

AFEHRI File 100.021

Research Materials/Source Documents  
STUDENT PAPERS

FILE TITLE: Essay on Enlisted Contributions to the Schweinfurt Missions During WW II

AUTHOR: MSgt Alexander M. Blake, 12 Jul 1997

Reviewed by:

AFEHRI Representative G.R. Akin date 5 DEC 97

EPC Representative Paul J. Link date 12 Dec 97

Scanner Operator Suzanne Polina date 12 Dec 97

APPROVED BY: Gary R. Akin  
GARY R. AKIN, CMSgt, USAF  
Director  
Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I know an acknowledgment page is not normally a standard part of an essay, but I could have never written this paper without a lot of help from some very knowledgeable people. This paper would not have been possible without kind their assistance.

First, I would like to thank Mr. James A. Traylor.. He provided invaluable firsthand information on the Schwienfurt bombing mission, the duties of the enlisted airmen aboard the B-17Fs, including their training, cultural backgrounds, and motivations. If you look up the Missing Air Crew Report for tail number 276 on August 17, 1943, you'll see his name listed as a SSgt James A. Traylor, ball turret gunner of the ill-fated B-17. Aside from patiently answering all of my questions, his story inspired this paper.

I also owe a special thanks to Mr. John Edwards, Archivist of the "Mighty Eighth Air Force Museum" in Pooler, Georgia. His expert knowledge of the history of Eighth Air Force filled in several gaps. Although 99 percent of this essay came directly from the original 1943 documents, the reports of the era contained some terms and abbreviations which were not explained, but the information they related were vital to this essay. Mr. Edwards researched these terms for me and explained their meaning. He enabled me to correctly interpret the fate of the missing air crews and the battle claims cited in the old reports. Last but not least, he knew I did not have time to dig through all of the histories to find out what happened to TSgt Cherry after the August 17<sup>th</sup> attack and researched the answer for me. I was unhappily resigned to not having that information for this essay, but Mr. Edwards took the time to help and now we all know the fate of TSgt Cherry. Incidentally, both the pilot 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Judy and copilot 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Layn survived the war and were also were awarded the Silver Star for their actions on August 17, 1943.

All of the people I met at the Air Force Historical Research Agency at Maxwell AFB, Alabama were more than just helpful. They not only took the time to point me in the right direction, but also helped narrow the search and help me track down all of the source documents I needed. It was also through them that I was able to find Mr. Traylor. To each and every one of them, I convey my deepest gratitude.

Finally, I would like to offer my sincerest gratitude to all of the airmen who took part in the Schwienfurt and Regensberg mission, officer and enlisted man alike. From what I read, most of them did not think of themselves as heroes. They considered themselves to be ordinary people who were just fighting for a cause they deeply believed in. Accounts from after August 17 and subsequent attacks show that morale was low because of the heavy losses of their comrades. The aircrews then believed their life expectancy was only eleven missions. A few feigned illness to avoid missions, but the majority continued to fly knowing the risks. Their willingness to face overwhelming odds at the risk of sacrificing their own lives for freedom makes them all heroes to me. I can not speak for others, but I will always remember them and the price they paid for my freedom.

Alexander M. Blake, MSgt, USAF

## ESSAY

ON

### THE ENLISTED CONTRIBUTION TO THE SCHWIENFURT MISSION DURING WWII

What did the enlisted airmen, who manned the B-17 Flying Fortresses of World War II, really do? The purpose of this paper is to give today's enlisted personnel a better understanding and appreciation of their heritage by showing how the enlisted force contributed to the Schwienfurt bombing mission during World War II. The valor and dedication demonstrated by the airmen who served during this one perilous mission should be understood and emulated by every enlisted airman serving today. Not only will this understanding help today's airmen define who they are, it will also serve as an example of who they **must** be to preserve the freedom we hold so dearly. To explain the significance of the airmen's role, this paper provides a basic background on the mission, the enlisted airmen's role that mission, and an example of their courage. Before you can truly understand the significance of the enlisted airmen's contribution to this mission, you must have a basic understanding of the mission.

