

Task Force Baum

WWII

Task Force Baum was a secret and controversial World War II task force set up by U.S. Army general George S. Patton and commanded by Capt. Abraham Baum in late March 1945. Baum was given the task of penetrating 50 miles (80 km) behind German lines and liberating the POWs in camp OFLAG XIII-B, near Hammelburg. Controversy surrounds the true reasons behind the mission, which may have been simply to liberate Patton's son-in-law, John K. Waters, taken captive in Tunisia in 1943. The result of the mission was a complete failure; of the roughly 300 men of the task force, 32 were killed in action during the raid and only 35 made it back to Allied-controlled territory, with the remainder being taken prisoner. All of the 57 tanks, jeeps, and other vehicles were lost. To read more on this mission refer to the attachment to this Bulletin title, "Task Force Baum".

Camp Hammelburg

Camp Hammelburg, located just 1.8 miles (3 km) south from its namesake town, was originally used as a military training ground before World War I and again before World War II. It was converted into two separate POW camps during the second war. One camp (Stalag XIII-C) was for Allied enlisted men, while the other (Oflag XIII-B) was used for Allied officers. Originally, all of the Oflag camp's occupants were Serb officers. The camp was later split into sections of American officers on one side and Serbs in the other. Most of the American portion of the camp was hastily upgraded in January 1945 after an influx of POWs from the Battle of the Bulge, which began 16 December of the previous year.

As Soviets continued a westward advance toward Germany in the winter of 1944, the POW camp Oflag 64 in Schubin, Poland was emptied of its prisoners on 21 January 1945. In the dead of winter, 1,290 POWs headed west into Germany, then south toward Hammelburg. Among them was Lt. Col. John K. Waters, General Patton's son-in-law, who had been captured in Tunisia in February 1943. Col. Paul Goode, the senior ranking officer at the camp, kept a list of the men in his ranks, which would have helped U.S. intelligence keep track of where the officers were. Traveling 340 miles (547 km)—mostly by foot—in 7 weeks time, the men arrived at their destination on 9 March.

By the time the men from Schubin arrived at OFLAG XIII-B, the numbers in the officer camp swelled to over 1,400, though it was by far less than the estimated 5,000-man population in the enlisted men's camp by that time. Conditions at the camp were miserable for both the prisoners and their guards. The winter of 1944 was considered one of the coldest on record. The seven 5-room buildings each were crowded with two hundred men. One small room was to house 40 prisoners on bunk beds, while coal was rationed out to heat the furnaces at a rate of just 48 briquettes per stove every 3 days. Although some men were able to scavenge for wood nearby, it still was not enough to keep the soldiers warm. The average temperature in the rooms at any time was estimated to be 20 °F.

Food was just as scarce as heat. Initially, the men in camps were given a diet of 1,700 calories (7,100 kJ) a day, well below the 2000 calories recommended daily allowance for men doing no work. This was cut even more as supplies ran low and the camp population increased, until an estimated 1070 calories (4,480 kJ) were distributed daily. Many men in the camp suffered dramatic weight loss of more than 50 pounds (23 kilograms) and atrophy of muscles because of the lack of food and subsequent immobility. Dysentery due to unsterile conditions and utensils further weakened many men in the camp.

Raid to Hammelburg

General Patton assigned the mission to Combat Command B (CCB), 4th Armored Division, commanded by Lt. Col. Creighton Abrams. Abrams wanted to use his entire combat command (two battalions and supporting artillery) but was overruled, and instead one company of medium tanks, a platoon of light tanks and one company of armored infantry were assigned to the task force. The tank battalion commander tabbed to command the mission was ill and suggested that Baum, the battalion S-3, instead lead the task force. Altogether the force numbered 11 officers and 303 men, 16 tanks, 28 half-tracks, and 13 other vehicles. The Task force organization was:

- Company A, 10th Armored Infantry Battalion (Capt. Robert F. Lange) – 4 officers and 169 men mounted in 15 M3A1 half-tracks
- Company C, 37th Tank Battalion (1st Lt. William J. Nutto) – 3 officers and 56 men mounted in 10 M4A3, M4A3E2, and M4A1 medium tanks, and 4 support vehicles
- 3rd Platoon, Company D, 37th Tank Battalion (2nd Lt. William G. Weaver, Jr.) – 1 officer and 18 men mounted in 5 M5A1 light tanks
- Command & Support Element, 10th Armored Infantry Battalion – 3 officers and 60 men mounted in one light tank, 12 half-tracks, and 10 other vehicles

On the evening of 26 March, the task force reached Aschaffenburg, encountering heavy fire that disabled several vehicles, including one of the Sherman tanks. It took until early the next morning to break through the bridgehead just past the German lines. The largest problem facing the force going into the mission was a lack of maps—15 for 57 vehicles—and lack of knowledge of the exact location of the camp, which would have to be obtained through questioning of the locals in route. This slowed the task force considerably, forcing it to take on more fire than anticipated. Furthermore, a German spotter plane shadowed the column as it neared the camp, which would help coordinate resistance to the task force. A few Jagdpanzer 38(t) “Hetzer” were sent as support.

