

The Hammelburg Raid Redux
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The Hammelburg raid was audacious, fast and a tactical failure. Task Force Baum failed to liberate prisoners from *Oflag XIII* on 27 March 1945 because the mission violated the characteristics of the offense, namely concentration and tempo. The characteristic of concentration was violated because political influence directed the mission to use a small task force that was unable to sustain operations in a deep raid. The characteristic of tempo was violated because the hastily planned mission was disrupted by each unforeseen contingency.

After LTG Patton liberated Bastogne in December, 1944, his Third Army continued the attack north, crossing the Rhine River and beginning the end game of WWII. See Figure 1 for the disposition of Allied and German Forces during the Hammelburg Raid. During the offensive, Patton found himself within 60 miles of *Oflag XIII*, a German prison camp for officers. Intelligence from the Red Army indicated that a large group of prisoners was recently transferred from *Oflag LXIV* in Szubin, Poland to *Oflag XIII* near Hammelburg, Germany.¹ Among the group of prisoners was rumored to be LTC John Waters, Patton's son-in-law. Fearing the Germans might soon move the prisoners deeper into Germany, he ordered a raid to liberate the POWs at Hammelburg.²

Patton assigned the mission to Major General Manton Eddy, commander of XII Corps, who passed it to the 4th Armored Division's commander, Brigadier General William Hoge. Among Patton's subordinates, the 4th Armored was Patton's favorite. Patton stated "There has never been such a superb fighting organization as the Fourth Armored Division."³ Patton insisted that no more than 300 men take part in the operation, believing that the smaller force would be faster than a larger formation. Hoge assigned the mission to Combat Command B, the precursor to a modern combined arms brigade, commanded by LTC Creighton Abrams.⁴ Patton said of Abrams, "I am supposed to be the best tank

¹Clarence R. Meltesen, *Roads to Liberation From Oflag 64*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Oflag 64 Press, 1990), 173.

²Martin Blumenson, *The Patton Papers: 1940-1945*, 1st ed., vol. 2 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 664–665.

³C. S. Forester, *Battle: True Stories of Combat in World War II*, Saturday Evening Post Collective ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 298.

⁴Richard Baron, Abe Baum, and Richard Goldhurst, *Raid!: The Untold Story of Patton's Secret Mission* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2009), 14, 19, 20.

