C.; the 29th Division when it was still square and still under an ill-disciplined and inept National Guard cadre; Infantry OCS at Fort Benning; and the newly activated 94th Infantry Division at Fort Custer, Michigan. I was part of the reception committee that met the new commander, Major General Harry Malony, at the train station at Battle Creek. He was a short, stocky, rather pompous man who later became Chief of Military History. He carried a swagger stick as he headed for his sedan. Within the swagger stick was an air pressure gage. He checked the

tires, found them wanting, ate out his reception committee, and inaugurated what was to be a command phobia--tire pressure.

The division soon left for Camp Phillips, Kansas, where we got our men directly from the reception stations, provided all individual training within the division framework, then the several elements of unit training ending with Tennessee Maneuvers. Then to Camp McCain, MS, to do squad problems in the Blue Mountains. It was quite a letdown. While I was up in the mountains my best friend volunteered the two of us as overseas replacements. I want to make this clear, because periodically divisions undergoing training in the U.S. got calls for replacements. And I assure you that the officers selected were not candidates for immediate promotion to higher grades.

I was part of a replacement package in Somerset, England, and on D plus 5 landed on Utah Beach to be assigned as a weapons platoon leader of an infantry company of the 90th Division that had landed on D-Day. I was captured on D plus 20 while on a patrol behind enemy lines.

Three months later I arrived at Oflag 64 in Schubin, Poland, the permanent POW camp for American ground officers. On 20 January 1945, to the sound of German-Russian combat, we left Oflag 64, presumably for a train 10 kilometers away. Instead, after 45 days and over 300 miles

of walking, some of us arrived at the POW camp at Hammelburg which, since the Bulge, had been receiving captured U.S. Army ground officers.

Now, we'll talk about Hammelburg, beginning with a description of the operation and its fate based on published accounts and ending with a worm's eye view of the fiasco--that is, how I remember it.

By 23 March, Patton's Third Army was across the Rhine heading for the Main River, 20 miles to the east. Next day the XII Corps Commander, Major General Manton Eddy, called the 4th Armored Division Commander, Brigadier General William Hoge, to tell him that Patton wanted a task force to go to Hammelburg and liberate the 900 Americans at the prison camp. One of Patton's aides, Major Alexander Stiller, arrived at Hoge's headquarters the next day and said he was going along. Hoge protested to Eddy who protested to Patton--to no avail.

The task force troops came from Lieutenant Colonel Creighton Abrams Combat Command B--294 men and 53 vehicles, including 10 Sherman tanks, 6 light tanks, 3 105mm assault guns, and 27 halftracks to bring back the prisoners. Feisty Captain Abe Baum commanded the task force. In civilian life he had been a pattern cutter in a New York blouse factory. Patton's aide, Major Stiller, would accompany Baum as an observer. "Patton wants me to go

along, because I'll recognize Johnny Waters," Stiller told an officer of the task force.

Captain Baum was asleep on the hood of his jeep on the afternoon of 26 March when he was awakened and told of his mission. By 7 p.m. that same day Task Force Baum was ready to go and departed. It met unexpected resistance at the outset and had to be helped by Lieutenant Colonel Abrams' forces. Throughout most of the trip the task force met surprised townspeople and little resistance. But it confronted a barricade in the city of Lohr and lost a Sherman tank. Following the left bank of the Main, the task force encountered a flak train and destroyed its engine and its 20mm antiaircraft guns. At Gemunden, Baum encountered an unsuspecting German division, and the subsequent action forced him to detour to the north and seek another crossing of the Sinn River.

The task force captured a German general and liberated 700 Soviet prisoners of war to whom Baum entrusted the 200-plus German prisoners his men had accumulated: poor German prisoners. At mid-afternoon, the Americans encountered a German assault gun battalion which just happened to be passing through Hammelburg. A fire fight resulted.

The largest contingent of prisoners at Hammelburg were the Serbs who had been captured in 1941. They befriended and contributed food to the Americans who began to arrive

in January 1945. It was their radio that alerted the camp of the imminence of the task force.