By the afternoon of the 27th, tanks had arrived in sight of the camp. Some of the guards in the camp put up resistance, though many of them fled or surrendered. The Serbian section of the camp received the brunt of American fire as it approached—likely due to the gray uniforms they wore making them appear to be Germans to the advancing columns. General Gunther von Goeckel, the camp commandant, called for Colonel John K. Waters to try to arrange a truce. Waters agreed to act as intermediary. Waters and several men, including one German officer, volunteered to exit the camp to notify the Americans of the mistake. While approaching the American column, an uninformed German soldier putting up resistance shot Waters in the buttocks before the German officer could explain the situation. He was taken back and treated for his wounds by Serbian doctors interned in the camp.

Roughly half of Baum’s forces made it to Hammelburg in fighting shape. Greeted by thousands of cheering prisoners, Baum quickly realized the camp contained far more than the 300 officers they were originally planning to liberate. After calculating losses, he determined no more than two hundred men would actually be able to be taken back to Allied-controlled land with their remaining fleet. It was decided that only field-grade officers (O-4 and above) would be allowed to ride back, while any remaining men who wished to march with the columns would be allowed to do so, or they could try to travel cross-country on their own to the American lines about 50 miles to the west. Barely able to walk, the vast majority of POWs decided to stay behind. One of the few who took off on foot, attempting to make it to the American lines was Lt. Donald Prell. He was recaptured and taken to a POW camp south of Nürnberg. Waters, unable to be moved, was left behind in the camp.

The task force left the camp at 8 pm local time to cross back across the German lines. By then, further complications had surfaced. There was no moon out that night, so only artificial light could be used for navigation, which could be spotted easily by the growing number of German troops in the area. Only one reconnaissance jeep was able to scout ahead of the column to find an escape route. Sometimes the tanks had to be turned off entirely to avoid detection by a growing German encirclement.

Nearing Höllrich in the black of night, Task Force Baum encountered a German ambush laid by Veteran Soldiers of the German Infantry Combat School in Hammelburg. (Nearly 100 NCOs in Officer Training) The first tank was hit by a German panzerfaust. Then a German drove this tank into a garden and a second answered the radio calls in English to lure more Tanks into the ambush. The Germans used their Sherman prize with good effect against the other U.S. tanks. Four American Sherman tanks were destroyed.

The remnants of the task force regrouped again after pulling back to a quiet area near Hill 427 in the early morning hours. Without enough fuel to make it back across the line by now, the task force waited for daylight to travel with visibility to maximize the distance they could travel. Colonel Goode, knowing most of the men would be unable to travel across the line on their own, advised that most of the walking wounded should head back to the Oflag. Colonel Goode himself decided not to slow the rest of the task force down and began the march back under a white flag.

Baum gave the order to move out shortly after dawn on 28 March. Just as the column started up, they immediately came under fire from all directions. Germans, having surrounded the hill during the night, opened fire on the first sign of mobilization. Knowing there was no way of fending off the attack, Baum ordered every man for himself. The battle lasted mere minutes before the survivors who hadn't escaped into the woods were lined up as fresh POWs. Baum managed to escape with two soldiers into the nearby woods, as did a number of American POWs from the camp.



An M4 medium tank of the 47th Tank Bn., 14th Armored Division crashes into the prison compound at Oflag XIII-B, 6 April 1945 two weeks after the failed Task Force Baum raid.

Aftermath

As Soviets were encroaching from the east, Americans began advancing into Germany days after the task force, with Germans moving POWs further away from combat zones. Those able to move were rounded up into unmarked boxcars and sent via train to Nuremberg, then to other prisoner camps away from the front lines. The remaining men were left behind at Hammelburg.

Baum was shot in the groin while trying to flee back to allied lines and captured by German Home Guard. He joined Waters in the Serbian hospital at the Hammelburg camp, which was liberated by the 14th Armored Division on 6 April—just 9 days after the failed liberation by Task Force Baum. Ironically, the failure of the task force did help set Waters free sooner: had he not been shot he would have been marched off to a camp further into Germany with the rest of the POWs.