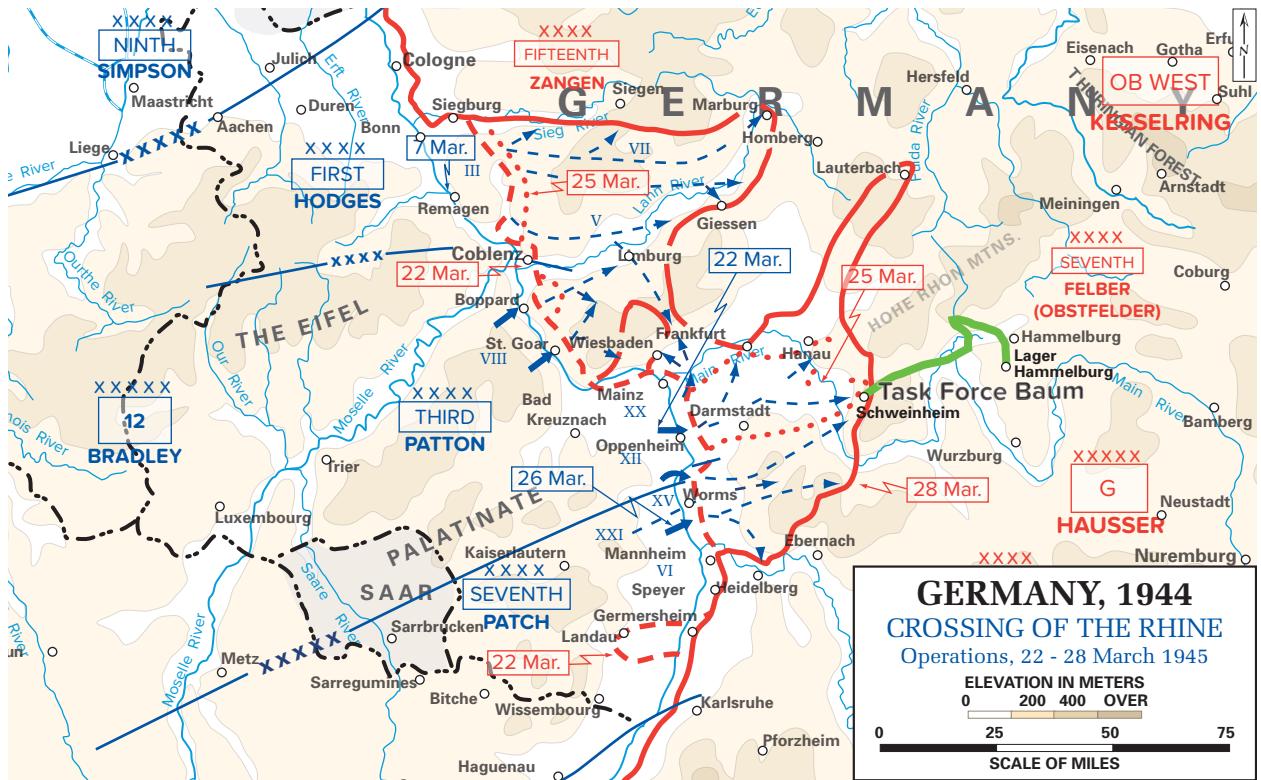


Figure 1: Disposition of Allied and German Forces during the Hammelburg Raid⁸

commander in the Army, but I have one peer – Abe Abrams.”⁵ Abrams assigned the mission to LTC Cohen, his close friend and commander of the 10th Armored Infantry Battalion. Unfortunately, LTC Cohen was incapacitated with a fierce case of hemorrhoids. Upon personal examination, Patton, drawing on his extensive experience as a cavalryman, exclaimed “That is some sorry ass. Terrible.” Cohen suggested that his S3, CPT Abe Baum lead the mission in his stead.⁶ Baum received his orders at 1700 on 26 March, 1945 and prepared to move out six hours later.⁷

The mission was unusual in many regards. Patton had never before liberated POW camps. The precise location of the camp was unknown. After the raid started, Third Army would continue north, leaving Task Force Baum in Seventh Army’s area of operations. Additionally, there was no reserve and dedicated air support was limited to one propeller plane to relay radio messages. The 60 miles to

⁵Kenneth Koyen, “General Patton’s Mistake,” *Saturday Evening Post* 220, no. 44 (May 1, 1948): 19.

⁶Baron, Baum, and Goldhurst, *Raid!: The Untold Story of Patton’s Secret Mission*, 20.

⁷37th Tank Battalion Diary: 1 January 1945 - 4 March 1945 (37th Tank Battalion, n.d.), 1.

⁸West Point Atlas for the Second World War: Europe and the Mediterranean, The West Point Military History Series (Garden City Park, NY: Square One Publishers, 2001), 79, <http://www.westpoint.edu/history/SitePages/WWII/%20European/%20Theater.aspx>, modified to show the route of Task Force Baum.

Oflag XIII would take Task Force Baum out of artillery range after 10 miles. Concerning the feasibility of the mission, Abrams said the mission “doesn’t have a chance” and that Baum’s return would be miraculous.⁹

Baum quickly assembled his task force, hand-picking companies and elements from the 37th Tank Battalion and the 10th Armored Infantry Battalion. From the 10th Armored Infantry Battalion, Baum selected CPT Lange’s Alpha Company and 2LT Hoeffner’s reconnaissance section. From the 37th Tank Battalion, Baum received 2LT Nutto’s Charlie Company, 2LT Weaver’s Platoon from Delta Company and TSGT Graham’s platoon of tank destroyers. The final composition of Task Force Baum consisted of 11 officers, 283 men, and 53 vehicles.

