

My Story.....Part One.....

December 1944, Germany and the Battle of the Bulge. Where to begin? Maybe, just to say I was a very young 2nd Lieutenant in charge of the Second Platoon, Anti-Tank Company, 422nd Infantry Regiment, 106th Division. (Map 1)

On December 18th my platoon had just undergone shelling and we were trying to remove our three 57mm guns from being overrun, when tree bursts showered down upon us. Since we had been left with only one round of AT ammunition for each gun I decided we would no longer be an Anti-Tank Platoon. I ordered the men to extract their breach-blocks, bury them, and then follow me on foot, moving west toward our Regimental CP at Schoenberg. (Maps 2 & 3)

We never made it.

We were pictured on the cover of the German Magazine: *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*. December 1944 (Figure 1) The caption at the bottom left corner translated into English reads: "From Star Spangled Banner to white Flag."

Flash forward to the night of December 23rd when 60 POW's (I was one of them) were in a 40 and 8 boxcar parked in the marshalling yards in Limburg, Germany. The British had decided to bomb the yards that night and I was one of the fortunate ones to come out alive. (Aerial photo taken after the bombing - Figure 2; For an aerial view of the marshalling yards today, see Figure 3) (RAF report of the bombing is in Figure 4)

Leaving the dead and wounded behind those from my boxcar were led out of the railyard to board a train for the next leg of our journey.

Two days later we arrived at Stalag IXB where we were interrogated and given POW identification numbers. Since this camp was for enlisted men only, my fellow officers and I were force-marched 60km to the Oflag XIII B (Officer's) POW Camp at Lager Hammelburg.

I will not take up space giving a detailed account of my time at Oflag XIIIIB. It was much the same as has been described by hundreds of other *Kriegies* (from the German word for POWs: *Kriegsgefangenen*) --- It was bitter cold and we had very little food. As to the Germans adhering to the 1929 Geneva Convention regarding the treatment of POWs, you can judge for yourself. The terms of the Convention did not allow officers to work. Enlisted men were allowed to work, cut wood and heat their barracks. Although we were officers we begged to be allowed to go into the nearby forest for wood but the German camp commander pointed out that it was not allowed by the Convention, as a result, many of my fellow POWs literally froze to death (I believe what saved me was the over crowding of our barracks keeping it above freezing). The Geneva Convention specified the amount of meat each POW was to have per week. The Germans brought a dead horse in from the Russian front which weighed X amount of kilos. This of course included the bones, hoofs head, maggots, etc. We were told this was meat to last for X many men for Y many days (we ran our own kitchen). After the cook got rid of the innards, bones etc, the result was one-quarter-inch piece of meat per man --- that is --- if you were lucky.

Lager Hammelburg was home for three camps, one for American Officers, one for Yugoslavian officers and enlisted men, and one for Russian officers and enlisted men.

My story will now be taken over by a *Story within a Story*:

After relating this sub-story, I shall return to what was to be a truly strange occurrence.

Patton's only error.....

"I can say this" General George Patton wrote in assessing his part in the victory [WWII], "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."ⁱ

Exactly what caused that error and what were its consequences?

The reason Patton wanted to "take Hammelburg" was because it was the site of the prisoner of war camp Oflag XIII-B, where his son-in-law Lieutenant Colonel John Waters was being held captive.

Waters, captured in Tunisia, had been in a POW camp for Allied officers in Poland. Early in 1945, as the Russians approached and threatened to overrun the camp the Germans marched the POWs westward. Reports from the Red Cross and other Allied Intelligence indicated that Waters might be in Oflag XIII-B; about the same time units of the Third Army were within striking distance of the camp. Patton made the decision to liberate his son-in-law.

