

Patton's Task Force Baum Raid Lives Again!

by Jim Sudmeier

What in the world is all the ruckus? The unmistakable whine of a dozen vintage Willys Jeeps convoying through one German village after another -- then a half-track -- all vehicles filled with scores of American GIs wearing the insignias of the legendary 4th Armored Division, the spearhead of Patton's Third Army?



(All photos courtesy of Herbert Hausmann.)

It looks like a movie set from "Band of Brothers" without the guns. Why are hundreds of German civilians lining the roads? Many scratch their heads in puzzlement, while others wave, cheer, and smile. Reporters and TV crews are following closely. Now the mayor appears carrying a white flag and surrenders the town. The commanding American officer in the lead Jeep who accepts the surrender is none other than 84-year-old Major Abe Baum.

A few of the older Germans remember the actual event from Mar. 26-28, 1945, being commemorated here today, and some of them crowd around Baum's Jeep as if he were a rock star, some with tears in their eyes, to tell their stories, to shake the hand of their former enemy, and to seek his autograph. Then they go together, both Americans and Germans to the Town Hall for an official reception, speeches, and food, drink, and good fellowship. At one stop in Gemeunden, Mayor Schiebel

jokes, "I trust we are giving you a better reception than the first time you came here."



Major Abraham Baum welcomed by Mayor Thomas Schiebel of Gemeunden.

At another stop, the German Infantry School in Hammelburg, all the 1945-style "GIs" stood in the same cafeteria line with soldiers wearing modern German uniforms. Many puzzled looks, as if to say "Oh No!..They're back!," came from the Germans, many of whom had evidently not been informed about the impending "reinvansion."

The retracing on Oct. 22-23, 2005, of Task Force Baum's Hammelburg Raid, one of the most fascinating and controversial chapters of WWII, was the brain child of two German Army soldiers, Lt. Col. Peter Domes and Master Sgt. Martin Heinlein, who have turned their hobby of gathering the complete history of this raid onto a German and English website (www.taskforcebaum.de). Domes and Heinlein, with the assistance of their 10-member Task Force Baum Working Group, have become the unquestioned world authorities on this raid.



Major Baum and raid retracing organizer German Lt. Col. Peter Domes (photo: Gesa Albert).

When then Captain Baum and his armored task force of 313 men and 57 vehicles came thundering in the middle of the night on the daring mission through this 50 mile route of forested hills, wide valleys, and villages just east of Frankfurt, Baum was a 24-year-old, battle-hardened, handsome Jewish guy from the Bronx, with a thin Erroll Flynn style mustache.

In combat in France and at the Battle of the Bulge, Baum earned several Bronze and Silver Stars, Purple Hearts, and the nickname "Able" -- a guy with a bullhorn voice, decisive leadership, and undisputed courage. His reputation was that of an Officer who always got the job done. Sixty-one years later, despite the recent artificial knee replacement, the leadership qualities and the sheer force of his personality are still evident to all, undiminished by time.

What was the purpose of this daring nighttime raid, 50 miles behind enemy lines? It was the personal business of General George S. Patton Jr. himself. He wanted to rescue his son-in-law, Lt. Col. John K. Waters, from the German POW camp at Hammelburg. The unauthorized raid was out of bounds, crossing into territory assigned to the Seventh US Army. Thus Patton did not dare send a

force large enough to ensure its success. Nor did he provide accurate intelligence or air support. The number of US prisoners was grossly underestimated (there were 1500, not 300). Nobody suspected that Baum would run into a German Tank Destroyer company with 10 Hetzers.

Thus the raid was doomed to failure, with 25 of the raiders killed, most of the rest taken prisoner, and a score of American POWs killed. Col. Waters was seriously wounded in the melee, shot near the spine, and could not be moved. These failings lie with the planners of the raid, and not on its execution by Capt. Baum or his courageous men. Baum was wounded twice during the mission and had the Distinguished Service Cross pinned on him by Gen. Patton while still recuperating in a military hospital. After the war, Gen. Patton would admit to the Hammelburg raid as his "one mistake."

The reenactors, about 40 strong, were history buffs, mostly civilians, coming from as far away as Munich and Czech Republic. Their passion for history is reflected in their beautifully restored Jeeps, half-tracks, uniforms, and equipment.



Major Baum inspects raid reenactors at the beginning of the route in Nilkheim.

