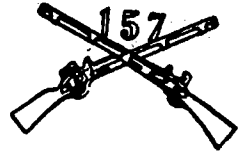




157th Infantry Association



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THE ASCHAFFENBURG BATTLE

PROLOGUE

During the early morning hours of March 26, 1945, the 45th Infantry Division, as part of the Seventh Army, made an assault crossing of the Rhine River on a fifteen-mile front north of Wurms between Gernsheim and Mannheim. A day or so earlier, General Patton's Third Army had already crossed the Rhine further north and was closing in on the Schweinheim-Aschaffenburg complex on the Main River. The Germans systematically demolished the bridges across the Main River, with one exception. By both a stroke of luck and daring, the 4th Armored Division of the Third Army seized intact a railroad bridge across the Main River opposite the twin cities of Schweinheim-Aschaffenburg. The division established a bridgehead across the river by the evening of March 25.

Almost simultaneously with the crossing of the Rhine by the 45th Division on March 26, the boundaries between the Seventh Army and the Third Army were changed with the Aschaffenburg area being assigned to the Seventh Army. As a result of this sudden boundary change, a strange and illogical event occurred. General Patton, in great secrecy, ordered a small task force from the 4th Armored Division to make a raid deep into German territory for the purpose of liberating American PWs then believed to be held in a prison camp near Hammelburg, some fifty miles from Aschaffenburg. General Patton's son-in-law, Lt. Col. John Waters, was reported to be a prisoner there. As it turned out, three officers from the 157th Infantry Regiment were also prisoners at Hammelburg, Lts. John E. Floyd, Richard Baron and William Meiggs, all having been captured at Reipertswiller in January.

The task force ordered by General Patton consisted of one tank company, one armored infantry company, one light tank platoon, one assault gun platoon and a recon party, a total of 294 men and 53 vehicles. It was commanded by Captain Abraham Baum. With the help of the 4th Armored Division, Task Force Baum was launched on its mission during the night of March 26, but only after a pitched battle to clear it

through Schweinheim. Aschaffenburg was bypassed. After the task force was on its way, the 4th Armored Division withdrew back across the Main River and moved out of the area, leaving the task force to shift for itself.

For the task force, it was a mission impossible. The round trip would cover over a hundred miles in enemy territory against overwhelming odds. It could not carry sufficient gasoline for the return trip, and it lacked the capacity to transport all the prisoners even if gasoline were available.

THE BATTLE

On the morning of March 27, the day after the regiment had crossed the Rhine River, I received an order to move my battalion (3rd Bn., 157th Inf.) to the high ground immediately beyond Aschaffenburg, about 40 miles distant. The assigned mission was to secure the ground for the anticipated advance of the 45th Division through the area on the following day. For this purpose, the battalion was fully motorized. There was attached to the battalion a field artillery battery (158th FA) and a tank destroyer platoon (645th TD Bn.). I was informed that Aschaffenburg had been cleared by the Third Army and that I was to cross the Main River on a railroad bridge which had been seized by that army. It seemed to be a simple, uneventful mission.

I was told nothing about Task Force Baum, then operating somewhere in my assigned area. From subsequent events it would appear that the 45th Division had been told nothing about this task force. My orders, however, did include one bit of curious information. I was told that I must not fire on any American tanks that I might encounter to my front. There was no further information, and I assumed that I would encounter elements of the Third Army in the Aschaffenburg area.

My battalion task force departed the assembly area before noon and moved in a column toward the Main River, with the tank destroyers in the lead and the artillery battery trailing. About two hours later as we approached the ridge overlooking the river valley and Aschaffenburg, I halted the column. The twin cities of Schweinheim and Aschaffenburg were clearly visible, as was the railroad bridge we were to cross. As we surveyed the area there was no movement to be seen nor any sounds to be heard. Through my field glasses I could see that the railroad bridge had been planked over, but otherwise I could see no evidence that the Third Army had ever been there. It was a setting in which any infantryman could smell trouble.

I thereupon detrucked the battalion and sent one infantry platoon toward and across the bridge. The silence continued until a full infantry company crossed the bridge and approached the nearby town of Schweinheim. The silence was then broken by small arms and mortar

fire coming from Schweinheim. The battle was then on. The rest of the battalion and the tank destroyers crossed the bridge, while the artillery battery went into position behind the ridge.

Shortly after the lead company of the battalion crossed the bridge along with my command party, we made contact with a cavalry recon troop from the 4th Armored Division dug in along the upstream bank of the river. This troop had less than a hundred men who were manning a few armored cars and some jeeps. The troop captain informed me that he had been left to guard the bridge "until relieved." He also told me that German civilians had informed him that there were several thousand German troops defending the Schweinheim-Aschaffenburg complex. He further said that the Third Army had not cleared either Schweinheim or Aschaffenburg, but had merely crossed the river and withdrawn after some fighting in Schweinheim. He said nothing about Task Force Baum. Apparently he knew nothing about the task force and the fact that it had gone through Schweinheim the night before.