On the day that the Third Army was across the Rhine, Patton wrote his wife, Beatrice, "We are headed right for John's place and may get there before he is moved." Then on March 25th, he wrote Beatrice, "Hope to send an Expedition tomorrow to get John."ⁱⁱ

Quoting from *Patton* by Martin Blumenson: ⁱⁱⁱ

On March 20, Patton flew to Eddy's XII Corps headquarters and revealed his intention. Eddy was reluctant to send a separate force on an independent foray into enemy territory because of the risk. Furthermore, Eddy was attacking north to join Hodges's First Army at the Ruhr, whereas Hammelburg lay to the east. An armored combat command of about 4,000 troops was large enough to take care of itself and might deceive the Germans on the direction of the XII Corps attack. But for a lightning hit-and-run affair, a smaller group might be better. Patton agreed, and later thought his assent was a mistake.

Captain Abraham Baum, big, rough, and red-haired, who had worked in New York's garment district before the war, took command of a little over 300 men in ten medium tanks, six light tanks, twenty-seven half-tracks, seven jeeps, and three motorized assault guns. His mission was to drive to Hammelburg, now forty miles away, liberate the prisoners, load as many Americans on his vehicles as he could, and bring them back. Shortly before he started, Patton's aide Stiller showed up. Patton had asked Stiller, who knew and could recognize Waters, whether he would like to accompany Baum. Stiller regarded the request as an order. Baum was suspicious of Major Stiller, who outranked him, but when Stiller assured him he wanted to go along "for the thrills and laughs," Baum invited him into his jeep.

Stiller's presence prompted later talk. Was Patton interested in liberating the prisoners and incidentally Waters, or the reverse?

Baum's men rushed toward Hammelburg, rudely dispersed a small German tank unit, destroyed railroad locomotives, smashed antitank guns on flatcars, set free 700 Russian prisoners who began to loot the area,

fought off an assault gun battalion, and reached the camp. The German commander decided to surrender and sent four volunteers, among them Waters, to make contact with Baum. As they were proceeding, a guard shot and seriously wounded Waters. Baum's force then broke into the camp as thousands of joyous officers milled about.

Loading his vehicles with as many Americans as he could, Baum started back. The Germans were lying in wait for him. A light aircraft had verified the small size of Baum's group, and German units converged on Hammelburg to prevent his return. As a firefight broke out, most of the prisoners walked back to the prison camp. Surrounded and outnumbered, Baum's men fought well, tried to escape, and eventually were captured. Baum, hit three times, was sent to Hammelburg. Stiller was marched to Nuremberg.

A week later, several officers who had escaped and walked to the American lines confirmed the presence of Waters in Hammelburg, according to Gay's journal, for "the first time." Two days afterward, the Seventh Army overran Hammelburg and found about seventy prisoners, among them Waters, whose life had been saved by a Serbian surgeon. Odom, Patton's friend and a medical officer, flew there in a light plane and brought Waters to an American hospital in Frankfurt; When Patton came to visit, Waters's initial question was whether his father-in-law knew of his confinement at Hammelburg. Obeying the tradition that West Pointers never lied to each other, Patton answered, "Not for sure."

Waters recovered from his wound and after a distinguished military career retired as a full general. Baum got well and after the war returned to the business of manufacturing ladies' blouses. Stiller was liberated from a prisoner of war camp late in April and, having lost thirty pounds during his confinement, rejoined Patton.

What the newspapers featured was Patton's sacrifice of Baum's soldiers to rescue his son-in-law. "How I hate the press," Patton told Bea.

When I first arrived Hammelburg I discovered it held officers from several countries other than the USA. Within days of being assigned to one of the twenty-five American POW barracks I met and became friends with a Yugoslavian Captain, Zdenko Mitrovic. One evening he slipped me into their compound and there I met the members of the Yugoslavian General Staff. The senior members had been German POWs for four years during WWI and were now POWs for four years in WWII. They were fit and in remarkable good spirits for having been POWs that length of time.^{iv}

Within weeks following our arrival the American officers (all captains) organized us into groups of 100 *Kriegies* (from the German

word for POWs - *Kriegsgefangenen*). In March a group of American POWs arrived on foot having been marched hundreds of miles from Oflag 64, in Poland. This group included several very senior officers who immediately took control of our compound --- rank has strict privileges.

