

Black Thursday: The Second Schweinfurt - October 14, 1943

Schweinfurt II – Mission #115

This was the prevailing mood at Eighth Air Force bomber stations throughout the cold and foggy countryside of East Anglia when crewmen were jolted awake in the pre-dawn of October 14, 1943. Sgt. Walter Peters, reporter for Yank magazine and nose gunner for this mission aboard a B-17 (also named Yank), recalled the door of his Nissen hut barrack opened at 6:00 AM, glaring lights went on, and the squadron operations officer read a list of names from a slip of paper. "Briefing at 7:30" he said, and then went on to the next hut. The men dressed quietly, trying to avoid disturbing those who could sleep until later, and "... secretly envying them." Once seated in the briefing room, the crews were stunned when the intelligence officer's pointer kept moving along the red yarn on the map eastward into Germany – until it stopped at Schweinfurt. [Peters] Then came the predictable, but brief, vocal groans and buzzing, followed by the Officer's "pep talk" about the strategic importance of the mission, aimed at crippling Hitler's ball-bearing production. Pilots and crews then focused intently as the briefing outlined essential information about weather, fuel consumption, the target, formations and myriad other details that were absorbed and memorized. As the minutes ticked away and tension mounted, men from eighteen heavy bombardment groups donned flight suits and performed other preflight duties. 1st Air Division bomb groups, whose aircraft were identified by a letter code in a white triangle on the vertical stabilizer, included the 91st, 92nd, 303rd, 305th, 306th, 351st, 379th, 381st, and 384th. The 3rd Air Division's bomb groups, whose Forts were identified by a code in a black square, were the 94th, 95th, 96th, 100th, 385th, 388th, and 390th. Two Liberator groups from the 2nd Air Division were included. The 93rd and the 392nd BGs were to fly a route parallel to but south of the B-17 formations, and rendezvous with them near the target. [Crawford]

On fog-shrouded hardstands the bombers waited, their tires almost flattened under full combat loads. A variety of U.S. markings were employed, ranging from the early white-star-on-blue circle to the later design with white bars added. Some had red or yellow surrounds to the insignia, and many crews had 'grayed out' the white areas of their markings to reduce visibility. Shortly before 10 a.m., the silence of the aerodromes was abruptly shattered. Wright Cyclone radial engines coughed, shuddered, spat smoke and burst into life. The three-bladed props seemed to windmill for a second, then faded into a blur as the engines settled into a smooth roar. Soon, almost 1,400 engines were flattening the grass behind the bombers, and the din rolled across the English countryside. [Crawford]

Colonel 'Budd' J. Peaslee, commander of mission #115, would fly to Schweinfurt with the 92nd Bomb Group, as co-pilot aboard Captain J. Kemp McLaughlin's

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Flying Fortress. At about 10:15 he saw the signal flare indicating the mission was on. Because of the dense fog and the overcast that limited visibility to a quarter-mile, the status of Mission #115 had gone down to the wire. But word finally arrived that weather over the continent was clear, and this was enough to put the mission into operation. Takeoff proceeded without incident, but conditions began to unravel shortly after the bombers climbed to form up. Due to visibility problems, the formations of three combat wings were disarranged when the 305th bomb group could not locate its 40th Combat wing, and linked instead to the 1st Wing. The 40th Combat wing, now composed of only two bomb groups, tagged along with the 41st Wing. Overcast at the Liberator bases was particularly heavy, and only 29 of the 60 B-24s scheduled to fly the mission could take off; eight of these could not form up and returned to base. It was decided to send the remaining 21 Liberators on a diversionary attack north, toward Emden Germany. (This feint was not detected by Luftwaffe controllers, thereby making more fighters from that sector available to defend Schweinfurt.) As the B-17s flew toward Schweinfurt, 26 aborted for various reasons. Thus, of the 351 bombers that set out to hit Schweinfurt, 86 were not on hand when the force reached the German frontier. The overcast also disrupted a scheduled escort by four P-47 Thunderbolt groups. Two groups rendezvoused successfully with the bombers and eventually shot down 13 fighters, but another could not locate its B-17s and returned to base. The fourth assigned fighter group wound up escorting the B-24s on their diversionary sweep – which proved unnecessary. A fifth fighter group, flying P-38 Lightnings, did not become operational in time to participate. [Crawford]

