

THE HAMMELBURG MISSION

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The setting of the Hammelburg Mission may be found in THE LAST OFFENSIVE, a volume being prepared by Major Fred J. Meyer, Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, who made the material available to the author.

The views expressed in this article are the author's and are not necessarily those of the Department of the Army or the Command and General Staff College.—The Editor.

ON A DARK night in March 1945, as World War II was drawing to a close in Europe, 307 American soldiers of General George S. Patton's Third Army departed on a strange mission. This group of American soldiers drove 50 miles into German territory and vanished.

Men in the European Theater heard vague rumors of the mission. Whispers passed from one soldier to another, but only a few knew what had happened.

Officially the story has never been told. All references to it have virtually disappeared from the record. Only a few entries remain in the voluminous battle journals of the forces involved. General Patton mentioned it in his memoirs to show that the mission failed because he accepted unsound advice from subordinates. The volume written by Robert S. Allen—a member of Patton's staff—contains only one allusion to the incident.

How do we know what happened then during this secret mission? We know because combat historians interviewed survivors shortly after the event and left us

a detailed account. Later, when we captured the German records, we learned more.

Toward the end of March 1945, Patton's Third Army was through the Siegfried Line and just across the Rhine River. An armored division had driven 30 miles east of the Rhine and taken Aschaffenburg. From there, Patton was to turn his Army to the north. Capture of a bridge at Aschaffenburg, however, presented Patton with an opportunity to make an armored penetration to the east. (See Figure 1.)

Deception is a cardinal principle of warfare. Like a good boxer or halfback, a good general knows the value of a well-executed feint. An armored feint to the east would deceive the Germans. It would disguise Patton's real intention to go north.

East of Aschaffenburg—50 miles—lay Hammelburg, where the Germans had a prisoner of war camp. Approximately 1,000 American officers were imprisoned there. A force sent to Hammelburg would liberate them—rescue some from starvation and death—and bring medical care to the sick and the wounded.

The mission was dangerous. Sending a small force 50 miles into enemy-held territory invited disaster. It would be comparatively easy for the Germans to cut off the force; surround and destroy it before the main body of American troops could advance and rescue it.

Patton intended to send a combat command of an armored division to Hammelburg. A force of 3,500 men—he reasoned—would be able to take care of itself if

encircled and isolated. Subordinate commanders apparently doubted the advisability of the mission. However, because Patton was determined, they tried to dissuade him from jeopardizing such a large force. Since it was to be a hit-and-run affair, they argued that a smaller group had a better chance of success. Fewer vehicles meant quicker movement. Against his better judgment, Patton let himself be convinced they were right.

The combat command originally selected for the Hammelburg mission formed a task force of 307 men in 54 vehicles—10 *Sherman* tanks, 6 light tanks, 27 half tracks, 3 assault guns on tracked carriages, 7 jeeps, and 1 tracked cargo carrier. The force was placed under the command of a lieutenant colonel. However, because this officer was to undergo medical treatment for a minor ailment, the task force was turned over to Captain Abraham J. Baum.

Baum's mission was to take the most direct route to the prisoner of war camp at Hammelburg. He was to load his vehicles with liberated officers and return to Aschaffenburg. The remainder of the freed men were to walk along beside the vehicles or move cross country in small groups to the American lines.

Just before the task force departed, an aide-de-camp of General Patton—Major Alexander C. Stiller—appeared and requested permission to accompany the ex-

Waters—General Patton's son-in-law. Rumor-mongers maliciously whispered afterward that Patton desired to liberate Hammelburg in order to rescue Waters. Stiller unconsciously abetted the rumors for he had explained to Baum that he wanted to accompany the task force "for the thrills and laughs"—a lame excuse, obviously not plausible, patently false. Stiller's real reason for volunteering—a reason that Baum appreciated and respected—was the realization that Patton could not help but have a normal personal interest in the outcome of the mission—an interest quite apart from the military aspects of the operation. Stiller's offer to go along with Baum was a creditable and courageous act that emerged as a natural result of his devotion to his chief.

