

17 August 1943

Regensburg – VIII Bomber Command Mission #84 – “A Summary of Operations”

[Details compiled by Kimberly Ann Lindner (*incl. bibliography*) 20090813 0139 PST]

The Schweinfurt-Regensburg mission was a strategic attempt by the American and British air powers to cripple the German aircraft manufacturing industry. The primary targets were the Regensburg based Messerschmitt Bf 109 assembly plant, and the Schweinfurt based ball-bearing factories (which was where nearly the entire production of bearings had been centralized).

Two large groups of B-17F flying fortresses were organized for this operation; the 4th Bombardment Wing (to Regensburg), and the 1st Bombardment Wing (to Schweinfurt).

The Regensburg strike force consisted of 146 aircraft, while the Schweinfurt task force committed 230 aircraft to the task. Both wings were supposed to hit their targets simultaneously; with the Regensburg force acting as a diversion for the greater concentration of bombers over the Schweinfurt area. This plan would disperse the squadrons of defending German fighters. Concurrent bombing of the targets was deemed by command as *critical to mission success*.

To further confuse the enemy, the Regensburg force had orders to turn south, fly over the Alps, and continue on to North Africa, utilizing their Tokyo fuel tanks – which added a significant range to the distance which a bomber could cover. Meanwhile the Schweinfurt force would return immediately to their home bases in England.

As evidenced by the heavy losses suffered that day, a sequence of uncalculated events severely reduced the effectiveness of both strike forces.

To begin with, the aircrews of the US Eighth Air Force woke up that morning to find their East Anglia airfields obscured in a traditionally thick English fog.

Starting at 07:15, the 95th Bomb Group, assigned to the Regensburg strike force, received official clearance to begin taking off from Horham Air Base using their instruments. As the rest of the 4th Bombardment Wing began to assemble over East Anglia, the Schweinfurt strike force remained unfavorably grounded. By 10:00, when the weather had finally cleared up enough for the 1st Bombardment Wing to begin assembling, the Regensburg strike force was already over the coast of the Netherlands.

The P-47 fighter escorts tasked to protect the 4th Bombardment Wing were forced to turn back after only about fifteen minutes, and without engaging any German

interceptors, leaving the bombers without fighter protection. These fighter escorts now required sufficient time to return to their bases and re-arm, inevitably (and disastrously) further delaying the 1st Bombardment Wing from getting airborne.

The 4th Bombardment Wing hit their target close to 11:43 hours, after losing around 15 bombers, most of which belonged to the 95th and 100th Bomb Groups, which were flying in the trailing formation, and at the lowest altitude. They lagged behind the lead formation by nearly fifteen miles - out of visual range with the rest of the strike force.

Lieutenant Ronald W. Braley, a pilot from the 100th Bomb Group, and flying in the vulnerable #5 position in the low squadron, reported that just after entering enemy held territory, two squadrons of Bf 109's and Fw 190's headed straight for them.

"The first pass was aimed at the low squadron and knocked out 3 planes", (including his own). Riddled by 20mm cannon shells, and with the number 1 engine and tail section on fire, the crew bailed out about 125 miles short of the target area.

Joe Noyes and the men of the 95th Bomb Group, flying above and in front of the 100th, reportedly remarked upon the fact that the 100th Bomb Group was quickly ceasing to exist. "Where did the 100th go?", was a question asked by many aircrews.

The mission summary later filed by 95th Bomb Group Headquarters reported that "Enemy aircraft tactics were aggressive *to the point of being characterized as vicious*".

By the time the Schweinfurt strike force finally got in the air, they had been delayed more than three hours, and the Regensburg strike force was limping slowly somewhere over Switzerland. The defending Germans were now able to re-arm their fighter groups, and prepare for the next wave of incoming bombers.

As the Schweinfurt strike force approached the coast of the Netherlands around 13:30 hours, they were confronted with cloud masses which had not been present earlier in the day, when the Regensburg strike force had passed through the area. The commander of the 1st Bombardment Wing elected to fly under the clouds, at an altitude of approximately 17,000 feet, thus increasing their vulnerability to attacks.

The German opposition now employed different tactics than the Regensburg strike force had encountered. While the trailing formation of the 4th Bombardment Wing had suffered the greatest losses hours earlier, now the leading formation of the 1st Bombardment Wing was continuously attacked head-on by both Bf 109's and Fw 190's.

Over 300 enemy fighters were scrambled against the Schweinfurt strike force, which only comprised of 230 B-17's. (*Just a little bit out-numbered I think*). The 91st and 381st Bomb Groups were massacred.

When they finally dropped their bombs over the target area close to 14:57 hours, the leading formation of the 1st Bombardment Wing had already lost 17 of their 57 dispatched bombers. Flak took down another 3 aircraft over the Schweinfurt target area.

Combined, the US Eighth Air Force lost 60 aircraft in the skies over Schweinfurt, Regensburg, Switzerland, and German controlled territories on August 17th 1943.

These heavy losses should have convinced VIII Bomber Command that without adequate long-range fighter support, they would be unable to successfully execute raids deep into the heart of German territory.

Foolishly they launched a second attack on the ball-bearing factories of Schweinfurt on October 14th 1943, which was later nicknamed by surviving aircrews as "Black Thursday". The American strike forces lost 77 aircraft (a loss of more than 20%). As a result of this second failure, long-range raids into Germany were suspended until the P-51 Mustang became more readily available as a fighter escort in early 1944.

During the second Schweinfurt raid, the weather once again played an important role in ensuring that the bomber formations were spread out and vulnerable to enemy fighters. The 305th Bomb Group lost 13 of its 16 B-17's within minutes of crossing the coast of the Netherlands. The 305th lost 87% of their men that day. Can you even imagine being a replacement crew coming in after a group has suffered losses of that magnitude?

As a result of the Regensburg mission, the 95th Bomb Group was awarded the Distinguished Unit Citation, and the 100th Bomb Group became known around the world as, "*The Bloody Hundredth*".

Albert Speer later indicated that he believed VIII Bomber Command had made two very critical flaws that day. Firstly they had divided their force instead of striking the primary target - the ball-bearing plants - together. Secondly, they had failed to follow-up the first strike on Schweinfurt with repeated attacks.

On September 8th 1943, Joe Noyes wrote home to his parents in Seattle.

"I was recommended for the Distinguished Flying Cross on our trip deep in Germany when we landed in Africa. It usually takes a couple of months for them to come through. I have two Oak Leaf Clusters in my Air Medal now".

Several days later, on September 15th 1943 he took off on a mission to bomb the Billancourt-Renault industrial works in France. He never returned to England.

In concluding this rather depressing mission report, I propose an informal (and imaginary) toast to the approximately 1,200 USAAF personnel who were reported as Missing In Action or taken in as POW's on August 17th and October 14th 1943.

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