On the morning of August 17, 1943, Headquarters Eighth Air Force (8th AF) sent 230 B-17F, Flying Fortress bombers from bases in the United Kingdom to destroy enemy ball-bearing factories in Schwienfurt. (6:1) HQ 8AF's Bomber Command Narrative of Operations Day Operations for August 17, 1943 says: the task force included nine units of 8th AF's First Air Division. They were the 91st, 92nd, 303rd, 305th, 306th, 351st, 379th, 381st and the 384<sup>th</sup> Bomber Groups. (3:2) The 91<sup>st</sup> Bomber group led the task force. According to the 91<sup>st</sup> Bomber Group's Official Diary, the Schwienfurt ball-bearing factory was the task force's primary target, and a second task force attack on the Regensburg Messerschmidt factory was intended to

divert some of the defending enemy aircraft away from the Schwienfurt area. This two pronged attack was originally planned to occur simultaneously, but it didn't. At the last minute, "someone" changed the plan and sent the first task force against Regensburg before the task force heading to Schwienfurt took off. By the time the second bomber force was dispatched to attack Schwienfurt and were barely over the English channel, the first attack force was done with their raid. The Germans were on full alert and had time to refuel and rearm their fighter aircraft to meet the Schwienfurt bombers head on. Since the attacks did not occur simultaneously as planned, the Germans were able to concentrate a very heavy interception force on the B-17's flying to Schwienfurt. But, the heavy German defense forces weren't the only problem (8:37-44)

The weather on the route to Schwienfurt complicated matters as well. A layer of clouds had formed over the coast of the continent, ranging from altitudes of 17,000 and 21,000 feet. The mission called for the B-17's to fly at an altitude between 23,000 and 26,500 feet but the heavy cloud layer prevented the pilots from seeing the ground and navigating to the target visually. The attack task force leader, decided to fly below the cloud cover base as long as it did not under 17,000 feet to ensure they could see the target long before they arrived. Under this cloud level, the visibility was almost ideal, but it also was probably the most important single reason for the task force's heavy losses. Viewed from below, the B-17s were clearly silhouetted against the clouds which enabled German anti-aircraft positions to spot them easily. When the German fighters arrived to intercept the B-17s, many of them used the clouds above the task force to hide and launch sneak attacks while the larger formations of Germany aircraft carried out the main assault. (8:37-44).

Despite the heavy German defenses and the problem caused by the weather, the task force fought their way through to the target. According to 8<sup>th</sup> AF's COMMUNIQUE OF OPERATIONS of August 17, 1943, only 183 B-17Fs bombers made it to Schwienfurt and still managed to drop 6235 bombs. (3:2) Immediately afterward, the German counter-attack intensified and the remnants of the task force had to fight their way back to the United Kingdom.

Of the 230 planes that departed to attack the ball-bearing plant that day, 36 were shot down. (6:1) Determining how successful the mission was is dependent on your point of view. Headquarters 8th Air Force's Official Report, states the mission results were "good."(3:2) The British Ministry of Home Security damage assessment report on the same attack states the damage to the Schwienfurt ball-bearing plants was "relatively light." (2:1) The 91<sup>st</sup> Bomber Group's Official Diary calls the attack a disaster but states the results were fairly good (8:37,43)." Regardless of the results of the actual attack, the enlisted airmen's contributions must not be overlooked.

During the attack approximately 1,380 enlisted members of the US Army Air Corp actively participated in the mission. (note: 1,380 is an approximation based on the number of B-17Fs and a standard enlisted crew complement of six per plane. The Missing Air Crew Reports [7:all] show six enlisted crewmen on most B-17 and as many as eight on others, but most showed the average enlisted crew size as six. Exact crew compliments for the planes on this mission which were not lost on this mission were unavailable). 230 bombers participated in the Schwienfurt mission and each B-17F had six enlisted personnel assigned normally. Five of the enlisted crew were usually assigned as gunners and the sixth was the radio operator. On some of the B-17s, enlisted personnel also filled positions as engineers and bombardiers, but most were gunners. The gunners protected the aircraft from enemy fighters using twin .50 caliber machine

guns and their positions were: top turret gunner (B-17 top center), ball turret gunner (bottom center), tail gunner (rear), and two flexible gunners (also called Waist Gunners) (located on both mid-sides of the B-17F). During air-to-air combat, the radio operator would also double as a gunner by opening the hatch above his station and firing a mounted .50 caliber machine gun.

(7:all)

On August 17, 1943, every gunner got a chance to test their skills in combat. The first German attack on the task force started as the task force neared Antwerp and continued in intermittent waves to the target and then back to the enemy coast. (2:2) During the battle, the gunners warded off mass attacks from enemy aircraft. They engaged 150-300 enemy aircraft that day, most of which were FW-190 Focke Wulfs and ME-109 Messerschmidts. (4:1) The enlisted airmen fought valiantly to destroy all enemy aircraft and extracted a toll on the enemy fighters. By the end of the bombing raid, the enlisted gunners were responsible for destroying 148 enemy fighters, disabling 18 more. Another 63 enemy fighters were also claimed as being “probable” destroyed or disabled, but the claim was unconfirmed. (6:1) The ability of the enemy to mass fighter and anti-aircraft attacks against the B-17 task force, coupled with the disadvantage of flying under the cloud cover, made the task of getting through to Schwienfurt almost impossible. But in the end, the airmen’s skill, courage in the face of the enemy, and dedication to the mission enabled 183 B-17s to reach and bomb the target. (4:1) Unfortunately, the German’s advantage exacted a heavy toll on the task force.