That morning, there were more enemy fighters in the air than on the first Schweinfurt mission. Dozens of them were rocket ships: converted twin-engine night fighters, most of them Junkers 88s, capable of launching 250 pound missiles from tubes suspended beneath their wings. These were the rockets that helped decimate the 100th BG at Munster – fused missiles launched from beyond the range of bombers' guns, that streaked toward the bombers and detonated at a predetermined range, creating bursts four times the size of ordinary flak explosions. Unlike machine gun and cannon fire, which killed the bombers slowly, the rockets – when they hit mid-ship – destroyed them instantly. The explosions forced the bomber pilots to take evasive action, breaking up the defensive combat boxes. Then the Me-109s and other single-engine fighters swooped in, concentrating on one formation at a time, and paying deadly attention to stragglers. "These were the tactics designed to produce terror and despair in the American crews." [Miller, p.208-9]

Copilot Wilbur Klint of the 303rd Bomb Group was part of the second wave of attacking bombers heading for Schweinfurt. Just beyond the German border, their escort fighters reached the end of their range, signaled by tipping their wings, and pulled off. Immediately, a row of single-engine fighters flew head-

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on at the bombers, firing 20 mm cannons and machine guns just before they dived. Then, large formations of the twin-engine fighters attacked in waves, firing rockets. In the meantime, the single-engine fighters had re-formed, and they attacked, this time from all sides. No sooner were they done than the twin-engine fighters had re-formed, launching rockets into the front and rear and blasting a single formation until their missiles were expended. From his cockpit, Klint saw two B-17s hit by rocket fire; they disintegrated. In front and below him was a sea of parachutes. "I had no idea the Germans had so many airplanes and so many types," Klint later said. [Hansen, p.137]

American bombers were falling out of the sky in all directions. Sgt. Peters, aboard the Yank, recalled, "There were fighters everywhere, but mostly on our tail. 'The goddam Luftwaffey is out today', somebody said over the inter-phone." [Peters] Once a B-17 got into trouble, the pilot – if he had any control at all – would pull off from the formation to avoid a mid-air crash. The bomber was then finished, as fighters swept in for the kill. Although the strike force was still far from the target, 37 Fortresses had fallen out of formation. That left 228 aircraft to actually bomb the target, about two thirds of the original force strength. The battle line extended for over 800 miles. [Miller, p.210] The German attacks, Gen. Ira Eaker later wrote, "were perfectly timed and coordinated and skillfully executed ... One of our combat wings was practically wiped out." [Hansen, p.137] As they flew through the aerial carnage with the 92nd BG only halfway to the target, the ordinarily unflappable 'Budd' Peaslee said to McLaughlin, "Captain, I think we've had it." But somehow they got through and upon approaching the target, fighter attacks stopped abruptly as Luftwaffe pilots turned their attention to groups of bombers still en route to the target. It was the first break for the beleaguered crews in more than three hours of continuous combat. Then Schweinfurt's flak guns, including 300 new guns added since the first raid, opened up on the bomber formations. [Crawford] Amidst the explosions, flame and smoke, the bomber stream advanced on the target. The 91st Bomb Group, leading the 1st Air Division, hit Schweinfurt before the fog generators could be turned on. Most of their bombs landed on or close by the ball-bearing factories. [Grabow, p.55] Surviving planes from the 1st Combat Wing made their bomb runs followed by the rest of the 1st Air Division. The three remaining Forts from the 305th could not make a satisfactory bomb run and jettisoned their bombs over Schweinfurt. Quickly, the bombers regrouped at the rally point some 20 miles from the target. Crews could still see the plumes of smoke over Schweinfurt. Unfortunately, many thought that they had not inflicted as much damage as they had received. Now the 3rd Air Division reached the target area. Despite being wounded, John Latham, the lead bombardier for the entire Division, released his bombs on target and the rest of the Division followed suit, wreaking havoc on Schweinfurt. Notably, the 390th BG earned a Distinguished Unit Citation for its bombing accuracy. Once the 1st Air Division left the target area, German