Baum got to the camp with a greatly reduced force. Not only were there now fewer vehicles, but there were vastly more prisoners than had been expected. The senior American POW, Colonel Paul Goode, said there was no way the halftracks could accommodate all the prisoners so they should either go back to camp or head west on foot, toward the American lines--60 miles away. Many went back; some of us went with the halftracks. It was night when Baum began his return. Advanced parties explored best possible routes, road blocks were encountered, the task force regrouped on a hill not far from the camp, and Pop Goode decided it was best to return to the camp on foot. The large majority of the prisoners did so. Baum attempted to regroup but was overwhelmed. At the end it was every man for himself. Baum was wounded and captured, and it was all over. So much for the overall picture.

Now, for the worm's eye view. Hammelburg was a disaster. The Americans captured during the Bulge were dominated by two regiments of the 106th Infantry Division--the Lionheads, the green division that had been placed in a safe sector of the American lines and was immediately overrun by the German attack. The two regimental

commanders were not all that great, and Colonel Goode and John Waters did much to rejuvenate the prisoners.

The food was terrible. The weekly meat allowance was divided into two meals of soup. The rest of the time we also had soup: one made with sugar beets and water, without salt, or even a bone, the other a salty ersatz sauerkrautish concoction. With such a liquid diet we urinated a lot--say four or five times a night.

Unfortunately, the latrines were separate buildings alongside the barracks. One night a German guard shot and killed an American prisoner heading for the john. The Germans were sorry, and the funeral on a cold, rainy day was as demoralizing an event as could ever happen.

Thereafter when I went to the latrine, four or five times a night, I never knew whether to be obvious and hence serve as a target for another careless guard or be furtive, inviting the attention of a suspicious sentry.

At Schubin we had all sorts of efficient American-run facilities--from schools to football leagues to dental chairs--Hammelburg had not much of anything. I have a vivid memory of great discomfort resulting from an impacted bowel. No action for days on end. In desperation I went to the infirmary to seek relief. An American sergeant, upon hearing my complaint, said "Hell, use your finger." For the next hour or so I forgot all about the lousy food.

In any situation where there is an absence of information, that gap is filled with rumors. And as prisoners, there were some areas about which we had no information. For some time, the rumors had involved the arrival of American forces. Apparently the Serbs had picked up word of the task force on their radio. Suddenly, one afternoon while we were gazing on the field and hill beyond the wire, a haystack went up in flames. American vehicles appeared from behind the hill, and one tank headed for our compound and tore through the wire. A large lieutenant dismounted and ran toward us brandishing a .45. John Waters was seriously wounded by a German guard. We had been told to stay put, but finally we were able to rush to the vehicles. I found a place on an ammunition halftrack. Then came the word: get off the vehicles, go back to camp or head west toward the American lines. Those of us with good seats stayed put. The lead tank was shot out. We waited it seemed an eternity while scouts were surveying the best routes. We finally headed out only to stop and wait again. I was about five vehicles back and up front a German soldier spotted the convoy and retreated screaming. I expected that they would have bazookas in place by the time my vehicle made it to that position. Nothing. We went through a village. A crewman told me if

we made the main highway we were home free. We made the highway, and the Germans shot out the lead tank.

Baum regrouped and returned to a hill not too far from the camp. There was a council of war. Colonel Goode said it was best to go back. There was no question in my mind. All these events had taken the entire night, and it was now near dawn.

We trudged through the same gap in the Hammelburg fence that had been made by the lieutenant and his tank. Believe it or not, a German guard standing near the breach said in perfect English as I passed by: "Get some sleep boys; you had a tough night."

Next day they sent us by train to Nurnburg; some other contingents made the journey on foot. Back in 1983 Bruce Sieman and I visited Hammelburg which is now the home of the German Infantry School. An old TRADOC friend was the U.S. liaison officer there and arranged for us to see the excellent museum and even my old barracks. And he arranged for all to meet the mayor of Hammelburg in his 15th century rathouse. He didn't speak English, and I no longer remembered German. It was rather awkward, and his announcement that his wife had worked in the POW camp didn't help things. What did help was a glass of the excellent Frankish wine and the bottles we were given as we departed.