General George S. Patton

Patton was alleged to have offered Baum a Medal of Honor for a successful completion of the mission. As a Medal of Honor warrants an investigation into the events behind the awarding of it, which Patton would not have wanted, Baum received a Distinguished Service Cross. Patton awarded it to him personally.

It is disputed whether Patton knew his son-in-law was being held at the camp, but many at the camp and Abraham Baum believed so. Patton sent an aide, Major Alexander Stiller, with the task force, purportedly to identify Waters so he could be taken back with them. Diaries that Patton made publicly available indicate he was unaware of Waters' presence there until after the task force had arrived, but a letter written to his wife just after the task force left indicates otherwise.

I sent a column to a place forty miles east of where John [Waters] and some 900 prisoners are said to be. I have been nervous as a cat... as everyone but me thought it too great a risk.... If I lose that column, it will possibly be a new incident. But I won't lose it." (The Longest Winter, p. 207)

A furious General Eisenhower reprimanded Patton for the incident. While Patton admitted the failure of the mission, he defended his actions due to fear that retreating Germans might kill the prisoners in the camp. Except for the Malmedy massacre during the Battle of the Bulge, the intentional killing of American prisoners was uncommon. According to Patton, the mistake was sending a force too small to perform the mission, saying, "I can say this, that throughout the campaign in Europe I know of no error I made except that of failing to send a combat command to take Hammelburg."

However, Patton claimed its true goal had been to distract the German forces from a massive wheeling maneuver to the north of Hammelburg by a mass of his Third Army. As Patton insisted, that mission was in fact accomplished as the diversion of German forces to Hammelburg had caused them to lose sight of the Allied turn north. Task Force Baum actually also fooled the Germans into believing the Allies would be continuing east instead of planning their actual northern maneuver.

As a footnote, Captain Abe Baum was born in the Bronx, New York, March 29, 1921. He died, age 91, at his home in Ranch Bernardo, California on March 3, 2013. Baum fought at Normandy, suffering shrapnel wounds in a mine field. By March he was a battle-toughened officer. Surprised when Patton personally gave him his orders for the raid to Hammelburg, he later remarked: "I thought, what the hell am I doing here?"

The following is a firsthand account of what happened in the raid by one of the soldier who participated in it:

Lon C. Colvin of Lockney remembers how he and a buddy from Ralls, Uel L. Arthur, were part of a high-speed raid designed to rescue Gen. George S. Patton's son-in-law from a German prison camp in the final year of World War II. "We had trained at Mineral Wells," he said of Camp Wolters where he and Arthur took basic training in late 1944. "Then we went up to New York, caught a boat and went to England, then France — and into Germany." At 18, they were infantrymen in the 4th Armored Division of the 3rd Army. The Battle of the Bulge had just ended, and Allied forces were ready to move forward into heavy fighting in Germany.

When Colvin and Arthur went into combat, they often had to cling to Sherman tanks for the sake of speed over walking. Patton liked going fast, and for the mission that Colvin and Arthur would be on, speed was a priority. Arthur, who passed away in 2005, had shared his memories with his sons Lloyd and Lonnie, and also recorded his experiences on cassette tape. Their trip through France was relatively uneventful, other than occasional sniper fire. "When they hit the Rhine, that's when business started. He commented several times how cold it was," Lloyd Arthur said. Lonnie Arthur said, "I think it wound up being the coldest winter in like 50 years."

Colvin remembers, "We saw a little bit of combat before going after the son-in-law. I was a 50-caliber machine gunner on the tank — stood up on the top and ran the machine gun." Of the controversies created by Patton, such as the slapping of a soldier in a medical facility, the doomed raid into the prison camp at Hammelburg, Germany, was one that was especially criticized by lower officers and resisted by those higher up. Still, it went inexorably forward. According to "The Guns at Last Light," which was Volume 3 of a trilogy by Rick Atkinson, Lt. Col. John Knight Waters, the West Point cavalryman who was son-in-law to Patton, was captured in Tunisia on Valentine's Day, 1943. Atkinson quotes Waters' diary: "Reached Hammelburg at 6 p.m., March 8." A sizable force was sent to attempt a rescue of Waters and what was believed to be as many as 300 other American prisoners in the same camp.