After getting all the information the captain seemed to have, I advised him to rejoin his unit. He and his men left immediately via the railroad bridge. I then relayed his information to regimental headquarters and made plans for a coordinated attack on Schweinheim. The attack was made in the late afternoon with two rifle companies, supported by the tank destroyers and the artillery battery. By nightfall the two companies had penetrated into the near edge of Schweinheim.

At about the same time my battalion reached the Main River on that first afternoon, Task Force Baum, against all odds, reached the Hammelburg prison camp, some fifty miles behind the German lines at Aschaffenburg. The task force had lost both men and vehicles. Even at full strength it did not have the capability of picking up all of the American prisoners there, numbering over a thousand. On a volunteer basis, however, it did load on its tanks and halftracks a number of American prisoners, three of whom were Lts. Baron (D Co.), Floyd (C Co.) and Meiggs (C Co.) of the 157th Infantry Regiment. Ironically, Col. Waters, the presumed focus of the rescue attempt, was seriously wounded in the taking of the camp and could not be evacuated. In the late afternoon the task force started back toward Aschaffenburg. By then the Germans were fully apprised of its mission and composition. The end for Task Force Baum was near.

On the following morning, March 28, my battalion resumed its attack on Schweinheim. By noon the battalion had cleared about a third of the town against fierce resistance. Enemy mortar fire was heavy and accurate. The battalion advanced from building to building with the aid of grenades and bazooka and tank destroyer fire. The fighting was at close quarters and casualties began to mount. We began receiving tank fire from the far edge of Aschaffenburg. We identified the tank as American, but obviously in German hands. I finally ordered the tank

destroyers to engage the tank, and that was the end of that annoyance. A short time later the tank destroyer platoon leader and my operations officer were both wounded and evacuated.

On that same morning some thirty miles away, the last of Task Force Baum was annihilated. Two hundred ninety-four courageous men were either killed or captured, along with an unknown number of American prisoners who elected to throw their lot with the task force. So ended one of the most bizarre and unnecessary episodes of World War II. A few days later, elements of the Seventh Army entered Hammelburg.

By early afternoon, all elements of the Third Battalion were fully committed in Schweinheim. Because of constant sniper infiltration around the battalion left flank, progress was slow. However, late that afternoon the Second Battalion of the regiment arrived and relieved most of the pressure on the left flank. The following morning, March 29, the First Battalion of the regiment was committed. The remainder of the division, the 179th and 180th Infantry regiments were also committed on both flanks of the Schweinheim-Aschaffenburg complex and the battle began building toward its climax.

By the morning of March 30, a fully coordinated division attack was under way. Nevertheless, it was not until the evening of April 2 that the resistance began to crumble. Final capitulation came on the morning of April 3. The final days can be best described by excerpts from news releases made during the fighting, as follows:

March 31. "Despite four air attacks by American fighter-bombers and incessant concentrations of artillery, fanatically resisting German soldiers continued to defend the besieged Main River town of Aschaffenburg, as 45th Division troops continued the third day of their assault on the city.

Steel and concrete casements and pill-boxes that form a perimeter defense around the town were stubbornly defended as veteran Thunderbird troops inched forward to blast the dug-in Germans with hand grenades and bazookas.

In Schweinheim, sister city of Aschaffenburg, three counterattacks were hurled against our troops. The first which came at 0100 yesterday struck at the 157th Infantry, but was almost immediately thrown back by Thunderbird troops who learned how to handle infiltration tactics in the hard fighting of the Vosges mountains last fall and winter.

At 0320 yesterday a second counterattack of greater strength again hit the 157th. Intense, bitter, hand-to-hand fighting lasted for two hours before the frenzied assault of the German troops was beaten back."

April 1. "Tenacious and bitterly resisting German troops that

were cleared from the Main River town of Schweinheim four times yesterday afternoon were still infiltrating into the half-destroyed city of death to snipe from behind piles of rubble at troops of the veteran 45th Division.

In Schweinheim and its sister city Aschaffenburg, Thunderbird troops inched forward against a curtain of small arms and mortar fire in a room-to-room attempt to clear the cities completely of fanatically stubborn defenders.

1500 rounds of enemy mortar fire alone fell in Schweinheim yesterday, with one area reporting 300 rounds for a single fifteen-minute period.

Troops of the 45th Division had driven the Krauts from Schweinheim four times yesterday, only to have them return by infiltration to harass our units from sniper positions behind heaps of rubble and from blown out windows and roofs.

Late this afternoon, small parties of Germans were still holding out in the northeast and northwest corners of the town. But no one in the attacking units would report the town as cleared."

April 2. "Schweinheim, twin city of Aschaffenburg, was cleared last night in a tooth and claw fight, after infantrymen of the veteran 45th Division fought from room-to-room into the town. At 1500 yesterday, more than 600 fanatically resisting German soldiers of the garrison town were forced from their training center barracks and taken prisoners in a move that broke the back of the town's defenses.