Much has been written about the Hammelburg raid-- service school monographs, chapters of books, entire volumes. A persistent question is: Did Patton know that son-in-law John Waters was in the camp?

In late January several American prisoners escaped from the column leaving Schubin and made it rather quickly to Moscow. As a result Major General John Deane, head of the American mission, learned that Waters was marching west and wired this information to Eisenhower. On 23 March, three days before the raid, Patton wrote his wife: "We are headed right for John's place and may get there before he is moved." On 25 March he wrote again: "Hope to send an expedition tomorrow to get John." And you'll remember the reason Major Stiller was sent with the task force.

Most of the American generals in the chain of command felt that the Hammelburg raid was ill-advised and based on motives other than tactical necessity. Ill advised, indeed. All 53 of the task force vehicles were lost, and all of its 294 members were listed as missing. After the war, Baum's division determined that 9 men were killed, 33 wounded, and 16 unaccounted for and presumed dead. Apparently no record is available of the fate of the prisoners of war.

No wonder Patton answered "No" when John Waters, from his hospital bed, asked his father-in-law pointblank: "Did

you know I was there?" And Patton provided a similar answer to a question, put to him by Abe Baum.

My memories of my college classes (Dickinson, 1940) are not often vivid, but in a 1937 English class Professor Schector made an indelible impression--a good composition should have three things: unity, emphasis, and coherence. Over the years I have offered this advice to many young historians. I'm going to break this rule now, just as I did in my introduction to these remarks, to conclude with a few words about the overall effect of my POW experience. I want to indicate that while Hammelburg was adrenalin packed and exciting, the sum total of my experience provided a more lasting influence.

Throughout my time as prisoner I never doubted that I would return. In fact, that day was always right around the corner, which made the Christmas 1944 news of Allied reverses in the Bulge so much more disheartening.

But the day Patton's 14th Armored Division liberated us at Moosburg the German guard fought among themselves over the degree of resistance that should be offered. One of the prisoners in my barracks was killed in the exchange. Then another was killed by a stray shot at Camp Lucky Strike on the Normandy coast. The ship taking us home was the first not to travel in convoy, and I was sure that there was a U-Boat lurking out there which had not gotten

the word or whose captain wanted to sink one more allied ship for the Fuhrer.

In short, after I was liberated I got the feeling that I wasn't going to make it home. The taxi from Fort Dix to my uncle's home in Trenton stopped on the opposite side of the street. Crossing the street was my last psychological obstacle. When my uncle opened the door the feeling was over.

Worse captivities produced different reactions. The moving account of several civilian German nurses, upon being freed by the Vietnamese, tells of their huddling together in the airplane taking them home, fearful of what was to come. And then there was the British lieutenant in World War II who, upon liberation, hesitated before taking a ride to his unit, because back at prison camp he had left 6 bars of soap, 300 cigarettes, and a greatcoat. The explanation? The experience of liberation is almost as traumatic as that of capture. When captured, a psychological spring is wound up; when freed, it is released.

The saddest story is told by Viktor Frankl, an Austrian psychologist who spent three years in Nazi concentration camps. Upon liberation, he and some friends walked in a meadow trying to comprehend the meaning of freedom. A colorful rooster provided their first spark of

joy. But that evening one prisoner asked another, "Tell me, were you pleased today?" And the other replied, feeling ashamed as he did not know we all felt similarly, 'Truthfully, no.' We had literally lost the ability to feel pleased and had to relearn it slowly."

Some final words about the meaning of it all, and please don't take this as a testimonial for becoming a POW. I suspect few former prisoners will go as far as Alexander Solzhenitsyn who, because his terrible experiences had nourished his soul, concludes Gulag Archipelago with "Bless you, prison, for having been my life." But, I have not found anyone who will disagree that prison camp experience is a marvelous teacher of human nature. Some one said that he could learn more about man in two years in prison camp than in two decades of normal life.

For me, in addition to the bittersweet nostalgia of the experiences and comradeship, my period of captivity formulated and shaped my overall outlook, understanding, and sensitivity. If it did not "nourish my soul," it proved to be the ultimate factor in shaping my philosophy of life.

Brooks E. Kleber