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A PERSONAL NOTE FOR MAJ. "ABLE" BAUM:

53 YEARS CAN DO STRANGE THINGS TO A PERSON'S MEMORY -
HENCE I SUSPECT MY RECOLLECTION OF EVENTS IN THE ATTACHED
MAY NOT ALWAYS BE IN AGREEMENT WITH THE FACTS. MY APOLOGIES
WHERE THAT MAY BE THE CASE.

YOU MAY PREFER NOT TO RESPOND TO MY QUESTIONS - ESPECIALLY
THE ONE ABOUT THE DELAYED DEPARTURE FROM "64." WHILE I KNOW
THAT MANY OF THE '64" KINGIES HELD CCL. GOODE IN HIGH ESTEEM,
I, AND MY "BUDDY" CAPT FONTLITZ (INFANTRY) DID NOT FULLY SHARE
THAT OPINION - WONDERING WHY HE HAD BEEN GIVEN A CRITICAL COMBAT
ASSESSMENT, AT HIS AGE. ANYWAY, WHATEVER THE REASON FOR THE
DELAY, MY RESPECT AND DEEP APPRECIATION FOR YOUR MAGNIFICENT
EFFORT WILL NEVER DIMINISH

SINCERELY.

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PS - AN AFTERTHOUGHT: WAS THE 15 LT. I MENTIONED
A WEST-POINTER? THAT SEEMS TO BE STUCK IN
MY MEMORY.



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The following account is based on the memory of the writer of this report, reinforced by Charles Whiting's 48 Hours To Hammelburg.

I was among those who were on the recent march from Oflag 64 who had arrived at Hammelburg eighteen days before the Baum Task Force attack. All day on the 27th, everyone knew that something big was about to happen. Germans were running frantically around the compound, and motorcycles and command cars seemed to be running in and out constantly. Something, something big, (but what?) was going to happen. Every POW could feel it. Later in the afternoon, we learned as we heard gunfire coming from the west. Gradually, the gunfire grew louder and closer. First, the thud of heavy artillery. Then, the fast rattle of machine-gun fire. The steady rhythmic crack of American machine guns, punctuated by the rapid bursts of German burp guns could be heard. After a short firefight, all firing ceased.

I can never describe the thrill on seeing the first Sherman tank tearing through the hated barbed wire of our enclosure. And then, the first American officer appeared, crouching low, weapon in hand, approaching the first barracks. I would like to know, was that officer you, Major Baum?

But then, there was a long period of agonized silence. We were all ordered to sit tight. Some of us did. Others seized the opportunity to run out and greet their liberators. But those in my barracks, including Captain Jack Pontlitz (deceased), obeyed orders, and we sat tight where we were. It was agony as we waited for some word, some decision, some action. Finally, I think it was about four hours later, although it seemed like an eternity, word came from Col. Goode. We were told that we had three choices: first, we could stay in the compound if we wanted to; second, we could join the Baum Task Force and fight our way back if that was what we wanted to do; or third, those who wanted could take off on foot.

At this point, I have another question for Major Baum. According to Charles Whiting, the four-hour delay was the result of then Captain Baum's near total exhaustion from some 30 hours of intense action. However, the word, which came down to us in our barracks, was that it was indecision by Col. Goode. If possible, I would like to know what really happened during that four-hour period, when we POW's didn't know what was going on and were waiting impatiently for some answer.

Of the three choices offered by Col. Goode, Captain Pontlitz and I decided to join the Baum Task Force, and found a place on a half-track with five or six task force men. By this time, we were emotionally and physically exhausted. Not in very good physical shape to begin with, having just completed about a 400-mile march, we were truly fatigued. The tension of the day's actions only added to our poor physical and mental condition. Once we were outside the camp, Jack and I attached ourselves to one of the half-tracks headed west down one of the main highways. It was only a few minutes later, I think, before there was a tremendous explosion up ahead of our column. Apparently, the lead tank had taken a direct artillery hit. The tanks and the half-tracks were immediately taken

off the highway and headed up to Hill 427, just outside a little German village called Hessdorf, I believe. Word passed around quickly that gas was being siphoned from the tanks to the half-tracks so that, at the break of dawn, we'd take off cross-country as fast as those half-tracks would go!

