

J, Wolfer

Tuesday, March 25, 2003 America Online: THO7448

Subj:Fwd: The Raid  
Date:12/5/02 9:57:56 AM Central Standard Time  
From:PDomes  
To:THO7448

Hello Bob,

we found another veteran of Task Force Baum.

Regards

Peter

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Forwarded Message:  
Subj:The Raid  
Date:12/5/02 9:46:25 AM Central Standard Time  
From:JWolfer8722  
To:PDomes, Martinheinlein

I said I would fill in the blanks to my original E-mail. I hate to burden you with all the detail but I just recently created the following Chronology for the VA in attempting to get some Medical Benefits with little records as a result of the 1973 fire in St. Louis. The part about my experience in the "Raid" is embedded in this Chronology. in red

Chronology  
Military Service  
James H. Wolfer

#### PROLOGUE

To better understand my particular situation, it is important to know that at the beginning of World War II, I was married, with two children, going to Engineering College at night and working in a Defense Plant during the day. Having three deferments kept me from being drafted until later in the War.

Another problem related to being drafted later was that I was always considered as a replacement and never became part of a unit until I was assigned in France upon my arrival there. I never trained with an organized unit and therefore had no "roots", never had any "buddies" like those who entered the service and immediately started

d training with an established organization and in all probability went overseas ,continued training and eventually found themselves in a combat situation with the same unit and with essentially the same "buddies".

The result of this ,is that I don't know a single person who can vouch for my presence(except for two persons who I will mention later in this chronology).

To further complicate the problem is the fact that my military records apparently were destroyed in the 1978 fire at the Military Records Storage Facility ,in St. Louis.I tried for many months to get my records but never got any response,until I wrote my Senator, The Honorable George Allen of Virginia. Not long after the National Personnel Records Center sent me a Certificate which was a generic document that shows the date of induction,the date of discharge ,my rank(which is incorrect),the fact that it was an Honorable Discharge. There are no military organizations or locations shown ,no dates of any military actions that I participated in, no fact that I was a POW,or that I was an MIA and that my wife received a telegram of this fact.

On April 3, 1944 I was drafted and reported for induction at Fort Thomas, Kentucky. After taking several tests; IQ and an Aptitude test, I was sent to Ft. Sil 1, Oklahoma for basic training where I was enrolled in a course to learn Morse Code, as a result of the Aptitude Test mentioned above and I was destined to become a Radio Operator. Part of everyday was spent taking this course but the rest of the day we had to go through the regular basic training afforded to any other artillery soldier. After three months of basic training, I was re-assigned to the Infantry and sent to Camp Maxey, near Paris, Texas. This came about because the War was not going well and there was a greater need for Infantry at this particular time. After a month or maybe two I was put on a train and sent to Ft, Meade, Maryland, where I was for three days. From there I was sent, by train, to Taunton, Massachusetts. The very next day we were taken to docks where we were to be loaded aboard this large ship that had been converted from a cruise ship, USS Washington, to a troop ship. When I went up the gang-plank at the top an Air Force Lieutenant, was there to direct us to the proper area of the ship. This officer's name was Jack Coffey, probably my very best friend in High School where we belonged to the same high school fraternity and double-dated almost every weekend.

We had a chance to visit often on the trip overseas.

We landed at Liverpool, England where we boarded a train and traveled that same day across England to Southampton, directly to the docks, where we boarded an English ship. I remember we were delayed by fog for several days. When the fog lifted we proceeded across the English Channel, and I can remember it was very choppy. We arrived at La Havre France at midday and because the port was so cluttered with

disabled ships and other debris, we had to jump on to Landing Boats, which took us to shore.

I remember walking up a very steep hill to a processing station to be assigned to a unit. Apparently they saw I had been trained as a Radio Operator and by coincidence there was a need for an operator at that time, so that is what I was to be. At any rate, I was a replacement for someone that either had been severely injured or killed. I was loaded on a Jeep, with a driver and we drove all afternoon and arrived at a town which I remember to be Neufchatel, France. (I am not sure of the exact spelling). It was here that I joined a unit, It was a Headquarters Company, attached to the Fourth Armored Division of the Third Army. If there was any intermediate units I either never heard them mentioned or, have forgotten them.