The third battalion of the 157th Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. Felix L. Sparks of Miami, Arizona, edged into the town at 0730 yesterday morning against a curtain of small arms and mortar fire. In addition to the frontal battle for the town, the veteran doughboys were continually harassed by snipers from their rear.

At 1500 King Company, led by 1st Lt. Charles M. Campbell of Wyalusing, Pa., broke into the barracks in a wild assault that routed the defenders. The haul of PWs brought the division's total to 1376 for the day."

April 3. "Two regiments of the veteran 45th Division swung east and north to bypass the besieged Main River city of Aschaffenburg in a sweep that cleared more than a dozen towns as the two-pronged attack penetrated fifteen miles further into the heart of the Reich. The third regiment, the 157th Infantry, which has been carrying the bitter fight into Aschaffenburg, was left at the 'Casino on the Main' with orders to encircle and reduce the town.

At 0630 yesterday morning, the second battalion of the 157th, commanded by Major Gus H. 'Wildcat' Heilman, whose home is the University of Virginia, moved from Schweinheim northeast into Aschaffenburg. At the same time, the first battalion, under Lt. Col. Ralph M. Krieger of Craig, Colorado, swung his unit to the east end of the doomed town.

Fresh from its victory in Haibach, the third battalion led by Lt. Col. Felix L. Sparks of Miami, Arizona, swung to the northeast to capture Goldbach and then down again to Aschaffenburg to complete the ring of steel around the city.

Fighting into the town was as bitter as at any time during the five-day siege. George Company hitting toward the center of town continually came under sniper fire that harassed them from all sides.

One man describing the action said: 'If you watched the company going up the street, you would see a whole platoon go into a house. Then there would be shots and grenade bursts. Then about twenty minutes later, you would see forty Krauts come marching out of the house with one of our boys for a guard. Then the casualties would be brought out, ours and the Germans. And then the platoon would go into the next house and the whole process would be repeated again.'"

April 3. "After several days of bitter fighting and heavy casualties, the German garrison in the City of Aschaffenburg on the Main River, Germany, capitulated to troops of the 45th Division's 157th Infantry. The surrender of the German Commander, Major Lambert, and his remaining officers was made to Lieutenant Colonel Felix L. Sparks, Commander of the 157th Infantry's Third Battalion.

Evidence of the determination to hold Aschaffenburg at all costs was disclosed in an order found in the German headquarters. It read:

'Soldiers, Men of the Wehrmacht, Comrades--

The fortress of ASCHAFFENBURG will be defended to the last man. As long as the enemy gives us time we will prepare and employ our troops to our best advantage.

This means...Fight! Erect dugouts! Make barriers! Get supplies! And win!

As of today, everyone is to give to his last. I order that no one shall rest more than 3 hours out of 24. I forbid any sitting around or loafing.

Our belief is that it is our mission to give the cursed enemy the greatest resistance and to send as many as possible of them to the devil.

signed, Lambert, Major'"

And so ended the battle of Aschaffenburg. The Germans suffered about 5,000 casualties, with over a thousand killed. The 157th Infantry Regiment suffered about two hundred casualties, of whom about ninety were from the Third Battalion, including eleven officers from that battalion. It was the last major battle of the war for the regiment. About a month later, the war was over.

EPILOGUE

Aschaffenburg in 1945 was the home of the SS officer candidate school, commanded by Major von Lambert. It was the staff and students of that school who provided the fanaticism for the defense of the area. Other regular army troops, many of them hospital convalescents, were impressed into the defense by Major Lambert under the threat of execution. Some were actually executed for their reluctance to serve. While I accepted his surrender, along with about fifty of his officers, I had no conversation with him. I am informed by Bob Macri, one of our members, that Major Lambert was executed as a war criminal after the war by the French Government. The French army was in no way involved in the Aschaffenburg battle. I assume therefore that Lambert was tried and convicted of a crime or crimes against French citizens which occurred prior to the Aschaffenburg battle.

As regards the Hammelburg incident, I had absolutely no knowledge of that tragic affair and its bearing upon the Aschaffenburg battle until I met Richard Baron at the regimental reunion in Boston a few years ago. I have since talked to both Baron and Ernie Floyd, who were both prisoners at Hammelburg. They and Bill Meiggs were recaptured during the escape try, but subsequently liberated at the end of the war. The current whereabouts of Meiggs is unknown. Both Baron and Floyd are listed in the current regimental roster.

Most of my knowledge of the Hammelburg incident comes from the book "Raid! The Untold Story of Patton's Secret Mission," published by G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York. Authors of the book are Richard Baron, Major Abe Baum and Richard Goldhurst. I found the book fascinating and informative. To me it provided some answers to the Aschaffenburg battle that I had been searching for these many years since the battle occurred. To those members of the regiment who were at Aschaffenburg, or to those interested in military history, I heartily recommend that you obtain a copy of the book.

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