Despite the enlisted gunners’ best efforts, thirty B-17s were shot down before reaching the target. Four more B-17s were shot down over Schwienfurt during the attack, and two were downed on their way back to their home bases. By the time the mission was over, a total 36 bombers were shot down with 222 enlisted airmen and 116 officers on board. (7:all) . [Note: The

figures above were determine by reviewing the time and location of each B-17F lost in the Missing Air Crew Reports for August 17,1943 with a destination listed as Schwienfurt].

The fates of the enlisted airmen who were shot down were primarily imprisonment as POWs or killed in action during the attack. According to the official Missing Air Crew Reports for the B-17s lost in this air battle: 31 enlisted airmen were confirmed as killed in action, 6 were presumed dead because their aircraft was destroyed but no one saw them die and their bodies were never found, 8 were captured and released to allied medical facilities, 176 were captured and served out the rest of the war in German POW camps. Of those 176 POWs, 68 airmen elected to returned to duty after being the war ended. (7:all). These figures do not include those enlisted members who were wounded or killed on the 194 bombers which were able to returned to their home bases after completing this mission.

The acts of individual and crew heroism during this battle are innumerable and sadly many accounts of valor were lost with the crews. Listing all of acts of heroism for this battle would take several months of research, but perhaps one example will serve to show the heroism displayed that day. , TSgt Earl M. Cherry flew this mission as a B-17 engineer/top turret gunner assigned to 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force, 91<sup>st</sup> Bomber Group, 322<sup>nd</sup> Bomber Squadron. The following account of his actions during the raid is extracted from official statements made by the pilot, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. James D. Judy(8:87), copilot, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Roger Layn (8:88), and the Missing Air Crew Report (7:283) for their B-17F, tail number 283.

On the mission to Schwienfurt on the 17<sup>th</sup> of August, TSgt Earl M. Cherry was the engineer and top turret gunner. This was only his second mission over enemy territory. As his B-17 reached a point 15-20 miles southeast of Frankfurt, a German fighter hit the aircraft with 20mm shells which exploded by the left wing and immediately below the pilot's compartment and

set the B-17 on fire. The enemy attack damaged some of the B-17's flight electrical and hydraulic controls and the rest were slowly being burned away by fire. As the aircraft filled with smoke, the pilot temporarily lost control but managed to finally bring it out of a slow spin at 6,000 feet. Sgt Cherry was wounded in chest and legs but was still able to move on his own. The aircraft suffered considerable damage and the pilot was fighting to just to keep the plane under control. Sgt Cherry went into the nose of the aircraft to access the damage and fight the fire. Eventually, the smoke and overall damage forced the pilot to issue the order to bail out. Seven of the crew quickly evacuated the plane, but Sgt Cherry's parachute was burned by the fire and the pilot and copilot refused to leave him behind. Together the remaining three crew members fought to keep their badly crippled B-17 aloft and return home. In the nose of the aircraft, Sgt Cherry continued to fight the fires and received burns to both his hands and around his face. As he fought desperately to stop the fires, their B-17 was hit again by enemy. For the next half hour, Sgt Cherry spent all of his time either fighting the fires which continued to breakout, or using the twin nose guns to defend the damaged aircraft against attacks by the German fighters.

It was during this time, Sgt Cherry, wounded and handicapped by burns, shot down and destroyed one enemy aircraft. After the last enemy fighter broke off its attack, Sgt Cherry extinguished the last fire and remained in the nose ready to use the guns again in case other German fighters attacked. Just before the B-17 reached the English coast, the copilot, Lt. Layn, helped Sgt Cherry into the copilot's seat in the cockpit, where Sgt Cherry assisted the pilot in maintaining control of the aircraft while the copilot acted as navigator. Sgt Cherry helped the pilot fly the crippled plane back to safety in the United Kingdom.