The task force got underway shortly after midnight. The vehicles passed swiftly through the towns of Stras-Bessenbach, Keilburg, Frohenhofen, Laufach, and Hain with little trouble. (See Figure 2.) A few German riflemen and bazooka operators in the towns caused several casualties, but Baum did not halt. Surprised enemy garrisons failed to man the artillery pieces that occasionally covered the road.

Beyond Hain, the vehicles entered the silence of a dense wood where the sound of the tank motors and the clank of the tank treads seemed as eerie as clashing cymbals in a deserted theater. But even

An account of a small task force—307 men from the United States Third Army—which knifed deep into enemy territory and for a brief period played havoc with German military plans, equipment, and morale

pedition. Baum invited him to ride in his command tank.

Stiller's appearance seemed to give weight to gossip that later circulated through the European Theater. It so happened that one of the prisoners at Hammelburg was Lieutenant Colonel John K.

more significant was the absence of Germans. For the first time since he had learned of his mission, Baum began to feel that he might succeed.

In the town of Lohr, the task force met a German tank unit moving toward the front. Before the Germans became aware

of the Americans, Baum's men opened fire and destroyed 12 enemy vehicles. One American tank was lost, but the task force had kept moving as the men fired, and the vehicles burst through the village and continued.

On the outskirts of Lohr, the men noticed an anti-aircraft train that carried multibarreled guns set in concrete. Baum stopped long enough to destroy the locomotive and to disable most of the guns with thermite grenades.

Just before dawn, as the task force entered Gemünden, the men saw a dozen trains with steam up; each train was composed of about 20 cars. They did not know that the trains were preparing to load and transport a nearby German division to the battle zone. But as they passed, Baum's tankers fired and destroyed about half of the engines.

There was an important bridge in Gemünden. When the lead tank in Baum's column rolled toward it, a German security guard destroyed the structure by exploding previously prepared demolition charges. A wide detour thus became necessary. Baum halted and questioned the few prisoners his men had taken. He selected as a guide a German who seemed familiar with the region. The prisoner took the task force 6 miles north to Burgsinn. There the force crossed a tributary of the Main River, then followed a rugged trail over a steep ridge toward a second tributary.

In the meantime, the Germans were

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making frantic efforts to stop Baum. General Von Obstfelder, the army commander opposing Patton, was cursing his adversary for having correctly diagnosed a German weak spot. His headquarters had almost been overrun near Lohr. His units were scattered, and he could not rally a counterforce at once. His greatest worry was that the small task force might not be alone, that it might be really the spearhead of a larger force that was following.

Ignorant that his advance was bringing consternation as far distant as Berlin, Baum continued. In mid-morning, the task force swept into Grafendorf, overran a German prisoner of war camp, and liberated 700 Russians who immediately raided the town and broke into liquor warehouses and food dumps in a wild frenzy of joy. Baum turned over to them the 200 German prisoners he had collected, and he prepared for the last dash to Hammelburg, less than 7 miles to the east.

Close to noontime, the armored column approached the town of Hammelburg. The men noticed a small German plane cruising lazily overhead. They drove it off with machinegun fire. But the German pilot had verified the size and the location of Baum's force. He notified the German High Command.