Colonel Paul Goode was now in command and Lieutenant Colonel Waters was one of his assistants. Since they had been POWs longer than we recently captured junior officers, they left no doubt who was in charge. This lasted only a few weeks, as we were soon to discover.

On March 27th, with guns a-blazing, Task Force Baum arrived at Oflag XIII-B. I was close enough to hear the officer in the lead tank shout: "Does anyone know where Colonel Waters is?"

About this time my Yugoslavian friend found me and in great consternation called out: "Your Americans are shooting at my people, help us stop them." Shots were also fired by a German Guard, some hitting Colonel Waters just after he was asked by General von Goeckel, the camp commander, to meet with the officer in charge of the attacking Task Force.

In less than an hour, Colonel Goode explained that we could choose one of three options: (1) Ride back to the American lines on one of the Tanks, (2) stay in the camp awaiting liberation by some other American outfit, or (3) take off on foot, trying to reach the US lines, which we were told were about 50 miles to the west.

No way was I going to get aboard one of the tanks; and no way was I about to stay in the camp. I and two other 2nd Lieutenants retrieved our meager belongings and then took off on foot heading west. A detailed account of the liberation of Oflag XIII-B is in *Raid (The Untold Story of Patton's Secret Mission)*.

What was the result of Patten's decision to launch Task Force Baum?

Immediately before launching the Task Force a path had to be cleared through a village leading east away from the Main River. A hastily assembled force accomplished this, resulting in a number of soldiers being killed or wounded. Task Force Baum itself suffered heavily from its failed attempt to return to its base, a summary was included in the book *Raid*:

Task Force Baum left the American lines on the night of March 26 with 53 vehicles and 294 men. All of the vehicles were destroyed or captured by the Germans. On 12 April, the 4th Armored Division listed the 293 men of the task force (not including Major Stiller) as "missing in action." After the war ended, the 4th posted 32 members of Task Force Baum wounded in action, 9 killed in action, 16 never accounted for—a total of 25 presumed killed. The casualty reports did not list the number of *kriegies* who lost their lives accompanying the task force. In fact, no official records seem to exist pertaining to the POW casualties.

Patton told reporters that he ordered the raid as a diversionary tactic. Indeed, Task Force Baum succeeded in bewildering the German command, which diverted units from the north to stop it. The military historian, Lieutenant Colonel Prederick E. Oldinsky, writing in *Armor* (July-August 1976) notes that "The effect of the diversion of those [German] units on the subsequent advance of the 3rd Army was evidenced by the fact that the 4th Armored Division didn't fire a shot for the first 90 to 100 miles in its subsequent attack."^v

With the conclusion of the *Story within a Story* I shall return to My Story.

My Story.....Part Two.....

Now that we were free from being prisoners of the Germans, we traveled cross-country, moving west from Lager Hammelburg. The terrain was a combination of farm fields and woods. (Figure 5 is a 2008 satellite view of the area). We started on our journey in the late afternoon and were able to reach a wooded area a few miles from the camp where we were to spend the first night. After dark we consumed the few bits of bread and cheese we had taken with us. A small stream ran near the woods providing us with fresh water. My vision of that first night away from captivity remains vivid in my memory. When the moon came up it was not only FULL but was bright yellow, making the woods into a scene from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

At daybreak the following morning, March 28th, we left the woods and headed directly west with the sun rising at our back. Captain

Baum had told us that it was about 50 miles to where we would find the Third Army. If we were able to make ten or more miles each morning before the sun was fully up, and supposing we could find a place to hide during the day and each night, then we might be able to remain undetected and eventually reach the American lines.