At this point the whole unit moved out of this location and I had no idea where we were going.

In the days following, I remember several names were mentioned; Aachen, Metz and Nancy. Being in an enclosed vehicle (half-track) I never really saw any road or town signs, so any ideas about where we were, was from conversations when we settled in somewhere. Being in a Headquarters Company we ordinarily would be billeted in a house or perhaps a barn. All of the following days as I just mentioned we were under fire and periodically were involved in firefights and skirmishes all along the way. I remember that we somehow arrived in Luxembourg and came under intense artillery fire every night. I also remember that it was at this time we experienced our first knowledge of jet aircraft as the Germans would send a surveillance aircraft over our position every night about 21:00 hours and we referred to this aircraft as "bedcheck Charlie". During these first months of my involvement in combat was at the same time when the "Battle of the Bulge" first began. Several weeks after we arrived in Luxembourg, one night we were loaded on open trucks and traveled, what I was led to believe was approximately 168 miles or maybe Kilometers to a

location in Belgium called Liege. I was now officially an Infantry soldier and was issued a rifle to replace my Carbine.

I remember the extreme cold and had to do guard duty every night for some period of time, and I have lost all cognizance of time. I remember it was a time when the Germans were infiltrating soldiers into our positions wearing American uniforms and spoke English and it was scary to realize that you were rubbing elbows with the enemy and you didn't know the difference until you were injured or killed. It was extremely important that you were advised of the days password, because if you didn't know it, it could be fatal. When the "Battle of the Bulge" was over and Bastogne seige had subsided, we were taken back to our original unit where we rejoined them, me again as a Radio Operator and I again traded my rifle for a Carbine.

Our movements after this are very vague. I remember being in, or, going through Koblenz, where we crossed the Rhine River, to Weisbaden and then to Franfort On The Maine. It was at this point where one evening I was told I was to be a member of a task force, whose mission it was to liberate a Prisoner of War compound approximately 60 miles behind the current battle lines and we would make an assault through the lines at dawn, after receiving a Corps Artillery Barrage that was to last some 30 minutes. Next morning came and after the barrage we proceeded to blast through the enemy lines. At the time it seemed easy as we hardly met any resistance, probably because of the surprise element. However as we progressed through some of the towns the resistance became more fierce and we began to suffer many casualties. The Task Force from what I was told was originally 300 troops with tanks, armored vehicles and many empty trucks, which were to transport the liberated POW's back to our lines. On the second day we approached the compound and managed to actually take down some of the fence enclosure, all the time meeting fierce opposition. There were far more POW's in this camp than predicted and as you might expect, chaos broke out and we neve

r got any order to attempt to remove the troops and head back to our lines. Nighttime fell on us and the Commander of the Task Force decided to stay overnight and head back by the light of day. As fast as the lines were moving each day we probably only had to go back , maybe 30 miles to contact our original units. This delay spelled the end for us as at dawn we came under heavy direct tank fire all around the perimeter and Infantry fire from a higher position. After a couple of hours of this the Commander decided we should surrender. At this time I realized that the scirmages on the way up to this location we actually lost most of the soldiers , all but one of the tanks, had expended all of our ammunition and we had no choice. The Germans quickly surrounded us and we were made to line up in a field. Only about 50 of us remained alive and many of them wounded. My only injury was as I laid behind this stone barn, they were lobbing mortar shells into it , and as I laid there a large boulder dislodged from above hit me on the head , (steel helmet) and as I was laying flat on the ground, face down, when it hit me it drove my face into the ground on large boulders the same size used to construct the barn. My upper teeth (5) were knocked loose and some were just dangling. The wounded were transported to an Infirmary, me included, where a doctor attempted to save my teeth by sewing the dangling teeth and gum back where they belong. While I didn't immediately lose them , after awhile they turned black and I had to have them removed. I was then taken back to rejoin the others in what reminded me of like a horse show arena that you might see at a County Fair. It was here that they asked me some information and I had to reply with my name , rank and serial number. They gave me their version of a dog tag to hang around my neck. My recollection tells me it said STALAG13, I'm not sure about the number. They gave us what appeared to be potato soup and that was going to be pretty much our food ration for the next forty days. I believe it was the very next morning when they marched us, including all the POW's that were there before, down a h

ill in what appeared to be a small town where we were packed in boxcars. I was later advised that this little town was Hammelburg, later to be the scene of a popular TV show. Before the train even moved we heard the drone of planes and they were American and they started to bomb the compound that we just left. After a few minutes we were strafed by American fighters. At this time they let us out of the boxcars and we had to jump to the ground.