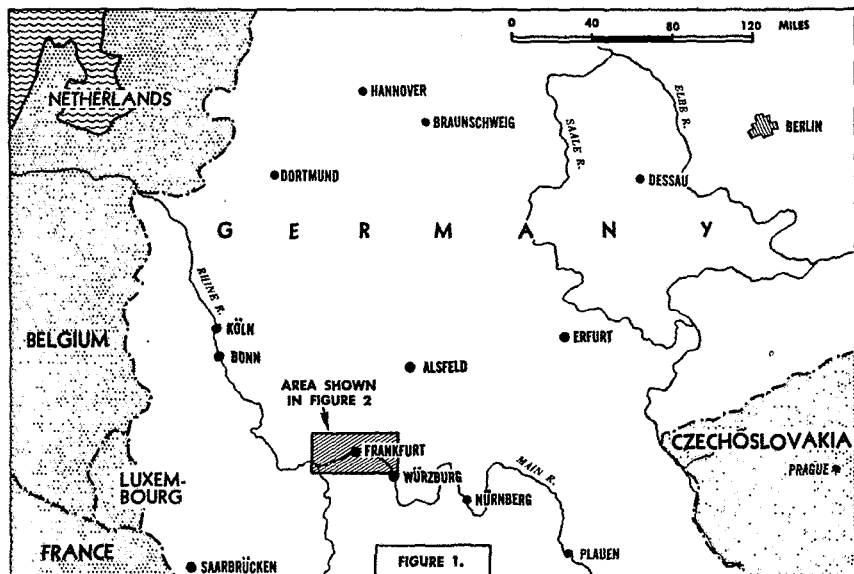
By "mere coincidence"—as the Germans later admitted—a German assault gun battalion was also entering Hammelburg. Traveling from the Soviet front and moving toward the Americans, it arrived in town at the same time as Baum's task force. A firefight took place which lasted for more than 2 hours. The Americans lost 3 *Shermans*, 5 half tracks, and 3 jeeps. Baum's men destroyed 3 German guns and 3 ammunition carriers. They also broke through the town and through the German force.

Continuing, they drove to the prison camp a scant 2 miles away. Intimidating the guards, Baum's tanks broke into the camp by pushing through the barbed wire

inclosure that surrounded the central compound.

The prison commandant, prodded by his prisoners, immediately came forward to surrender. A few obstinate SS guards opened fire and seriously wounded Waters. Baum's men quickly overcame this resistance and liberated the camp. The enthusiasm of the freed prisoners was so great

erred close to 5,000 Allied prisoners, of whom almost 1,500 were American officers. Loading as many Americans as possible on his tanks and personnel carriers, and accompanied by those who could walk alongside, he began his return trip to Aschaffenburg. The wild enthusiasm that had greeted the task force had subsided. Those who left the shadows of the in-



that several hours passed before Baum could restore order.

The enemy was not idle during this time, especially in the town of Hammelburg. When the commander of the gun battalion seemed uncertain about what he ought to do, a German officer—on leave and spending his vacation in town—resolved his problems by assuming command. He was persuaded that Baum would have to return to the American lines; therefore, Baum had logically to come back through Hammelburg. An ambush was in order.

In the Hammelburg camp, Baum discov-

closure wall moved soberly, conscious of the dangers which still stood between them and freedom.

They did not go far. Scarcely 50 yards from the camp, a sharp flat report sounded; one shell knocked out the lead tank. The German assault gun battalion lay in wait in the town of Hammelburg.

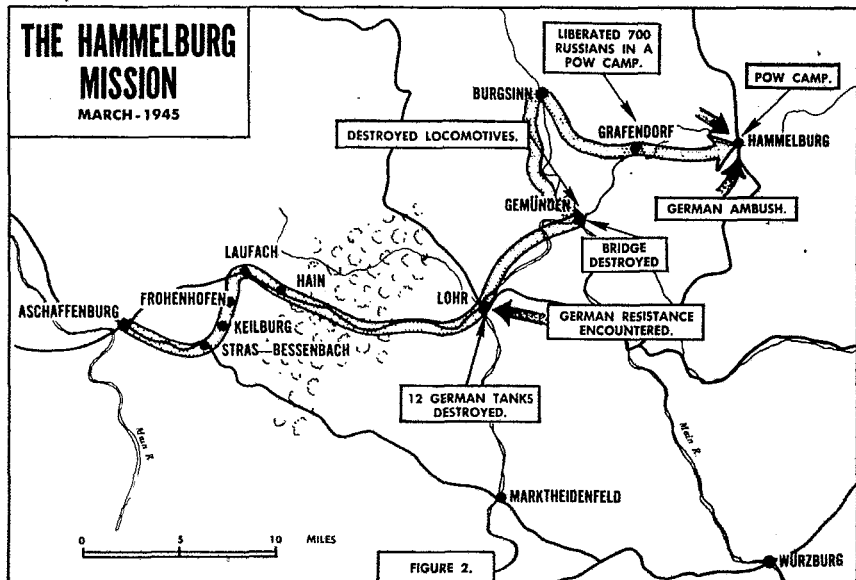
Hope of taking the prisoners back vanished. Most of the men returned silently to the camp. Baum's force, with 65 liberated American officers who chose to accompany it, turned to the southwest to avoid ambush and drove toward Hessdorf, 5 miles away. It was late in the evening,

and Baum hoped he could evade discovery by German counterforces during the night.