Three days later, after crossing a small stream we found ourselves behind a stonewall, about a hundred yards from a farmhouse. There were no woods in which we could hide, and we were very hungry. It was decided that we would draw straws and the loser would circle the field and attempt to find some food for the three of us. The short straw took off as the morning became brighter. We two hunkered down behind the wall as the minutes began to seem like hours. All of a sudden there appeared behind us two German soldiers, pointing rifles at us. "Gekommen" was the command and we obeyed.

We walked about two miles to the town of Lohr am Main where we were turned over to an officer who put us in separate rooms in what appeared to be some sort of military barracks. Within minutes I was escorted back out to the street and a very young Oberleutnant took me in tow, guiding me to the motor pool where we climbed into a jeep-like vehicle to be driven some 21 miles to the train station in Würzburg. Visiting a kiosk, the Oberleutnant obtain some papers, and then led me into a lunch-room where we were fed brown-bread laced with a hard cheese (Käsebrot). An hour later we boarded a passenger train. He spoke enough English to inform me I was being taken to Oflag 73 a short distance south of Nürnberg. Imagine how I must have felt, having my own private escort. He wanted me to know that "We Germans have nothing against Americans, it was the Jews and Communists who started the war." He wanted me to take his name and address so that we could be in touch after the end of the war. He also wanted me to be able to confirm that I was not ill-treated. Something whispered to me that the war must be near its end. We were on a passenger train and no one seemed surprised to see me in dirty army fatigues being escorted by a German officer.

From the train station in Nürnberg, I was taken in a van to Oflag 73. Instead of being put in a barracks with other POWs I was delivered to the medical dispensary where an Australian doctor took charge of me.

There I remained for the next two weeks, when on April 12th we were informed that President Roosevelt had died. All the time I was with the Australian doctor I was ordered to remain in bed. What appeared to me to be strange was that I was the only patient in the ward.

After the war I was to learn that many of the POWs who remained at Lager Hammelberg were later taken in boxcars to this same camp. Following the announcement of Roosevelt's death, the Germans began marching (to the east) the American and British POWs being held at Oflag 73. The Australian physician told the guards that I could not be moved, which no-doubt saved my life as many *Kriegies* died on that march from the Nürnberg camp. A week after the POWs were moved out, I woke up to find there were no longer any guards in the camp so the Australian doctor and I walked out the front gate of the Oflag. After "requisitioning" a motorcycle from a German civilian, we rode about thirty miles (west) to freedom (a Tank Battalion of the US Seventh Army, that a few days later, on April 20th, captured Nürnberg). After being fed and accepting a full tank of "petrol" we two ex-POWs rode our BMW to Paris. (I wrote my Mom and Dad a V-Mail letter containing only one sentence: "I'm free and on my way home, Don")

As related, I felt I owed my life to that Australian doctor, who rode with me all the way to Paris. When I wrote that we requisitioned a motorcycle, what I should have written was that I called on a woman residing in a house opposite the gate of the POW camp, and demanded the Schlüssel (key) to a lock and chain securing the BMW to a tree. I gave her a receipt signed by Lt. D. B. Prell, 0551911, US ARMY, so that she might obtain compensation.

We parted in Paris, I reported to US Army Headquarters; my companion took the BMW and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Within a week I was sent to Camp Lucky Strike, then to board the Hospital Ship Sea Robin leaving La Harve for New York. We were the second ship to enter New York harbor following V-E day, May 8th, 1945. What a celebration! I was allowed to board a train for Los Angeles, where I was met by my father. I was hungry and he took me to the Pacific Dining Car restaurant near downtown Los Angeles where I enjoyed a double New York cut sirloin steak.

Roll the tape fast-forward sixteen years to 1961, a month before our son Owen was born, I was speaking at a Venture Capital Conference in Bakersfield, California. A man in the audience caught my eye, and within seconds I knew who he was. As soon as my talk ended, I quickly left the rostrum moving directly toward him as he was trying to exit the room as swiftly as he could. When I reached him, I asked: "Why did you turn us in?" Stammering: "I don't know what you are talking about" he pushed me aside trying to get to the exit. My heart was pounding as I again confronted him with my question, but he ducked under my outstretched arms and bolted for the door. There was no doubt, this was the same guy, the same kriegie who on March 31, 1945, left us hiding behind a stonewall in a German farm yard while he went to find food. Although I was never to see him again, there is no doubt as to who he was. What is almost as strange is that today if I close my eyes, I can see his face, exactly as it was in 1961.