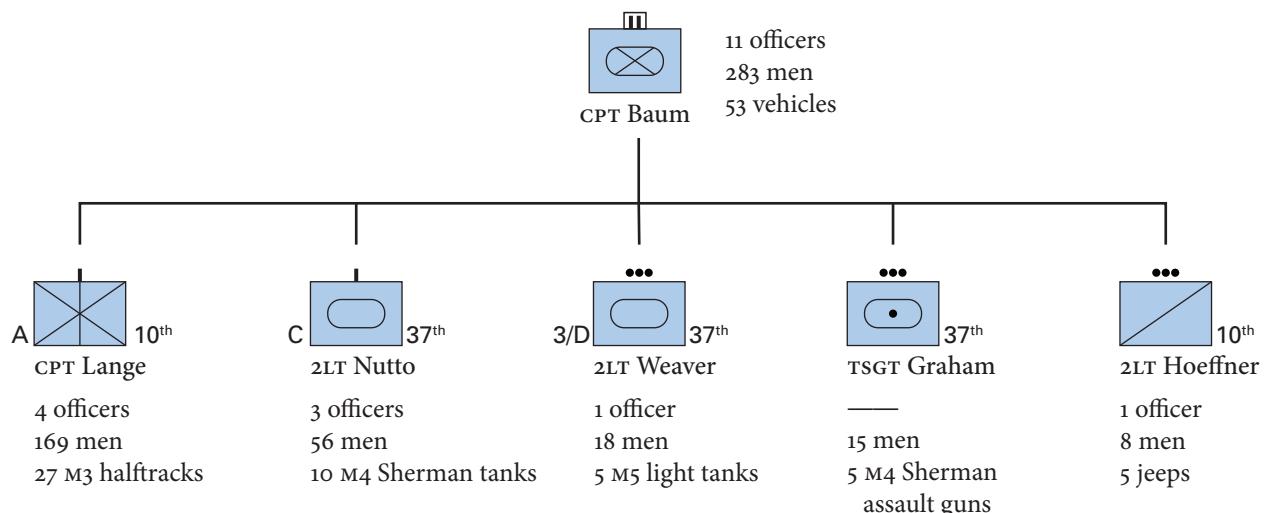


Figure 2: Task Force Baum Task Organization¹⁰

To pass Task Force Baum past German lines, Abrams used two companies to clear a route through the town of Schweinheim. The artillery barrage began at 2030 with three battalions of artillery firing ten volleys. The attack began at 2100 and soon became mired amongst the staunch German defense. Impatient by the delay wrought by German resistance, at 2330, Baum told his men “we’ll leave when I return from the front.” After a brief scouting mission, Task Force Baum barreled through Schweinheim,

⁹Baron, Baum, and Goldhurst, *Raid!: The Untold Story of Patton’s Secret Mission*, 22, 28.

¹⁰Michael K. Robel, “Patton’s Hammelburg Raid: Mission Assessment & Lessons Learned,” *Command*, no. 54 (November 2000): 28.; Also Kenneth A. Koyen, *The Fourth Armored Division: From the Beach to Bavaria*, 2nd ed. (Munich, Germany: Herder Druck, 1946), 33;

beginning their mission at 0030 on 27 March.¹¹

The *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW), the German Supreme Command of Armed Forces, was notified of the breach shortly thereafter at 0100. The German staff surmised that Patton exploited a weak spot in the German line. The OKW directed the newly promoted General Obstfelder, the Seventh Army commander, to “concentrate all available forces to annihilate the enemy task force.”¹² General Obstfelder assumed command earlier that day after his predecessor, General Felber, failed to defend the bridge at Remagen. CPT Tobin Green, writing for the Strategic Studies Research Seminar, noted the irony of the replacement, as Hoge’s seizure of the same bridge won him his “promotion to brigadier general and command of the 4th Armored only five days before the German Seventh Army change of command.”¹³