After landing at Manston, England Sgt Cherry was too weak and in too much pain to walk and was carried to an ambulance and hospitalized. All three crew members were nominated for the Congressional Medal of Honor. Although this crew never received the Medal of Honor, their valiant efforts were recognized. According to Mr. John Edwards, Archivist at the Mighty Eighth Air Force Heritage Museum in Savannah Georgia, TSgt Cherry was awarded the Silver Star for his actions during the Schwienfurt mission. Mr. Edwards also told the author of this paper that TSgt Cherry returned to duty after his wounds healed, was shot down on another bombing mission two months after the first attack on Schwienfurt. Sgt Cherry was captured by the Germans and eventually returned to the US.

TSgt Cherry's heroism was not an isolated incident. The Missing Air Crew Reports tell of several airmen who died at their posts while fighting off enemy aircraft with twin machine guns. Others were killed while trying to help wounded comrades get off the plane while it was going down, or died trying to fight the enemy while performing damage control at the same time. (7:all) The uncommon valor of these airmen is self evident and is a legacy left to today's enlisted Air Force.

In summary, on August 17, 1943, Eighth Air Force sent a task force of 230 B-17Fs to destroy the enemy ball-bearing factory in Schwienfurt Germany against heavy enemy anti-aircraft artillery and fighter planes. Flying under the clouds increased the visibility and vulnerability of the attack force. These factors caused heavy losses to the task force, but the enlisted airmen aboard played a crucial role in safeguarding these planes. Most of the enlisted personnel were gunners and they destroyed and disabled over 166 enemy aircraft while protecting the bombers, enabling the task force to reach the target. Of the 1,380 enlisted men who flew the mission, 222 went down with their planes. Most of those either died in combat or were captured and interred as

Prisoners of War. TSgt Cherry and the rest of the enlisted airmen in the task force showed uncommon valor and commitment in the face of the enemy and overwhelming odds. The Missing Air Crew Reports of the time show how many sacrificed their lives defending their aircraft and comrades. All of these events demonstrate the enlisted airmen's vital contribution to the Schwienfurt bombing mission during World War II and should provide today's airmen with a better understanding and appreciation of their priceless heritage.

If the sacrifices of these airmen were so important, why doesn't every American know about them? Today, the Schwienfurt mission is now just a footnote in history because the efforts of the airmen who gave their lives were overshadowed by other events of their time and the motion picture industry in our time. According to Life magazine, on the same day of the attack, August 17, 1943, the allies liberated the city of Messina and captured Sicily." The POWs in the far east were being forced to build the famous "Bridge over the River Kwai." In August 1943, Adolf Hitler was instituting his "Final Solution," the imprisonment and execution of the Jewish people. Jack Kennedy's Patrol Boat was sunk on August 2. And also in August 1943, General Mac Arthur was pushing the offensive in the war in the Pacific. (1:216-231, 238-241,263-264,266-273) These events have been popularized and remembered by such movies as "Patton," "The Bridge over the River Kwai," "Schindler's List," "PT-109," and "Mac Arthur." It is true that all of these were indeed important and should be remembered, but the attack on Schwienfurt is equally important.