At Hessdorf—close to midnight—Baum turned north. One of his tormenting problems was finding bridges or crossings over the tributaries of the Main River. Less than 2 miles from Hessdorf, the vehicles struck an enemy roadblock. German sol-

the tanks. After the gas was drained, the half tracks were set afire. He placed his wounded in a building on the hill, and marked it with a Red Cross. After giving his men a brief talk, he led them down the hill to attempt to break through the German roadblock.

As soon as they had started, the men knew it was hopeless. Day was breaking,



diers manning antitank guns knocked out three of Baum's tanks and inflicted severe casualties on his personnel.

Baum pulled his force back to a hill where he took stock of his situation. He had slightly over 100 men and about 60 liberated officers. He had 3 Sherman tanks, 6 light tanks, and 12 half tracks. He was dangerously short of gas. He had only a few hours before daylight to make good his escape. If he got his men through the German roadblock, he still had about 45 miles to go to reach the American lines.

He directed his men to siphon the gas from the half tracks and divide it among

and the column was surrounded. Two companies of enemy infantry supported by tanks advanced from the southeast. Self-propelled guns fired from the south. Anti-tank guns threatened from the northeast. Six large tanks blocked the route leading north. An armored column approached from the northeast.

Enemy shells soon destroyed all of the task force vehicles. With his tanks gone and the Germans closing in, Captain Baum held a final conference. He instructed the members of his command to form into groups of three and four and attempt to filter through the Germans to safety. Wish-

ing them luck, he then dismissed them.

Some managed to escape. Baum was not so lucky. With Major Stiller and a lieutenant, he moved off the hill on foot. They heard the baying of bloodhounds—dogs from the Hammelburg camp that the Germans were using to track down the task force survivors. Before they reached the bottom of the hill, Baum's party was taken prisoner by a German patrol. An enemy soldier shot Baum in the leg and gave him his third wound of the operation.

That evening American airplane pilots saw a convoy of vehicles near Hammelburg. A large white sheet displayed the letters "USPWS"—United States Prisoners of War. The Hammelburg mission was over.

It had come close to achieving its purpose. Despite failure, the Hammelburg task force had accomplished much. It had disrupted the entire Aschaffenburg—Hammelburg sector. It had damaged military trains, destroyed anti-aircraft guns, deranged troop schedules, disabled assault gun units, and provoked general uncertainty and confusion. Who knows what trouble the Germans had with 700 liberated and intoxicated Russians near Grafendorf?

In addition, the task force caused the Germans to draw additional forces to the Hammelburg area—thereby making Patton's feint successful. The effect of sending the task force deep into German territory weakened further the deteriorating German morale. The action disclosed to the German High Command the woeful inadequacy of the defenses east of Aschaffenburg and it also underlined the futility of trying to deceive Patton by maintaining a semblance of resistance.

Unwilling to admit that such a small force had brought such consternation, the Germans reported destroying 13 of 50 American tanks and driving the remainder back to the west. A propaganda broadcast boasted that German forces had obliterated an entire American armored division near Hammelburg.

Little more than a week later, Patton's Third Army re-took the town and liberated the prisoners. By then, the Allies were driving recklessly forward to overrun the last scattered enemy resistance. With the end of the war in sight, the Hammelburg mission was virtually forgotten. As a typical Patton maneuver—a cavalry action combining audacity and a willingness to gamble—it deserves to be remembered.

The factors bearing on grand strategy are constantly changing with the changing fortunes and trends of nations; strategic conclusions must be periodically reviewed. Therefore, strategy itself is a fluid thing, shifting under the influence of timely circumstances. The principles of war (the implementation of strategy) are constant, but strategy itself changes.

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