

A SURVIVOR



Alan Hunter Hammet (1921-1961) was born in Melbourne. Before the war, he worked as a laboratory assistant in chemistry. In 1940, he enlisted in the Army and was sent to Canada, where he trained as an air force wireless operator. In 1941–42, he flew 33 sorties over Europe on Wellington and Lancaster bombers with No. 12 and No. 460 RAF Squadrons. In November 1942, due to his knowledge of French, he was transferred to Morocco, where he served as an instructor for French wireless operators. After 11 months in Morocco, Hammet volunteered for the 178th Squadron, flying Liberator bombers based in Foggia, Italy. He took part in 20 bombing raids targeting oil facilities in Romania, cities in southern Germany, and operations mining the Danube. His final three sorties were supply missions to the Polish Home Army during the Warsaw Uprising. On 17 August 1944, his aircraft was shot down on the return flight. On that day, the RAF lost 87 aircraft over Poland. His plane was attacked by an enemy fighter about 20 miles south of Kraków and quickly caught fire. The pilot managed to order the crew to bail out. Apparently, only Hammet succeeded—the other five crew members, including an Australian named Liversidge, were lost. Two days after landing, Hammet reached an isolated farm, where he asked for help. The farmers treated his wounds, fed him, and the next day transported him—hidden in hay on a horse-drawn cart—to another location, where a doctor attended to him.

After that, he was moved repeatedly, hidden in peasant houses. The countryside was full of German patrols searching for downed Allied airmen, but Hammet was fortunate: although the Germans once searched the very farm where he was hiding, he was not discovered. Eventually, he reached a base of a Polish Home Army partisan unit. He recovered quickly and, on 20 September, took part in his first partisan raid on a railway station. The objective was to capture weapons and German uniforms for future operations. By that stage, many German soldiers were no longer eager to fight. As Hammet later recalled, some surrendered their weapons and uniforms without resistance. However, on 23 September, he took part in his first major battle on Polish soil, in the town of Kazimierza. The partisans killed the guards of a sugar factory and distributed the sugar among local residents. Further operations followed, including raids on convoys transporting alcohol to Germany. Hammet later noted that these raids were particularly popular among the partisans.

Hammet wanted to return to Great Britain and made several unsuccessful attempts to cross the German–Soviet front line on foot. Eventually, he realized this was impossible. He then proposed a daring plan: to reach Warsaw, then make his way to Gdynia and escape to Sweden. The Polish partisans took the plan seriously, but he never reached Warsaw—the fighting between the insurgents and SS units was still ongoing. For several days, he hid in a suburban house before it became clear that reaching Gdynia was impossible. Hammet returned to the partisan unit and made further attempts to cross the front line, again without success. Back with the unit, he met two British soldiers who had escaped from German captivity. Together, they devised another plan: to join a Polish labor brigade forced by the Germans to dig trenches near the front line and attempt escape from there. The plan proceeded well until the brigade reached a bridge near German positions, where identity checks were to be carried out. Hammet and his companions did not risk presenting their forged documents.

By the end of October, a German reconnaissance aircraft (a *Storch*) located the partisan unit, but the partisans managed to shoot it down with small arms fire. The pilot had apparently transmitted their position, and within days a Ukrainian punitive unit of about 100 men, operating under German command, attacked the Polish partisans near Święcice. Relations between Polish partisans and Ukrainian units were extremely hostile. The latter were often aligned with the Germans and known for brutal reprisals against civilians. Battles between them were particularly fierce, and this clash was no exception: nine partisans were killed, including two British fighters.

Hammet later sought to avenge his fallen comrades. He recalled:

Some days later I learned that three Ukrainians serving with the Germans were in a peasant's hut in Słaboszów. I threw a Mills bomb into the room. I did not stay to see the result, but later heard they had been killed."

At the beginning of winter, the Germans and the Polish Home Army reached a temporary agreement: the Germans would cease forcing Poles into labor near the front, and the partisans would suspend their operations. Nevertheless, clashes with roaming armed groups—composed of Poles, Ukrainians, and Russians engaged in looting—continued. On 20 January 1945, long-awaited liberation came. The area where Hammet's unit operated was taken by advancing Soviet troops. Hammet and three other British survivors then undertook a long journey under Soviet escort, marching several hundred kilometers to Częstochowa. His wartime actions did not go unnoticed. In early February, he was appointed leader of a group of nearly 800 British, Australian, and South African servicemen liberated from prisoner-of-war camps. Later, in Kraków, another 90 men joined them.

In early March 1945, all former POWs were transported to Odessa, and on 15 March they were repatriated to Great Britain.

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