ⁱ *Patton (Ordeal and Triumph)* by Ladislav Farago, 1964, p. 790. (Originally from Patton's personal journal, published posthumously in the *Saturday Evening Post* in August 1948.)

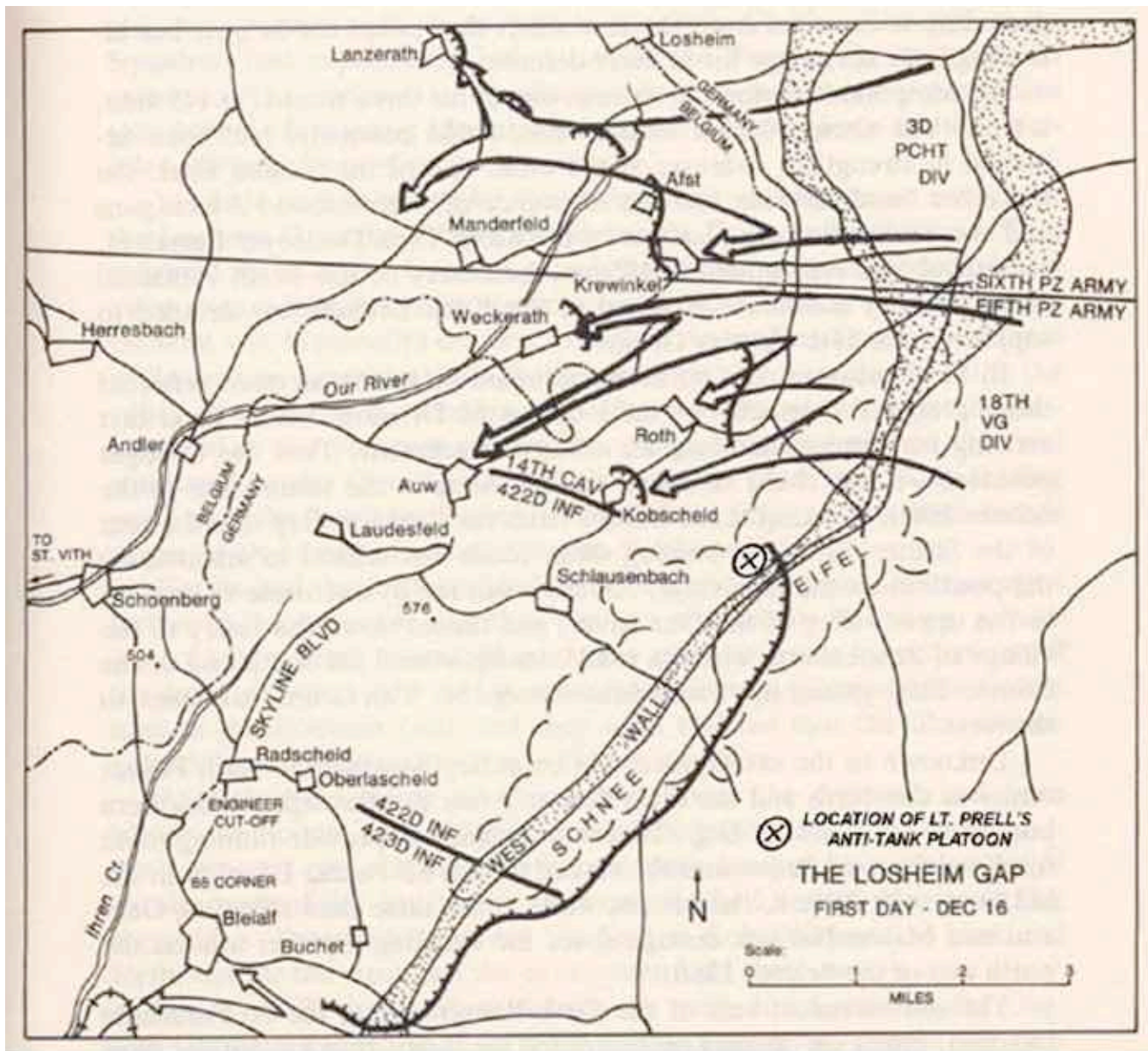
ⁱⁱ *Raid (The Untold Story of Patton's Secret Mission)* by Richard Baron, Abraham Baum and Richard Goldhurst, 1981, p. 10