Baum reached his first objective at 0230, merging onto Highway 26 near the town of Laufach. To hinder German reporting of his progress, Baum directed his Sherman tanks to knock down the telephone poles to disrupt German communications. Unsatisfied that the felled telephone poles were inoperable, Baum directed his infantry to dismount and cut the wires to ensure the job was complete. The technique was unsuccessful. Driving under black-out conditions, the mile long convoy was limited to 15mph. News of the breach traveled faster than Baum’s attack and by the time the convoy reached Fronhofen, white sheets greeted them, hanging from windows in the early dawn. The first road block appeared a few miles later at Lohr. While navigating around a overturned truck, a *panzerfaust* destroyed the first vehicle from Task Force Baum. The crew of the tank scrambled from the burning hull as the rest of convoy poured fire into the ambush location and continued east.¹⁴

Baum planned to cross the Sinn River at Gemünden, opting to take the most direct route to Hammelburg. Obstfelder, anticipating the route, directed his troops to establish a hasty defense and to rig the bridge with explosives. As the column entered the town, German defenders welcomed them with immediate, effective fire. In the span of minutes, three tanks were destroyed and several

¹¹Ibid., 54.

¹²Ibid., 113.

¹³Tobin L. Green, *The Hammelburg Raid Revisited* (Strategic Studies Research Seminar, July 7, 1994), 48.

¹⁴Baron, Baum, and Goldhurst, *Raid!: The Untold Story of Patton’s Secret Mission*, 116–117.

infantrymen succumbed to the heavy fire.¹⁵ Two Americans made it across the river prompting the Germans to blow the bridge, sending two soldiers to their death in the river below. With no way forward, Baum began the precarious task of withdrawing an armored formation under fire. Baum returned to Langenprozelten and started north to find another crossing. Fortune soon returned to Baum as a wayward propaganda team from Seventh Army bumped into the column. Baum enlisted their help, and after a few broadcasts, 200 Germans from the Gemünden defense promptly surrendered. After the propaganda team departed towards friendly lines, the convoy's lead tank knocked a German rider off his motorcycle.¹⁶ After a brief tactical questioning, Baum's interpreter, PFC Sotoloff discerned that the soldier was a paratrooper and deserter from the Eastern front, returning to see his wife and newborn baby. Baum took the time to draw his knife before gently asking the paratrooper the location of the next bridge. The paratrooper quickly told of a bridge at Burgsinn prompting Baum to continue north. The paratrooper proved valuable, coaxing several squads of Germans from hiding and into surrender, exclaiming the "Americans are here". Sotoloff helpfully added "It's better to surrender to Americans than Russians."¹⁷

Just before crossing the Sinn River, the task force captured *Schutzstaffel* (ss) General Oriel Lotz. Baum lashed Lotz to the hood of half-track as a field expedient bullet shield and as Green helpfully noted, a law of war violation.¹⁸ Lotz did not ride with the column for long, but long enough to overhear the objective of the task force. The convoy made rapid progress to Gräfendorf, arriving just before 1300. The task force stumbled upon 700 Russian POWs guarded by 200 Germans. Baum liberated the Red Army soldiers who quickly found a nearby liquor warehouse to celebrate their good fortune. Baum deposited Lotz and the 200 Germans with the Russians. Continuing east, Baum noticed a German spotter plane near Weickersgruben at 1400. Determined fire forced the plane away, but not before the pilot reported the composition and disposition of the task force to Obstfelder.¹⁹ After his release, Lotz quickly regained control amidst the chaos of the Russian POWs and promptly told Obstfelder of

¹⁵ Abe Baum, *Notes on Task Force Baum: Raid on Hammelburg, March 27, 1945* (HQ, 4th Armored Division, April 10, 1945), 1.

¹⁶ Green, *The Hammelburg Raid Revisited*, 17.

¹⁷ Baron, Baum, and Goldhurst, *Raid!: The Untold Story of Patton's Secret Mission*, 134–137.

¹⁸ Green, *The Hammelburg Raid Revisited*, 18.

¹⁹ Baum, *Notes on Task Force Baum: Raid on Hammelburg, March 27, 1945*, 2.