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interceptors switched their attacks to the 3rd Bomb Division. The comparatively intact formations suffered many losses in quick succession. But the Germans did not let up just because the bombers had dropped their loads. Rather, the attacks continued with the same intensity. [Stout, p.149]

Wally Hoffman, flying in the 388th BG, described the bomb run of his B-17, Morning Delight, over Schweinfurt in an article entitled, "Reality:"

When we have turned on IP [initial point] the bombardier is already looking for his aiming point as the plane controls are hooked to the bombsight. Again the fighters are coming in all directions, but this time it is the squadron ahead of us. Soon the sky around us filled with flak bursts, paving a solid black steel asphalt roadway to Schweinfurt. The explosions sound as if someone is throwing rocks at you when they burst close. Those flak gunners on the ground are good. Normally the fighters will usually leave when you get into the flak from the target, this time they are flying through their own flak. Apparently, they have been ordered to defend the target at all costs. These fighters may be the enemy but I have never seen braver men. All the German efforts to keep us from the target have so far failed, but we have paid a tremendous price in men and planes. ... The target below is now fast deteriorating into smoke and debris as our strings of bombs walk through the city. The dead will outnumber our losses by a great number. Finally we feel the plane lighten in little jerks as the bombs pass out the bomb bay on their way to Germany. We are now at the halfway point of the mission as we begin a wide turn to the right. There is little need to get into formation, as everyone is staying close. As we make our turn one can see the other formations behind us. They look ragged and are still under attack from the fighters. [Hoffman]

On the return trip, the fury of air combat was entered anew, as many of the German fighters that had left the fight to refuel and rearm returned. Frantic crews administered first aid, fought fires and struggled to keep the riddled Forts flying. It was estimated that more than 300 German fighter planes flew more than 800 sorties against the American bombers that day. It was obvious by the varied types of aircraft they sent up that the Germans made an all-out effort to intercept the bombers. Those in greatest numbers were the FW-190s and the Me-109s, but the twin-engine types, some of them night fighters, were also put into the fight. These included the Me-110, Ju-88 (rocket ship described above), and Me-210. There were even reports of attacks by the slow and obsolete Ju-87 Stuka dive-bombers. [Stout, p.150] The punishment being meted out was not always one-sided, however. Gunners in the bombers claimed 186 aircraft shot down, although German documents reviewed after the war placed their losses

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at approximately 40. Some over-claiming by gunners was inevitable (and not unusual), since several gunners within a combat box of bombers would fire on the same plane. The fighter attacks continued without letup throughout the return flight, since poor weather had grounded the Spitfires and Thunderbolts that were to have provided cover for the bombers' withdrawal. A few German fighters continued their attacks almost to the British coast. [Crawford] Each pilot groped in the fog for his airfield, but many landed at other aerodromes or in any open field.

Soon after, the drone of the returning bombers was heard by anxious ground crews and base commanders, it was apparent that a disaster had occurred as bomber after bomber failed to return to its hard stand. Cascades of flares marked a group's return with damaged aircraft and wounded on board. The news was horrible for many. Huge holes appeared in several formations while the bombers awaited their turn to land. Then the results were tabulated: 60 bombers down over Europe, five more lost near or over England, and 17 aircraft damaged beyond repair. Only 33 bombers returned without battle damage. Although other targets produced equal or greater total losses, the 26 percent loss figure recorded during Schweinfurt II gave it the dubious honor of being the most costly mission of the war for the Eighth Air Force. [Crawford]

The element of chance involved in death, injury or capture of Mighty Eighth crewmen was never more evident than on Black Thursday. Some bomb groups were almost annihilated, while others were untouched. "The 305th, the group that had never found its proper place in the bomber stream, had put 15 aircraft over the continent. Its ground and support crews waited in stunned disbelief as day turned to dusk and only two of the bombers returned to base. It took the unit months to recover." [Stoup, p.151] The 306th lost 12 B-17s, while three other 1st Air Division groups, the 92nd, 379th and 384th, lost six each. The 3rd Air Division fared much better, with its seven groups losing only 15 aircraft overall and three – including the Bloody 100th – losing none. Of 2,900 crewmen who took off, about 650 men did not return. Sixty-five survived as prisoners of war, but 594 were listed as missing-in-action. Five of those killed-in-action and 43 wounded were in the damaged aircraft that returned. [Crawford]