ⁱⁱⁱ *Patton (The Man Behind the Legend)* by Martin Blumenson, 1985, pp. 260-261.

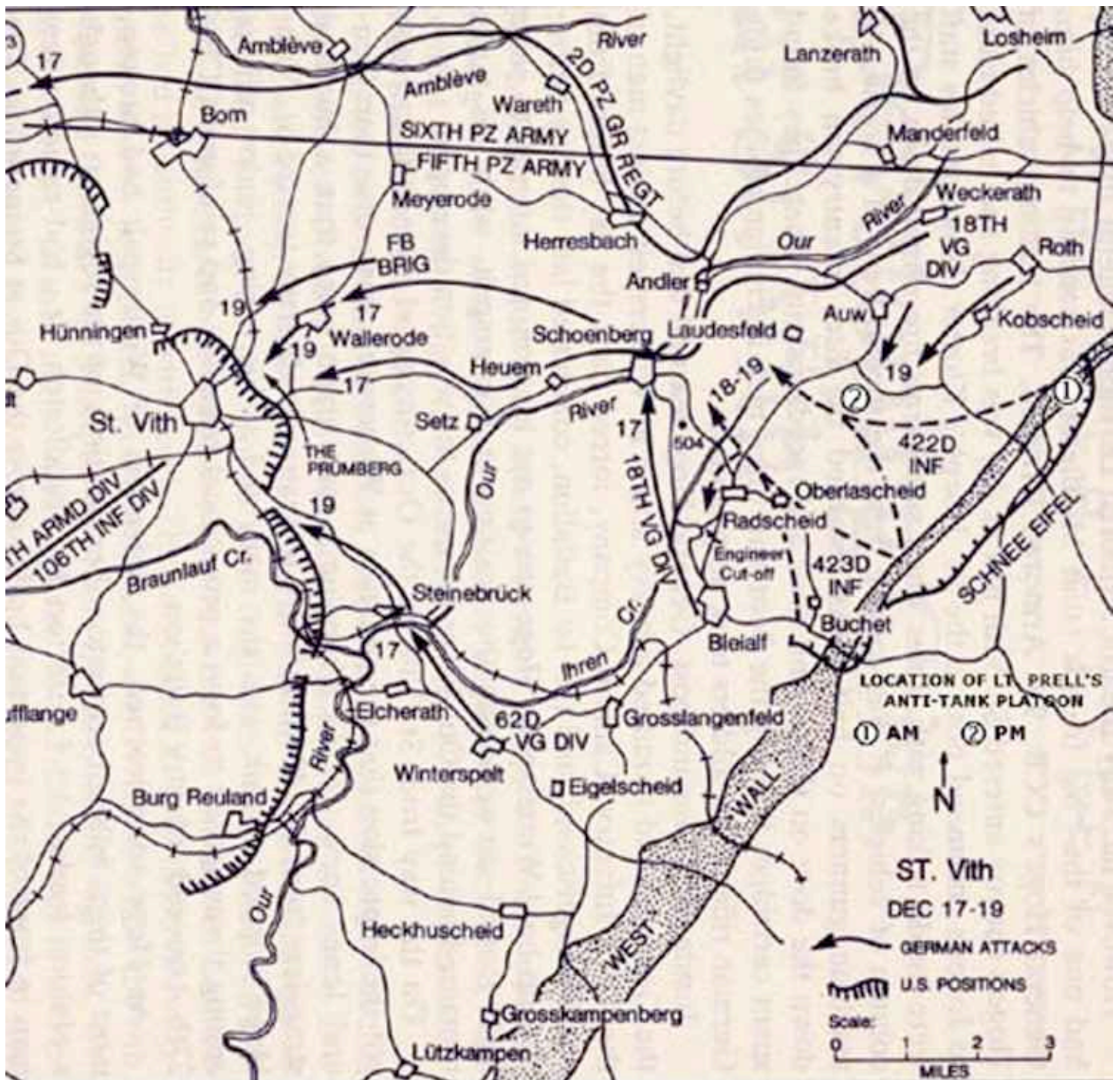
^{iv} After liberation they were returned to Yugoslavia, only to discover their leader Draza Mihailovic had lost out to Tito. Because they were not followers of Tito, almost all of them suffered the same fate as Mihailovic --- death.

