

Lt. L. Martin Jones

Company G, 423d Infantry Regiment
106th Division

See also Stalag IX-B for more of Lt. Jones' story

On the afternoon of March 27, 1945. Captain Abe Baum's M4 Sherman tanks crashed through the barbed wire that surrounded the prisoner of war compound at Hammelburg, Germany. Although Baum's task force had expected to find 1,000 Americans held captive, it actually found approximately 1,400, including one by the name of Lieutenant L. Martin Jones. Initially elated at the arrival of the rescuers, Jones soon discovered that the ill-fated raid would result *in* his recapture just a few short hours later. The young infantryman's permanent liberation would not come until May 2, 1945.

ARDENNES NIGHTMARE

Before his capture, Martin Jones had been a platoon leader in Company G, 423d Infantry Regiment, in the brand-new 106th Infantry Division manning a thin defensive line in the Ardennes. When the Battle of the Bulge began in the early morning hours of December 16, 1944, the German vanguard quickly cut off and surrounded Jones' regiment. On the afternoon of December 19, with very little rations and almost *no* ammunition remaining, Jones' regimental commander agreed to surrender the unit. The captain who was Jones' company commander notified him of the decision, and then he added that since individual breakouts had been authorized, he was going to attempt one. The captain promptly abandoned his company to its fate and disappeared into the dense woods. The following day as Jones trudged drearily along with the rest of the POWs, some of his Soldiers thanked him for not running away like the Captain did?



DEADLY JOURNEY

Much of Jones' journey to the Hammelburg camp was by train. The prisoners were crowded into small boxcars with no food or water for days at a time. The most dangerous part of the trip, however, occurred during the night of December 22-23 in the railroad marshalling yards at Diez, Germany. While the POWs sat vulnerably in their boxcars, 52 RAF Lancaster bombers dropped tons of explosives on the "transportation grid's" target. Later Jones said, "The boxcar in which I was huddled with perhaps 50 cold, dirty, hungry and discouraged POWs bounced on the tracks but remained upright. The door was blown off but no one was injured in my group."

Perhaps as many as several hundred Americans prisoners died in the air raid, in addition, guards

Lt. Martin Jones after his return to the U.S. in 1945. He survived the Battle of the Bulge, the Hammelburg Raid, and a 200-mile forced march before liberation.

shot anyone who tried to get out of the boxcars to take cover. Describing his emotions at the time, Jones said, “being locked in that boxcar and exposed to the falling bombs, I suffered the most helpless feeling had experienced during my [entire] time as a POW”.

STARVATION DIET AND TRIGGER-HAPPY GUARDS

After more than a week on the train, Jones arrived at Stalag IX-B at Bad Orb, a filthy, overcrowded transient POW camp. Less than two weeks later, however, he was part of a group of officer prisoners sent to Hammelburg - again via locked boxcar. They arrived on January 11, 1945, and while slightly better than Stalag IX-B, the conditions at Hammelburg (Offizierslager Oflag XIII-B) were still very severe. Daily rations, according to Jones, “usually consisted of a slice of bread, (made with 20 percent sawdust), about the size of two normal slices, and a small bowl of "green hornet" soup that was thin, wormy, and a dark green color, (which raced through our digestive system). The men also received a mug of “ersatz" coffee, which tasted so foul that most prisoners used it for shaving water. After several weeks of this starvation diet, Jones dropped from his normal weight of 150 pounds down to 120.

The living conditions at Hammelburg, like most POW camps, were appalling. “1 was in a room with 50 men,” Jones recalled. We had double-deck wooden bunk beds with very thin straw mattresses and one-half of a blanket for each man. We had to walk about two blocks to our latrine. Our barracks had a small metal stove in the middle of the room. We received seven or eight charcoal briquettes each day to provide heat but what little heat they generated was absorbed by the stove itself?’

Slow death by starvation was not the only threat to the POWs — German guards were often extremely quick on the trigger- “Fear of being shot by guards was a constant worry”, Jones said. “Lieutenant George Varem was killed by a guard during in air-raid alert. On March 21, as lieutenant Charles L. Weeks returned to our barracks from the latrine, I saw a guard shoot him in the back and kill him as he reached the barracks’ door apparently because Weeks was not moving fast enough. I always made sure I *ran* back to my barracks whenever the air raid sounded’.

SHORT-LIVED DELIVERANCE

Camp routine changed dramatically on the afternoon of March 27, 1945. As Jones recalled, ‘About 4:15 p.m., we heard small-arms fire and saw red tracer bullets streaming past our barracks windows. (Task Force Baum) attacked Oflag XIII-B and drove off our German guards. When the Sherman tanks came crashing through the barbed-wire fences, we POWs shouted and jumped with joy because we were liberated! We did not know that our freedom would last only a few hours.’

Captain Baum found hundreds more American prisoners at Hammelburg than he had expected. Only a few managed to cram into the trucks or climb onto the tanks. The rest, including Jones, staggered along in the wake of the task force as it attempted to return to U.S. lines. Jones had vivid memories of that day. “As the task force moved

out... I was among some 900 POWs who followed the tankers for a short distance out of the camp. But the Germans had encircled the task force with tanks, anti-tank guns and infantry. Captain Baum stopped the procession and announced that we were almost 60 miles from the U.S. front lines and that only the few POWs who were riding could continue with his tankers as they tried to fight their way back. He said the rest of us were "on our own".

Jones and a fellow prisoner tried to hide out, but the area was swarming with German soldiers. "About two or three o'clock the next morning, we were recaptured by German troops and forced to walk to the southeast away from the camp. Soon, there were about 160 recaptured POWs in our group."

LONG MARCH TO FREEDOM

Although Jones remained a POW for another month, he never again set foot inside Hammelburg or any other German camp.

Instead the guards marched the prisoners for 200 exhausting miles. Walking all day and sleeping in fields or barns at night, they traveled near - but never through - the cities of Wurzburg, Nuremberg and Munich. Bypassing the cities helped avoid the SS and the Allied bombing raids. However, on April 5, they passed a little too close to Nuremberg's suburbs, consequently, they found out that being bombed was perhaps their worst immediate threat. "We stopped to rest just as U.S. planes began bombing the city. (The bombs) started falling closer and closer to our group. Then we lay flat on the ground and the bombs fell among us. Approximately 25 POWs and a German guard were killed. Other prisoners were injured, some badly. Five POWs were assigned to bury the dead, and the remaining POWs continued walking for the rest of the day?"

Crossing the Danube River on a raft-ferry, the prisoners moved steadily southeast, Despite walking 10 kilometers or more each day, Jones' health actually improved during his odyssey he was exercising and eating better than he had in the camps. "Most days we ate food we could "liberate" although on some days our guards provided one loaf of bread for every eight men. Because I spoke a little German, I sometimes begged for food from German farmwives. Infrequently, they gave me potatoes or bread".

Jones' POW nightmare ended on the banks of the Inn River about 30 miles southeast of Munich. Retreating Germans had blown the only bridge for miles, thus stranding the prisoners in the town of Gars-am-Inn. When, the rumbling of American artillery moved close to Gars, the German guards disappeared, leaving the POWs on their own, Jones recounted,

At dusk on May 2, we heard the wonderful sound of American tanks coming down the hill into Gars. Tanks of the 14th Armored Division moved in without firing a shot. We celebrated our second and final liberation!" Over a month after the Hammelburg Raid, Lieutenant L. Marlin Jones was finally free.

Jones now a retired professor of accounting and administrator at the University of Kansas, returned to Germany in 1989 to retrace his 200-mile walk This time, however, he made the trip by automobile.

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Page last revised 12/06/2006

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