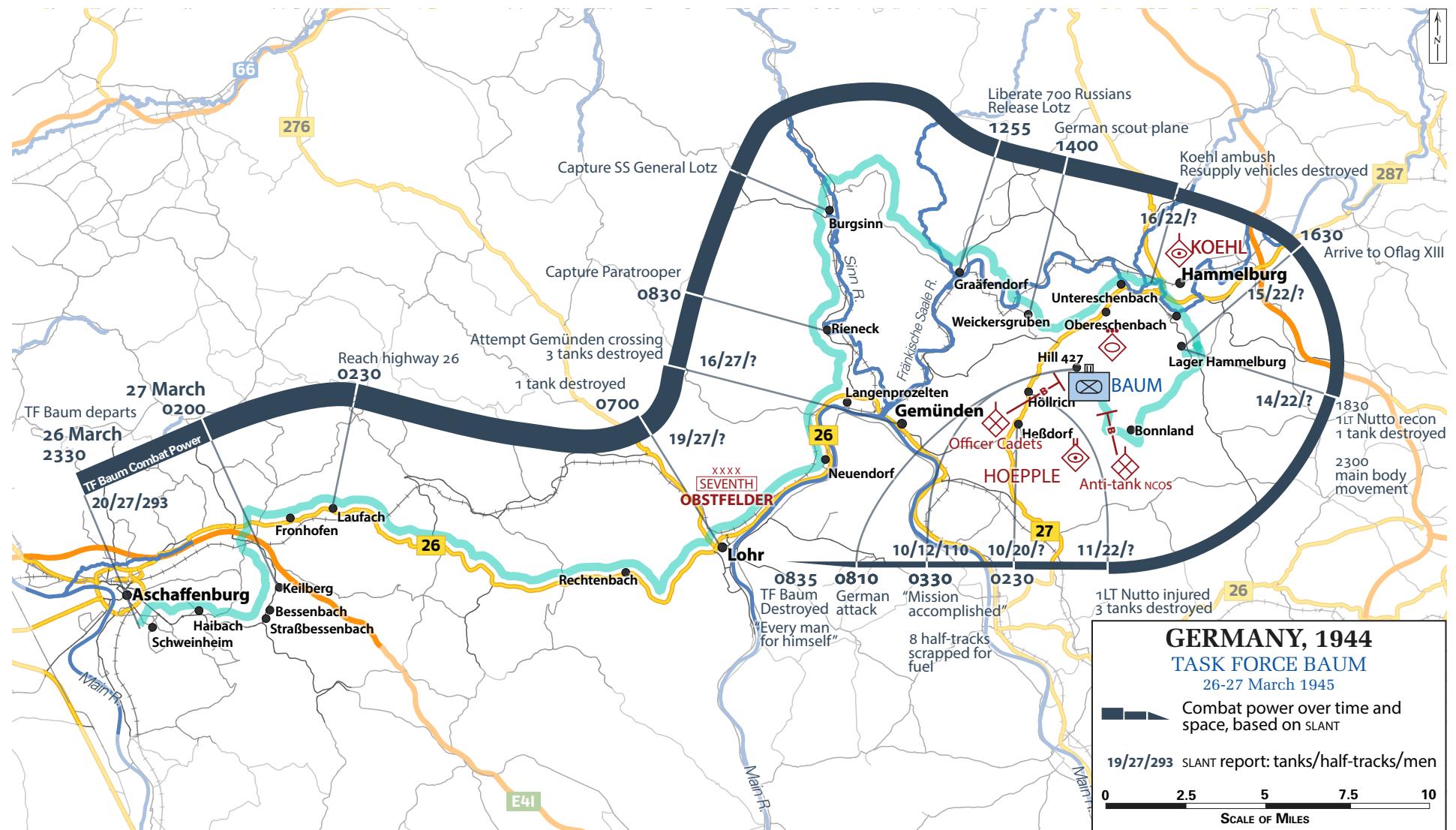


Figure 3: Hammelburg Raid - Task Force Baum Route[†]

[†] Map created with QGIS and Adobe Illustrator using physical feature data from <http://download.geofabrik.de/europe/germany.html>; Locations, times and events compiled from Baron, Baum, and Goldhurst, *Raid! The Untold Story of Patton's Secret Mission* and Baum, *Notes on Task Force Baum: Raid on Hammelburg, March 27, 1945*