When Major Baum arrived on Saturday morning, Oct. 22, with Col. Domes by

Jeep in a light rain at the tour's starting point, the Nilkheim athletic field, he was astonished at the large number of military vehicles and spectators waiting there, and the GI reenactors standing in formation. The troops were commanded to attention by Sgt. Heinlein, and Major Baum conducted an inspection.

Then the convoy took off, following as closely as possible the original route of the raid, with traffic controlled by Fire Chief Herbert Hausmann and volunteers. The first stop was for a briefing at Laufach, where TFB lost its first tank and its first man KIA. The second briefing was at Bischbornerhof, where TFB opened fire on a large group of German soldiers doing their morning calisthenics in a field. The briefings were conducted by Col. Domes, Sgt. Heinlein, and various members of the TFB Working Group. After lunch and an official reception by Mayor Siegfried Selinger at the Rathaus in Lohr, the convoy's next briefing stop was at Langenprozelten, and finally Gemuenden.



Major Baum signs the Golden Book of Gemuenden with the Mayor standing by.

Another big surprise for Major Baum was Mayor Schiebel's reception in the

Town Hall of Gemuenden. Baum was led into the hall where the Mayor was waiting along with scores of spectators and photographers, and all the GIs standing at attention as an honor guard, which Baum passed in review -- a moment richly symbolic and emotional. Mayor Schiebel gave a welcoming speech, and invited Baum to sign his name in the town's Golden Book for distinguished visitors.

When TFB arrived in Gemuenden early in the morning of Mar. 27, 1945, the reception they received was decidedly unfriendly. The Germans suicidally blew up the Saale bridge in Baum's face, knocked out 3 Sherman tanks, killed a half-dozen GIs, captured many more, and shot Baum's right hand and leg full of shrapnel that cut to the bone. The defenders were mostly young combat engineers well-armed with Panzerfausts, the very effective one-shot, blunt-headed, armor-piercing rocket. The lost bridge forced Baum to take a detour to the north in search of a river crossing. Gemuenden suffered far more, being 2/3 burned to the ground and losing 65 civilians, mostly from Allied bombs in Mar.-Apr., 1945.



Retracement vehicles parked for the night in the Huttenschloss courtyard in Gemuenden.

Old wounds were long since forgotten, however, at the festive dinner hosted by Gudrun Schneider and the Film-Photo-Sound Club at the Huttenschloss, a former

castle near the embattled bridge, now housing their Museum. Following normal protocol, the GI enlisted men went through the chow line before the officers and dignitaries.



Mayor Waldemar Horn of Rieneck with the white "surrender" flag talks with Sgt. Heinlein.

On Sunday morning, Oct. 23, the column rumbled off northward to Rieneck, where the good-natured Mayor Waldemar Horn appeared with a white flag, "surrendering" the town to Major Baum and inviting the entire group to breakfast.

Next stop was Burgsinn where a "guide/hostage" was captured (a friend of Col. Domes) and a briefing held. Here TFB found a bridge over the Saale, so they could proceed eastward to Hammelburg over back roads, aided by local guides. The next briefing stops were at Weickersgrueben and Hammelburg. Then the column was admitted to the German Army base where TFB met its end. Lunch was served in the mess hall of the German Infantry School, reenactors in strange juxtaposition with regular German Army.

There was a briefing in Hoellrich, where one of the escape attempts was carried out, and finally the entire group assembled for a briefing, final words, thanks, and group photos on the flank of the "Reussenberg"

(Hill 427) where the coordinated German attack on the morning of March 28 scattered the Task Force and ended any hope of escaping as a military unit.



Major Baum describes his "last stand" on Hill 427 before the wreck of his 105mm assault gun.

This beautifully planned and executed retracing event was originally intended by Col. Domes and Sgt. Heinlein as a reward for the TFB Working Group researchers, reporting their latest results along the way. When Major Baum agreed to attend, along with his wife Eileen, sons David and Eric, daughter Susan, and David's wife Nancy, it became more of a celebrity event.

Domes' and Heinlein's passion for history has obviously infected the hundreds of participants and spectators in this event, testifying to the great public interest that remains in WWII. Their research results will soon appear in book form ("Alarm, die Panzerspitze kommt!" plus an English edition). Domes and Heinlein are also collaborators with the present author on a new screenplay, "Patton's Secret Mission," which will soon be searching for a producer.