The German pilots knew all too well their effectiveness against our bombers. They witnessed the burning planes, bombers with the wings torn off, crews tumbling through the air, and the burning bodies. How could those bomber crews take such punishment and hand it back while continuing to fly towards the target? There never was a question of not reaching the target, no matter how many formations were split apart, how many bombers were in flame, and how cruel the test. We continued on with white knuckles. [Hoffman]

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In Gen. Eaker's report to Hap Arnold the following day, he "... was spirited rather than defeatist, ... tallied the Eighth's losses and called the bombing results 'excellent', which was actually quite accurate. (Albert Speer estimated that 67 percent of ball bearing capacity was destroyed.) Eaker then asked Arnold for more bombers and crews, 'every possible fighter,' and drop tanks for the fighters." [Stout p.151-2]

The raid marked the apex of the Luftwaffe's success against the USAAF. Regardless of how Arnold or Eaker might have tried to qualify what had happened during the past several months, the truth was that their dearly held precept – unescorted daylight bombardment of Germany – was untenable. In blunt terms, notwithstanding the bravery and skill of its men, the Eighth had been sorely beaten over Schweinfurt. [Stout p.152]

Epilogue

From Black Thursday until early 1944, the Eighth returned to Germany, but only along its margins. No missions were flown beyond the range of the Anglo-American fighter escort umbrella. "Missions were also less frequent as the miserable European winter weather precluded operations on most days. It was a time of relatively subdued activity ..." Opinions differ about the reason why. Was the Eighth indeed totally stymied by the weather, or was it waiting for solutions to extend the range of American escort fighters? Critics have questioned, in fact, whether there was not a single day when weather over German targets was forecast to be clear enough for visual bombing. Yet on the other hand, "no orders were ever issued by Eaker ... to refrain from deep attacks." [Stout p.154] Clearly, the Eighth Air Force did not have the resources to follow up. Without fighter escort to minimize losses, any more immediate missions against vital ball-bearing factories would have wiped out the Eighth's Bomber Command, and no projected results would justify that. [Crawford] Donald Miller states in *Masters of the Air*, "Perhaps the greatest myth of the European air war is the idea that after Black Thursday the American Air Force called a halt to unescorted missions deep inside Germany until long-range fighters became available. ... Black Thursday should have killed the idea of the self-defending bomber, but it did not. Eaker clung stubbornly to it." The air war was a battle of attrition, and the battle was in the balance. "With Overlord (the invasion of Europe) planned for the spring of 1944, Allied leaders became increasingly worried that their air forces would not have sufficient time and strength to achieve, not just air superiority, but the air supremacy Eisenhower deemed essential for the success of the largest amphibious invasion in history. For this reason alone, the bomber offensive could not have been officially suspended after Black Thursday; the entire invasion depended upon its success." [Miller, p.212]

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The USAAF made good use of that time. For one, on November 1, 1943, it created a new strategic air force. The Fifteenth Air Force was officially formed under Maj. Gen. Jimmy Doolittle in Tunis, and by the end of the month had relocated to Bari, just above the heel of Italy. Air bases in Italy offered significantly better weather. “Although fog and rain might shut down operations in England on any given day, there was a fair chance that missions could be flown that same day from bases in Italy. This was a very important factor considering that air superiority had to be unequivocally established in the few short months remaining before [Overlord].” Italy’s location also allowed the heavy bombers to reach targets beyond the range of the Eighth Air Force flying from England. And lastly, “faced with two strategic air forces on separate flanks, the Germans would have to split their defenses; split defenses would be weaker defenses.” [Stout p.154-6]