The people who already jumped did not move out of the way quick enough, so that when you jumped, you landed on someone already on the ground and you would try to soften the impact by landing with your hands on their shoulders.

When I jumped and landed on this guy, he turned around and to my amazement it was a guy, like the other earlier encounter, a guy I had gone to High School with, who was in the same High School fraternity, as was the other guy, but even more amazing, his name was Jack

Manthey, the brother in law of the guy I had run into on the ship. This Jack was married to the sister of the other Jack.

We were not returned to the train, and someone decided that we were going to walk. (this walk turned out to be from this spot, Hammelburg, to Nuremberg, to Munich, estimated to be some

400 kilometers), and would cover the next 39 days. Jack and I had a lot to cover and in the beginning got along very well. Several days out, my teeth and gums were hurting and I guess I was complaining and then one day at the end of the day we stopped to eat and then rest

overnight. All we had to eat were potatoes that we could find in the fields. Potatoes were planted but all the men were gone and no one left to harvest them, so they rotted in the fields

, so this became our source of food. The Germans allowed everyone to build small fires so at least you could cook these rotten potatoes. Earlier in our walk I found an old rusty table knife

which I used to cut or shave small pieces of kindling to build a fire. I was using this, when because it was so rusty the blade portion broke and ran the blunt portion of the blade into my

hand, more of a puncture wound than a cut. There wasn't anything to

do about it except to wash  
it in water that we weren't sure if was contaminated or not but it  
was all there was to do and  
then wrap it in a piece of my own longjohns that I tore off the le  
g. After several days it began to  
throb and swell and I knew it was infected. One of the other men ap  
proached a Guard and told  
him of my problem. He apparently knew one of our own Medics up furt  
her in the column and he  
sent him back to me. He had just a small medical kit but did have  
some sulfa drug and he  
sprinkled it on my hand. By the time we reached Munich my hand heal  
ed but left a scar and it  
can faintly be seen today, some 57 years later.  
We continued our walk to Nuremburg where we arrived about Easter .  
We were taken to this  
large Stadium , I believe the site of the 1936 Olympics and which w  
as later seen in many  
documentaries about WWII and Hitler giving his bombastick speeches  
in this Stadium. When  
we were leaving Nuremburg to continue our trek we had to walk thro  
ugh the city proper and  
we could see the total devastation that was made by our bombers, an  
d people lined the streets  
and threw rocks at us and would come right up to you and spit in y  
our face. I guess I understood.

We had only walked an estimated 10 miles out side the city when we  
heard this now familiar  
drone of planes. When we looked around the sky was literally black  
with planes, and minutes  
later they started to drop their bombs , a spectacle that I had nev  
er witnessed before or  
since. Now I thoroughly understood the contemptuousness of the peop  
le in the city.

We contiued on our way each day pretty much a duplicate of the day  
before; walking along the  
roads in this seemingly never ending column of humanity, stopping o  
ccasionally to eat some  
potatoes in some form or other and for excitment our own planes re  
turning from bombing runs  
would drop any bombs left over , on us or, fighter planes would stra  
fe us almost on a daily  
basis. We were allowed to run to the side of the road to get whatev  
er protection we could but  
many men were lost in each of these situations.  
If the Guards thought we were too far off the road they would turn



their dogs loose to track us down. At night we would stop and we had a chance to rest and sleep, if the odor of the rotten potatoes allowed you to sleep. By this time we were very dirty, crusty is probably a better word and most of us were lice ridden and a favorite pastime was to flick the lice off you from the seams of your longjohns. The weather for most of these days of marching was fortunately mild and dry and the scenery was beautiful. In addition to potato fields we began to get into what I believe to be Bavaria and we began to see "hops" fields. The odor was still bad and this was contributed to by the German way of fertilizing, using animal waste as compost and also horse urine. Whatever our trials and tribulations were along this march, it was a blessing compared to being in one of the POW camps.