Baum's objective.²⁰

Obstfelder immediately notified the *Oflag XIII* commander, Generalmajor Goeckel and the Hammelburg area commander, COL Hoepple. Unfortunately for Baum, a German *panzerjäger* (tank destroyer) company commanded by *Hauptmann* (captain) Koehl, sat in ambush near Hammelburg, alerted about Baum's break-through in the hours after the event. Koehl had 8 *panzerjägers* equipped with an 88mm flak gun mounted on a Tiger tank chassis.²¹ With the element of surprise, Koehl destroyed 1 Sherman, one light tank and 5 half-tracks. Baum returned fire destroying three *panzerjägers* before Koehl withdrew. The destroyed half-tracks were carrying the extra fuel and ammunition the task force need to return to American lines. Additionally, the fight dragged on for two hours as Baum worked to defeat Koehl.²²

By accident, Baum veered south at Hammelburg, away from Koehl and into Lager Hammelburg and *Oflag XIII*. After a cursory defense, the Camp Commandant, Generalmajor von Goeckel, surrendered to his American POWs. The liberated Americans sent a small contingent to meet Task Force Baum. Among the group was LTC John Waters. A German guard, unconvinced of the order to surrender, promptly shot Waters, missing his spine by inches. Waters was evacuated back to the prison camp where he would remain until his liberation nine days later. Task Force Baum continued into the camp, breaking down the gates at 1630. The American POWs quickly surrounded the convoy, totaling 1492 and vastly exceeding the 300 Baum expected. Baum broke the news that they didn't have room for all Americans. Dejected, only 200 prisoners boarded the convoy.²³

As Baum wrestled with the logistics of prisoner transportation, Hoepple arranged his trap. Hoepple commanded a training area for replacement troops. Under his command, Hoepple trained three classes, a company of anti-tank NCOS, 300 SS officer cadets, and a platoon of engineers. Hoepple positioned the NCO anti-tank class south of Bonnland. The SS officer cadets established blocking

²⁰Kenneth A. Koyen, *The Fourth Armored Division: From the Beach to Bavaria*, 2nd ed. (Munich, Germany: Herder Druck, 1946), 193.

²¹Michael K. Robel, "Patton's Hammelburg Raid: Mission Assessment & Lessons Learned," *Command*, no. 54 (November 2000): 28–29.

²²Baum, *Notes on Task Force Baum: Raid on Hammelburg, March 27, 1945*, 2.

²³Meltesen, *Roads to Liberation From Oflag* 64, 390.

positions at Heßdorf and Höllrich, reinforced by the recent arrival of five tiger tanks.²⁴ The engineer class joined Koehl's *panzerjägers* and moved south of Lager Hammelburg. A German assault gun battalion moved south of Hill 427 to setup an overwatch position.²⁵

Baum dispatched 1LT Nutto to find a route to Highway 27 at 1830, two hours after arriving to the prison camp. Obstructed by a roadblock at Bonnland, Nutto continued north-west towards Heßdorf. The SS officer cadets sprung their ambush, wounding Nutto and destroying 3 Sherman tanks. Nutto withdrew east and reported the ambush to Baum. Just before 2300, Baum moved the task force from *Oflag XIII* to linkup with Nutto's reconnaissance element and continue searching for a route to Highway 27.²⁶ After waiting for over seven hours to depart, only 57 POWs elected to remain with the convoy.²⁷

From the prison camp, Baum moved east towards Höllrich and into another ambush, losing two tanks. Realizing that he was blocked, Baum moved the task force to Hill 427, hoping to break-through the road-blocks in the morning. CPT Sheldon Thompson, a liberated POW from *Oflag XIII* noted that the "action of the last two nights and a day without rest was too much for [Task Force Baum] and many, standing or sitting, slept even as the column moved." After arriving at Hill 427, Baum had just over 100 men, 3 light tanks, 4 Sherman tanks, 3 M4 Sherman assault guns and 15 half-tracks. By this time, the vehicles were critically low on fuel because the half-tracks carrying fuel were destroyed earlier by Koehl's ambush. While reorganizing, the task force siphoned gas from eight half-tracks and then destroyed the half-tracks with thermite grenades.²⁸

Unbeknownst to Baum, his assembly area at Hill 427 was the target area of a range for Hoepple's anti-tank course complete with fighting positions and a telephone network. During the night, Hoepple's officer cadets moved within 50 meters of the American positions waiting for the signal to begin their attack. At 0810, as Task Force Baum was preparing to depart, the ambush commenced with a volley

²⁴Robel, "Patton's Hammelburg Raid: Mission Assessment & Lessons Learned," 30-31.