Aside from creating the new Fifteenth during this period, the Americans fielded new equipment that would change the air war and make the doctrine of “self-defending bombers” moot. Having accepted that its bombers could not range deep into Germany without fighter escorts, the Air Force leadership adapted technical and procedural advancements that allowed its fighters to provide the needed escort. One such advancement was externally carried fuel tanks, or drop tanks, which had been under development for over a decade. When it flew its first missions from English bases in March 1943, the P-47 Thunderbolt had only marginally better range than the notoriously short-legged British Spitfire. By late August, they were utilizing new drop tanks, which were then improved upon significantly. Shortly thereafter, aircraft maintenance improved, as did pilot techniques; both factors added small increments of extra range. Finally, escort procedures were adapted that did not force the big fighters into fuel-sucking, bomber-hugging formations. The results of all these factors was remarkable – whereas the early P-47s penetrated only barely beyond the English Channel in March 1943, a year later they were protecting bombers deep into Germany. And it did not stop there. Variants of the P-47 were introduced which, among many other features, added 20 percent more internal fuel, and new 108 gallon drop tanks, increased in mid-1944 to 150 gallons. The P-47 now had the performance to meet its Luftwaffe counterparts on similar terms as well as the range to escort the Eighth’s bombers to any target they could reach. “Furthermore, in addition to the big ungainly fighter, the [Americans] had an ace in the hole. That ace was the North American P-51 Mustang.” [Stout p.156-8]

The full story of the P-51 is fascinating, but too long to be told in detail here. Suffice to say that it was originally a British specification for a new fighter to replace the Spitfire. An American company, North American Aviation, won the contract in May 1940, and after design development and testing the Mustang finally reached operational RAF units in February 1942. The plane was well liked

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but judged to be under-powered, particularly at high altitude. Since the USAAF did not have an advocate for the American version, called the P-51-A, the plane was given only passing attention for the better part of a year. Then someone got the idea to replace the plane's Allison engine with the Rolls Royce Merlin, which had been so outstanding in the Spitfire. "The British got to work on the Merlin installation in the spring of 1942, while North American Aviation engineers started [shortly afterwards] with a Packard-built variation of the same engine. Both modifications were designed to turn a four-bladed propeller rather than the original three-bladed type. The British got their modified aircraft airborne in October, while the Americans flew theirs in November. Performance of the re-engined aircraft was spectacular ... and production – with Packard-built Merlins – went into high gear." Later versions were built with an additional 85 gallon fuel tank behind the pilot's seat. "Production of almost 4,000 [Mustangs] was nearing completion when the definitive version, the P-51D, was flown in November, 1943. This variant included many improvements, the most noticeable being the ... installation of a bubble or tear-drop canopy ... which permitted an unobstructed view in virtually every direction." Also, one more gun was added to each wing, giving the aircraft a total of six .50-caliber weapons. "The Mustang was for all practical purposes the best all-around fighter of the war, but the Eighth could have prevailed without it. At the same time as the P-51 was arriving in England in numbers great enough to make a difference, the P-47's range was being improved to the point that it [as well as the P-51] could escort the bombers virtually anywhere they needed to go."

[Stout, p.158-64]

Despite the low level of combat operations, the bomber offensive officially continued after Black Thursday. Eaker, according to James Parton, his aide, said years later that he and Fred Anderson (head of Eighth Bomber command), "would have gone right back into the heart of Germany, even without the long-range fighters, if weather permitted." But the weather refused to cooperate; beginning in mid-October, heavy clouds masked vital targets inside Germany, making pinpoint bombing impossible. "As Parton aptly put it, "Control of the air in the two and a half months after Schweinfurt II belonged to the clouds." [Miller, p.213] In January, 1944, Lt. Gen. Jimmy Doolittle replaced Eaker as commander of the Eighth Army Air Force in England, and the air war to destroy the Luftwaffe and Germany's other vital war industries entered a new phase. Along with Doolittle came new long-range fighter escorts and a revised command philosophy about how the escorts would operate. Although the Eighth's bomb missions would continue to be a bloody business, its loss ratios would become more manageable as it destroyed Germany's war economy and began to win the battle of attrition in the skies.

The march of history [since the end of WWII] has relegated

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competing arguments over strategic bombing to academic theories only. Schweinfurt is quiet now, having returned to the anonymity it enjoyed before 1943. There is not much there to commemorate the carnage that took place overhead so many years ago, and that is too bad, because Schweinfurt should rank with Pickett's Charge, Bataan, Chosin and other battlefields as an epic of American heroism. As it is, we can only look at grainy wartime pictures of the bombers going down in flames, and try to imagine what it was like for the men trapped inside. [Crawford]

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