Around the 1st of May we reached this POW camp near Munich, so we were there several days. The camp was filthy and the sanitary conditions were deplorable and how some of these men survived these camps is a miracle. Of these remaining days, none went by without our planes bombing around the perimeter. After seeing some of these soldiers and hearing their stories, some of them captured in North Africa, and a time span of almost seven years, I vowed that I would never complain about a single thing the rest of my life. At this time we heard that the War was about to end.

On May 8th we heard the rumbling of tanks and then all Hell broke loose. It only lasted an hour or so and it was American troops entering the Compound. We had been liberated. If I remember correctly it was the 13th Infantry Division. They gave us some food and were allowed to rest the night. Some of the soldiers went in to Munich by any means they could devise.

The following morning we were taken to a small Airfield, I believe it was called Landshut. This was formerly a Luftwaffe fighter base and there were no paved runways, just mud. It was an amazing to see; there were literally hundreds of aircraft parked alongside the single runway. They were either C46 or C47 aircraft. It seemed like magic that they were able to

assemble and fly so many aircraft to this single location in such a short amount of time. They began loading us on these planes and they would immediately take off. Gradually the dirt/mud runway began to tear up very badly and then the joyous occasion turned to disaster. One of the planes taking off apparently hit a rut and veered off to the side, obviously out of control and it sideswiped several already loaded aircraft parked at the side of the runway.

They were loaded with fuel and four or five exploded killing all the men aboard. If there were four involved and they were loaded with fifty men, plus crew on each, then approximately 200 to 210 soldiers were killed, just at a time when it seemed like they were safe and on their way home.

They immediately reduced the number on each plane to about 25. Within minutes we were airborne. The misery wasn't over as many of the men became airsick and the floor of the plane was ankle deep in vomit. As little as they gave us to eat, it was too much. The flight didn't seem very long and landed, at what we were told was Reims. From here we were taken by train to Le Havre where we were de-loused, got showers, given new uniforms and fed.

I remember they let us eat all we wanted which at the time I didn't think was too smart, as many became sick again. We also were taken to some tents where we were given Medical exam.

I believe it was two days here and then we were taken to the docks and loaded on a ship, this time of the Liberty type. The next day we were sailing back to the USA. The seas were very rough and this relatively small ship was literally tossed around. In big wave conditions it would dive forward so that the rudder came up out of the water and when the screw hit only air the whole ship would just shudder and you would have to hold on to something.

I believe it took almost two weeks to cross the Atlantic and we landed at Camp Kilmer NJ. We were debriefed, fed and stayed overnight. The next morning I was given my orders, boarded a train and was on my way to Cincinnati. I didn't even think about calling home as I was so intent

on getting home so when I knocked on the door it was a complete surprise to my wife, and this was an understatement, because it was only the day before that she received a Telegram stating that I was MIA in Europe. I had a 30 day furlough and after four days I received additional orders which was an invitation for my wife and I to get a free two weeks in Miami Beach ,FL..I remember being in Florida during the two weeks that included the two nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. After returning home I received more orders assigning me to Fort Benning ,GA.I don't think they even assigned me to any unit and all I did was keep an area policed.I remember having leave and going in to Columbus, and across the Chattahoochee River to Phenix City AL. I was mustered out of the service on October 29, 1945 and returned to Cincinnati and my family.

Sometime in early 1946 there was an article in Time Magazine concerning that Task Force I was a part of when I got captured. It came out that the reason for this risky mission had to do with the fact that one of the prisoners at Hammelburg turns out to be a Colonel Waters, an Air Force Officer and was the son-in-law of General George S. Patton. Secondly, to cause a breakthrough made to appear to be much larger , which caused the Germans to converge many of their forces to the breakthrough point which weakened other areas and allowed a much larger assault all along the front and from this point German positions were literally overrun, bringing the War to a much earlier end. Also, about this same time the State of Ohio awarded all POW's with a \$400 settlement which really came in handy.

This concludes my recollection of my Military Service. After I was out I kept the documents, souvenirs etc., but in the ensuing 57 years, I moved around in my job situations and eventually all these papers were misplaced or lost in the moves.

Compiled September, 2002 by James H. Wolfer