The force, called Task Force Baum for its commander, was outlined in a book titled "Raid! The Untold Story of Patton's Secret Mission," by Richard Baron, Abe Baum and Richard Goldhurst. It consisted of a company of armored infantry, a company of Sherman tanks, a platoon of light tanks, a platoon of 105mm assault guns, and a reconnaissance platoon for a total of about 300 men. The perilous mission would be operating 50 to 60 miles behind the lines in enemy territory. At the time, Abe Baum, its commander, was a captain. During the mission the three close friends, Arthur, Colvin and Jeff Clem from Plainview, were on a bridge over a river they had to cross after the Rhine, and were strafed by a German plane. Lloyd said, "The plane made one pass and they could tell he was probably wanting to target the bridge to blow it up, and they let loose with everything they had on the tanks and with tracers." Referring to his father's account, he said, "It was just getting dark, so they could utilize those tracers and didn't even have to sight. They hit the plane, and the plane veered over, crashed and exploded. "So, they saved the bridge."

Colvin said of the Hammelburg rescue assignment, "It was risky. We didn't know what was happening there for a while — Patton had just sent us on that mission. The further we got into it, the more we learned about it." At a point along the way, they encountered small-arms fire from German troops, and dug foxholes. When that stopped, Colvin, Arthur and Clem, along with others, moved to the top of a hill to see what was happening on the other side. Then artillery shells began falling on the area they had just vacated. When they returned, Arthur found a piece of metal, still glowing orange, in his foxhole. The excursion had apparently saved his life.

Colvin remembers reaching a German military camp. “There was firing when we got to this camp. We got in there and shot that thing up and we started to leave and ran out of ammunition. They knocked our tank out, too “And that was it. Then German soldiers came up and captured us.” Arthur had talked about the Germans’ use of bazooka shells against the tanks, and when his tank was hit, several of the men fell off. Lonnie said of his father, “He wound up getting some shrapnel, and he broke his ankle when he fell off the tank.” Lloyd said, “Daddy, in his words, said he didn’t recall how he got underneath the bridge, but they were still fighting. And by that time, the whole rest of the bunch had left, because they were trying to vacate. I think Daddy said there were eight of them that were captured.”

Ironically, the German soldiers who captured them were carrying only bazookas because they had been intent on destroying the tanks. Those were the only arms they used to point at the Americans. They were taken to a jail, put in a small cell, and given no food or water for three days. Apparently at that point, they set out on an extended prisoner-of-war march that one of the men remembered as 30 days, and another as 34 days.

At Hammelburg, the larger part of the force suffered disaster. According to Atkinson’s book, “The Guns at Last Light,” Task Force Baum had lost every vehicle, and nearly every man was captured in addition to 57 killed, wounded or missing. Col. Waters, the son-in-law, was wounded, along with Capt. Baum. The prisoners who could walk were marched to an area near Munich. Arthur remembered that he didn’t unlace his boot on his broken ankle, thinking that he might not be able to get it back on, and stragglers could have been shot. Though it hurt, he continued walking on the march. Colvin said they were guarded in barns at night, then marched during the day. “We were going to make a getaway, but my buddy at Ralls, he got sick and couldn’t go with us, so we didn’t go.” He remembers a German guard gave them advice, and he relates it with a West Texas accent: “The next day or two, the German guard said, ‘Y’all just better stay with us — the war’s going to be over pretty soon and if you get out here and get to rambling around, you’ll get killed.’ “That was probably true.”

Not all advice was gentle. Colvin remembers, “One day I decided ... I told that old guard I wasn’t going to walk that day. He stuck that gun in my stomach and said, ‘Are you going to walk?’ And I said, ‘I’ll run if you want me to.’ “So, that was all of that. I went on.” The food rations were diminutive. “We would eat old Irish potatoes and stuff like that,” Colvin thinks he lost about 30 pounds on the march, and Arthur had said he lost 40 pounds. They never were placed in a concentration camp — the American troops simply overtook them and liberated them. The former prisoners were released to their own means of getting back to Camp Lucky Strike in France. Lonnie said, “They were on their own to get back, because all of the supplies and everything was going to the front, with nothing going back.” “We would just go from place to place,” Colvin remembers.

According to Arthur’s memories, farm families treated them hospitably. They discovered a car without wheels in a barn, and were able to find wheels that would fit it. That gave them transportation. When they arrived at Camp Lucky Strike, they were given transportation back to England, and in England put on a ship to the United States. When the ship’s officer asked for volunteers among the troops, Arthur was first to volunteer, followed by Colvin and Clem. They were given assignments involving transporting food by elevator from the kitchen area to the mess hall, and were able to sample the food until, as Arthur remembered, he had gained back the 40 pounds he lost. At 18, they had survived World War II.

[Source: Lubbock Avalanche-Journal, Texas & http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Task_Force_Baum | Ray Westbrook| Mar. 09, 2015 ++]