While Jack and I, half asleep, were resting one of the half-tracks, there suddenly was a massive explosion right beside us. The half-track, not ten feet from ours, had taken a direct artillery hit, just as the lead tank in the column had earlier. I presume the artillery used for both hits were from eighty-eight's -- at least that's what it sounded like to us.

Jack and I immediately jumped out and decided we had to get out of there fast because artillery shells were falling all around us. Exhausted though we were, I am still amazed even today how fast we ran with shells falling everywhere. It didn't matter how tired we were or that we had just experienced a harrowing escape, when you are being shelled, you get up and you go! And, we did!

When we reached what we thought was about as far as we could go we spotted a patch of low evergreen trees. Jack and I immediately crawled under as far as we could and lay as quietly as possible. After several minutes, the German infantry apparently came through the area with search dogs. We heard the dogs barking, and listened breathlessly as the dogs approached our hiding place. We knew instinctively what was going on. Jack and I thought for certain the dogs would smell us out, but they didn't. We were safe for the moment. The Germans passed by our hiding place, leaving us undetected until daylight. We couldn't believe our luck!

Cautiously, we peered out from among the brush of evergreen trees. Seeing no Germans whatsoever, we very carefully and very quietly started to move away from the area. Several other men from the Baum Task Force quickly joined us. In this small group was a first lieutenant, and perhaps six or eight enlisted men.

Well, Jack and I joined this group, and together we decided on a battle plan, so-to-speak. Rather, it was an escape plan. We decided to stay hidden through the day and travel at night under the cover of darkness. Quickly and quietly as possible, we concealed ourselves through the day, making neither sound nor movement. But as soon as darkness fell, we struck out heading west. The plan that Pontlitz and I had worked out was to travel for two nights; then hide out and wait for the American forces to come and overtake us.

Before we started out, now being some 20 kilometers removed from Hammelburg, Jack and I decided, along with the lieutenant and the group of enlisted men from the Baum Task Force, that our chances for success would be greater if we split up. We believed our group was too large for safety. Well, Jack Pontlitz and I had been together all through the prison camp experience, and we were not about to separate at this stage.

So, since the lieutenant (I don't recall his name), was acquainted with the men from the Baum Task Force, and they were familiar with his leadership, we decided to split that way. The task force men, under the direction of the lieutenant would go to one end of the woods where we had hidden, and Jack and I would go to the other end of the woods.

We concealed ourselves beneath a huge brush-pile, where we rested for perhaps three or four hours. Almost as suddenly as our escape had begun, however, it was over for us. Three or four members of the Volksturm, which would be equivalent, I guess, to the home guard, were standing around our brush-pile with shotguns and rifles, jabbering at us in German to come out. I personally don't believe the Germans were certain there were any Americans hiding in the brush-pile, but with those weapons pointed at us, we took no chances. We came out and were, again, captured.

That was the end of our liberty. While it was short-lived, I shall never forget Captain Baum and his Task Force - those wonderful men who made even our temporary liberation possible.

Many, many years later, my oldest daughter and son-in-law (the boy was a lieutenant during the Vietnam War), were stationed in Germany, and my wife and I had the privilege of spending some time with them during their stay. My son-in-law, Lieutenant Jerry Teague, had come across Charles Whiting's book, 48 Hours to Hammelburg. With this book in hand, we followed every step of the Baum Task Force, using Whiting's map and his hourly and daily description of the progress, difficulties, and the fire-fights along the way. We traveled the exact route of your task force, from Schweinhurst, Germany, to Hammelburg. This was, indeed, a truly wonderful and moving experience for me, and I still wonder, even today, how you and your men could possibly have managed to travel that distance through enemy territory and arrive to liberate us - to say nothing about your ability to fight your way back out again.

It was a tremendous event, Major Baum, and regardless of the end, I know that those of us who survived will never forget the gallantry and the heroic efforts of you and your task force. So, this simple reiteration of my memories is just my way of saying... Thank You!

If you can, perhaps you might be able to answer something for me. The young first lieutenant who was with your task force and who, for a short period of time escaped with us - could you identify him and tell me what happened to him? Did he make it back? I never encountered him again, so I doubt if he was recaptured. Perhaps he was one of those who made it back. I hope so. In any event, it would be interesting to know.

I hope my experience with your task force will be of interest to you. It was, indeed, an honor to prepare it for you.

Prepared by then, Captain George Thomas of the 3rd United States Army, Antiaircraft Artillery.

George Thomas