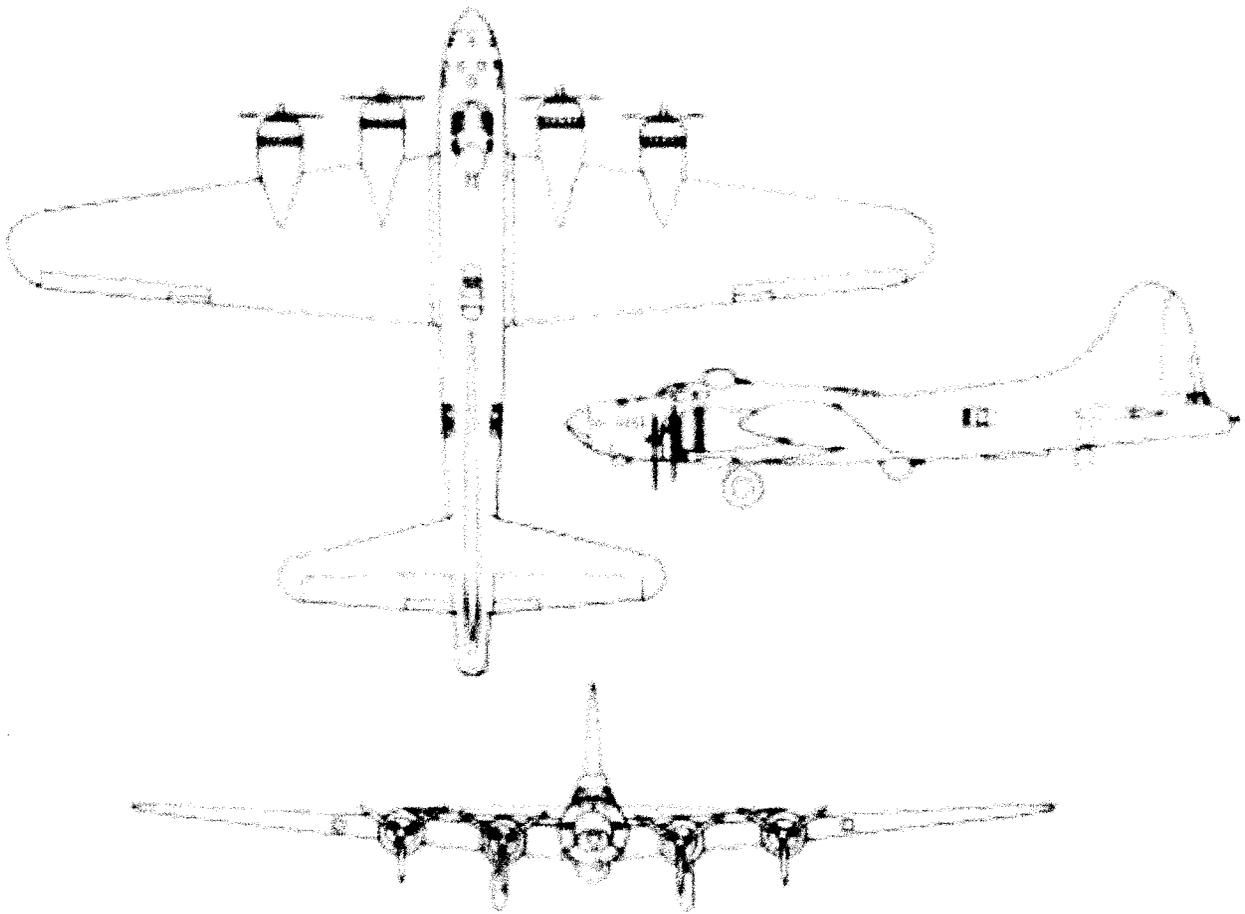
This single mission may have had little impact on the outcome of War II, but the sacrifices made by our enlisted predecessors are much too important to ever forget. Their courage to face the enemy, determination to complete the mission, and willingness to pay the ultimate price to preserve our freedom must be remembered or the sacrifices they made were in vain. One day,

their exploits may receive the attention of the American people as a whole, but until then it is up to every enlisted airman to keep the memory of the men who gave their lives in this battle alive.

Today's U.S. Air Force enlisted personnel owe all of the enlisted airmen who flew the perilous Schwienfurt mission a debt of gratitude that can only be repaid by serving their country with the same pride and commitment shown by the airmen of 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force over fifty years ago. As long as airmen strive to preserve freedom regardless of the strength of the adversity, the legacy of the airmen who flew the Shwienfurt mission will live on!



**Eighth  
Air  
Force**



**B-17**  
*"Flying Fortress"*

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

3. HQ, Eighth AF, AAF Station 101. Communiqué of Operations of August 17, 1943, K520.331 43/08/17-43/10/14, in USAF Collection, AFHRA
4. HQ, Eighth AF, AAF Station 101. Bomber Command Narrative of Operations Day Operations-17 August, 1943 Mission No. 84, K520.331 43/08/17-43/10/14, in USAF Collection, AFHRA
6. HQ, Eighth AF, AAF Station 101. Combat Mission No. 84, 17 August 1943, K519.332 43/08/17, in USAF Collection, AFHRA
8. HQ, Eighth AF, 91<sup>st</sup> Bombardment Group. Official Diary - August 1943, GP-91-HI 43/08/01-43/08/31, in USAF Collection, AFHRA
1. Kunhardt, Philip B. Jr. Life: World War II. Little, Brown, and Company, Boston: 1990
2. Ministry of Home Security. Raid Assessment Report Ball Bearing Plants, Schwienfurt, German Raid of 17<sup>th</sup> August, 1943, K520.331 43/08/17-43/10/14, in USAF Collection, AFHRA
7. Missing Air Crew Reports, for 17 Aug 1943. Tail numbers: 274, 275, 276, 277, 278, 279, 280, 281, 282, 283, 296, 379, 380, 381, 382, 384, 398, 399, 291, 292, 293,294, 296,301, 300, 302, 303, 378, 653, 661,663, 1350, 1763, 1764, 1765. In USAF Collection, AFHRA

### OTHER REFERENCES:

Mighty Eighth Air Force Museum  
175 Bourne Avenue, Pooler GA  
P.O. Box 1992, Savannah Ga 31402  
1-800-421-9428