²⁵Green, *The Hammelburg Raid Revisited*, 26.

²⁶Sheldon L. Thompson, *Operations of the Task Force Baum, 4th Armored Division, Between Aschaffenburg and Hammelburg, Germany, 27-28 March 1945 (Central Europe Campaign)* (United States Army Infantry School, 1948), 15.

²⁷Meltesen, *Roads to Liberation From Oflag 64*, 397.

²⁸Thompson, *Operations of the Task Force Baum, 4th Armored Division, Between Aschaffenburg and Hammelburg, Germany, 27-28 March 1945 (Central Europe Campaign)*, 18, 19.

from the assault gun battalion.²⁹ The coordinated attack completely overwhelmed Baum's formation. After 25 minutes, all vehicles were destroyed. At 0835, Baum told the group to escape and evade in groups of three or four and make for American lines.³⁰ Of the 293 men, 9 were confirmed killed and 16 were reported missing. Nearly all the remainder spent time as POWs before the war ended. Only 15 men successfully escaped to American lines.³¹

The Hammelburg Raid failed to liberate prisoners at *Oflag XIII* because the raid violated two of the four characteristics of the offense, concentration and tempo. Surprise and audacity, the remaining characteristics of the offense, were present in abundance.

Task Force Baum was not an appropriate formation for a daring raid 60 miles into enemy territory because it lacked the combat power and sustainment capabilities to operate through 60 miles of enemy terrain. On the characteristic of concentration Patton wrote, "Never send a boy on a man's job, the larger the force and the more violence you use in the attack [...] the smaller will be your proportionate losses."³² In doctrinal terms, "concentration is massing of overwhelming effects of combat power to achieve a single purpose."³³ Patton eschewed his own advice in constraining the raid force to 300 men. When Patton assigned the mission, the entire chain of command protested the small size. Hoge, Abrams, Cohen and Baum all questioned the rationale of using 300 men for a mission fraught with risks. Abrams strongly argued for using his whole combat command, asserting that the almost 5,000 men of his "combat command could go anywhere."³⁴ Despite the protests, Patton insisted on a small force. Patton claims he was persuaded by Bradley to use a small formation, but the diaries of both generals conflict each other.³⁵ The consequence of the small size was evident in the latter half of the mission. In one engagement, Baum lost all fuel and ammunition resupply. Additionally, after losing a few half-tracks, Baum did not have enough vehicles to move even the 300 POWs he had planned to liberate.

²⁹Jr. Inge Herndon, "The Hammelburg Raid," *Military XVIII* (March 2002): 7.

³⁰Koyen, *The Fourth Armored Division: From the Beach to Bavaria*, 135.

³¹Robert B. Reppa, *That Raid on Hammelburg* (Fort Knox, KY: General Instruction Dept., The Armor School, 1948), 26.

³²Thompson, *Operations of the Task Force Baum, 4th Armored Division, Between Aschaffenburg and Hammelburg, Germany, 27-28 March 1945 (Central Europe Campaign)*, 22.

³³U.S. Army, *Offense and Defense, ADRP 3-90* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2012), 3-1.

³⁴Baron, Baum, and Goldhurst, *Raid!: The Untold Story of Patton's Secret Mission*, 16.

³⁵Blumenson, *The Patton Papers*, 2:671.