^v *Raid*, p.270

Donald B. Prell
Palm Springs, California
September 22, 2008



Map 2



Map 3

Nummer 52, 23. Dezember 1945
Preis 100 Reichsmark

Berliner

53. Jahrgang, Preis 02 Reichsmark

Illustrierte Zeitung



**Vom Sternenbanner
zur weißen Fahne**

Die Soldaten marschieren unter dem amerikanischen Sternenfahnen zum Rhein, Dezember 1945

Verlagsgesellschaft der Illustrierten Zeitung, Berlin, Unter den Eichen 10. Telefon: 240000. Druck: Verlagsdruckerei der Illustrierten Zeitung, Berlin, Unter den Eichen 10. Preis 100 Reichsmark. Abgabe für den Ausland: 100 Reichsmark. Abgabe für den Ausland: 100 Reichsmark. Abgabe für den Ausland: 100 Reichsmark.

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

PART I PAGE 1AIR OPERATIONS (HOME).MEMO.25/26 DEC - NIGHT OPERATIONS.

157 aircraft were despatched on the following operations:-

12 on LINSBURG Railway Centre (12 miles E. of KOBLENZ)	Mosquitos
15 on SIDBURG Railway Centre (7 miles N.E. of BORN).	Mosquitos
7 on BREMEN, HANNOVER, OSNABRUCK and MÜNSTER.	Mosquitos
27 on Bomber Support	27 Mosquitos 13 Stirlings 9 Halifaxes 5 Fortresses 3 Liberators
1 on Weather Reconnaissance	Mosquito

RESULTS.LINSBURG Railway Centre.

50 Mosquitos attacked, between 1805 and 1831 hours, dropping approximately 51 tons of H.E. (including 25 x 4,000 lb) and 24 x 250 lb. marker bombs in conditions variously reported as from nil to 7/10ths thin low strato-cumulus or haze.

The marking throughout was good and practically all the main force aircraft were able to bomb on the markers, and bombing appeared to have been well concentrated. Two good explosions and several fires were observed.

Very slight heavy flak was encountered.

SIDBURG Railway Centre.

38 Mosquitos attacked, between 1728 and 1750 hours, dropping approximately 50 tons of H.E. bombs (including 19 x 4,000 lb) from between 23/27,500 feet in cloudless conditions but some ground haze.

The aircraft attacked either on their leaders or failing that, owing to approaching darkness, on navigational aids or bomb flashes. No accurate assessment of bombing results can be made.

Very slight heavy flak was encountered.

One Mosquito attacked COLOGNE dropping 1 x 4000 lb. bomb at 1738 hours.

Figure 4



Figure 5

'STALAG IXB Bad-Orb GERMANY





2nd Lt. Donald B. Prell
June 30, 1944