The risk of a small formation was not mitigated with additional assets. Third Army moved North the following day, leaving Task Force Baum in Seventh Army's area of operations. Task Force Baum passed out of artillery range after 10 miles, operating alone, unafraid and unsupported past Laufach. Political power directed concentration in the wrong places. Patton requested that MAJ Stiller, his aide-de-camp, accompany the raid. Ostensibly, MAJ Stiller's purpose was to experience a "taste of combat" but Stiller later told Baum that his purpose was to identify LTC John Waters, Patton's son-in-law.³⁶ Though Patton later vehemently denied organizing the raid to rescue his son-in-law, his letters to his wife suggest he knew of Water's location at *Oflag*.³⁷

Task Force Baum did not maintain the tempo needed to retain the initiative and prevent the Germans from fixing their force. Initially, Patton's hallmarks of surprise and audacity afforded the Task Force relative safety under a blanket of fog. Obstfelder slowly lifted the fog of war as Baum continued toward his objective. At Weickersgruben, Obstfelder had a complete and accurate picture of Baum's task force. The German scout plane confirmed the composition and disposition of the column and Lotz confirmed the objective. Without air support, Baum had no means of preventing reconnaissance assets from observing his position. No attempt was made to integrate Allied air power into the mission, which by March 1944 was completely dominant. The compressed planning timeline orchestrated by Patton prevented the synchronization of assets needed to maintain tempo throughout the depth of the fight.

Further eroding Baum's ability to control tempo was the poor dissemination of information. Most of Baum's men were poorly informed about the mission. Consequently, at every unforeseen event, precious time was lost as Baum worked to invent solutions. For example, when Baum was presented with almost 1,500 prisoners, it took almost two hours for him to dispatch 1LT Nutto to begin the reconnaissance. CPT Robert Reppa, a liberated POW, noted that the "men were not informed and they lost cohesion in the mass of liberated prisoners."³⁸ Baum did not depart the objective for another four and a half hours. According to another POW, CPT Sheldon Thompson, the long time spent

³⁶Baron, Baum, and Goldhurst, *Raid!: The Untold Story of Patton's Secret Mission*, 23, 37.

³⁷Blumenson, *The Patton Papers*, 2:664–665, 675.

³⁸Reppa, *That Raid on Hammelburg*, 28–29.

milling at the objective, coupled with “hopeless aspect of the future [...] brought an inertia and an apathy that would have been a serious problem even under more favorable circumstances.”³⁹ The lack of contingency planning diminished Baum’s tempo throughout the fight.

The lack of sleep compounded the friction resulting from the lack of planning. By the time Baum moved to Hill 427, his men had gone without sleep for 100 hours.⁴⁰ Citing his firsthand experience, Reppa wrote that officers made “confused decisions and failed to make proper reconnaissance.”⁴¹ Thompson reasserts this view, stating that Baum “did not use the reconnaissance section as frontal security at any time during the operation.”⁴² As a result, the convoy became embroiled in short engagements that the reconnaissance section could avoid. Baum failed to use his reconnaissance assets to prevent friction from slowing his tempo.

Audacity and surprise are often necessary for mission accomplishment but they were not sufficient for Task Force Baum. The Hammelburg Raid holds the distinction of venturing farther into enemy territory than any force before without the promise of reinforcement.⁴³ Patton acknowledged the use of a small force as his only mistake in the war writing in his journal, “throughout the campaign in Europe I know of no error I made except that of failing to send a combat command to Hammelburg.”⁴⁴ Though audacity and surprise often determine success, Task Force Baum required detailed planning and support to build the concentration and tempo required to liberate the prisoners at *Oflag XIII*.

³⁹Thompson, *Operations of the Task Force Baum, 4th Armored Division, Between Aschaffenburg and Hammelburg, Germany, 27-28 March 1945 (Central Europe Campaign)*, 14.

⁴⁰Charles Whiting, *48 Hours to Hammelburg: Patton’s Secret Mission* (New York: I Books, 2003), 28.

⁴¹Reppa, *That Raid on Hammelburg*, 29.

⁴²Thompson, *Operations of the Task Force Baum, 4th Armored Division, Between Aschaffenburg and Hammelburg, Germany, 27-28 March 1945 (Central Europe Campaign)*, 23.

⁴³Baron, Baum, and Goldhurst, *Raid!: The Untold Story of Patton’s Secret Mission*, 111.

⁴⁴Ibid., 271.

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