

# **Schweinfurt - The Battle Within the Battle for the U.S. 8th Air Force**

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After the war, Hitler's minister of armaments and economics, Albert Speer, said, "The strategic bombing of Germany was the greatest lost battle of the whole war for Germany."<sup>1</sup> Such was not the consensus thinking early in the war, though. Commander of the Army Air Forces, Gen. Henry "Hap" Arnold, had sent one of his best generals and closest friends, Gen. Ira Eaker, over to Great Britain to start what would come to be known as the U.S. Eighth Bomber Command from the ground up. In a push to prove not only to the British but to the world that strategic daylight bombing was the instrument needed to bring Germany to its knees, Eaker sent out over one-hundred missions during the next year-and-a-half, aimed not at the civilian populations of Germany but instead at targets that were supposed to cripple the German war-machine. Facing criticism from both home and abroad over his seemingly slow pace of operations and unnecessarily high casualties, Eaker launched the most daring offensive of the war, sending over one thousand bombers into the air during a one-week span in mid-October, 1943. This week culminated with the second attack against the ball bearing factories in Schweinfurt, Germany, in which over sixty B-17s and six hundred men never returned home. Despite the high losses and unspectacular bombing results, the raid on Schweinfurt did help the war cause by making the policy makers finally realize the urgent need for long-range fighters to escort the bombers deep into enemy territory. Without these fighters, particularly the P-51 Mustang, the bomber losses would continue to grow to the point at which the Eighth Air Force would be unable to continue the successful targeting of vital war assets in Nazi Germany.

Things were not looking good for the Allies in early 1942. The Japanese were making steady advances in the Pacific and the Germans were sinking virtually every ship that came close to the European mainland. Great Britain, under siege for a short time by a massive German bombing effort and naval blockade, was short on men and supplies. It was during this time that Commander of the Army Air Forces, Gen. Henry "Hap" Arnold, sent his friend and fellow general Ira Eaker to England to organize the new Eighth Bomber Command. Another close friend, Gen. Carl "Tooe" Spaatz was soon to follow as Commander of the U.S. Eighth Air Force.

Eaker had a large task ahead of him. He arrived in England on February 20, 1942 with only six men to start what would be the first major American cooperation with Great Britain. From the beginning, Eaker received great support from his British counterpart, Air Chief Marshall Sir Arthur Harris. Anything that Eaker asked for, Harris would supply with as much as he could afford to lose. Harris went so far as to offer Eaker a spare bedroom in his house so that the two could become better acquainted.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the support that Harris was offering Eaker, he was not convinced that the American's plan of strategic daylight bombing was going to work against the formidable

German Air Force. Since the war began, Great Britain had been bombing German cities in an effort to blast the German citizens into submission. They did this under the cover of darkness, which made the British bombers harder for the Luftwaffe pilots to engage and nearly invisible to the flak gunners on the ground. Bombing during daylight, Harris argued, would expose the American bombers to the full might of the Luftwaffe and cause unnecessarily high casualties. Harris' suggestion to Eaker was to integrate the B-17s that were arriving from the states with the British heavy bomber squadrons. This would make faster use of the B-17s that were already arriving in theater and, at the same time, increase the number of bombers that the British could send against Germany every night.

Eaker was well aware of the British position but insisted to Harris that daylight operations against specific military targets would enable a ground invasion of the continent faster than the indiscriminate bombing of cities. Eaker was also worried that if he gave the first few bombers to the British to use for night operations, for which the American pilots were not trained, that soon the Eighth Bomber Command would be a subsidiary of British Bomber Command and he would lose any chance he had of implementing daylight bombing.<sup>3</sup>

Another obstacle facing the 8th was the allocation of promised bombers to other countries and commands. At the same time that the 8th was being built, American aircraft were being shipped all over the world. Countries like Australia, Russia, China, and Great Britain were having their air force built on American planes and technology at the expense of the 8th Air Force. Even the U.S. Navy was doing its part in keeping aircraft from reaching the 8th. Besides asking for fighters and bombers to defend the fleet, the Navy was also asking for more cargo planes to be built instead of combat aircraft. As Hap Arnold later wrote:

When asked what solution they might have for getting greater production and making more planes available to the British, or for securing more air transports, the answer of the Navy representatives was, "Stop manufacturing B-17s at the Long Beach plant and build cargo planes."...When Freeman asked what the Navy was able to give up or help, if the Army Air Forces stopped manufacturing B-17s, our Naval officers said, "Nothing - there is nothing the Navy could give that would help any."...The Army Air Forces was expected to give everything to everybody.<sup>4</sup>

Despite all of the early problems, the 8th received its first group of bombers, named the 97th Bomb Group, in July 1942. A month of intensive training followed, in which the pilots learned how to fly under the instrument conditions that were prevalent in England and the gunners practiced their accuracy against R.A.F. fighter planes. Just as it seemed everything was falling into place for the 8th, word came from Washington on a new operation that would once again stall the growth of the 8th.

Operation TORCH, the invasion of German-occupied North Africa, diverted two of the three inbound bomb groups to the Mediterranean and stripped Eaker of the one bomb

group he had been training for the past month. Before he lost the 97th, however, he was going to use them for what they were brought overseas to do in the first place, drop bombs on Germany. On August 9th, the 97th was alerted for its first mission over German occupied territory.

Eaker was soon to discover an even more unforgiving adversary than the Germans or the policy makers in Washington, the English weather. The morning of August tenth found the airfield closed due to fog and subsequently the mission was canceled. Over the next week, the dense fog stayed in the air keeping the heavy bombers on the ground. Finally, on August 17th, the weather cleared and the 97th launched twelve planes for a mission against the marshalling yards at Rouen, France. The bombers met very little fighter resistance and no flak on the way to the target. Eaker, flying in the lead aircraft, watched as most of the bombs dropped fell within the target area. A little over an hour later, all twelve bombers were safely on the ground in England.

The mission was a success, but no one was under the impression that all missions would be this easy or this successful. British Spitfires escorted the bombers the entire way to the target and back and they met no flak and very little Luftwaffe opposition. Until the number of bombers got larger, however, the Americans would have to be content with small scale attacks against relatively undefended targets. These easy missions would later come to be known as “milk runs”.

The next few months saw many changes for the 8th Air Force. In December of 1942, Tooley Spaatz was transferred to Africa to be in charge of the aerial portion of Operation TORCH and Eaker was given command of the entire 8th Air Force. Four new bomb groups arrived in England, and the pace of operations increased. Due to the lack of long-range fighter escort and still somewhat small numbers of bombers, however, the missions were aimed at targets on the coast or in the occupied countries. Not one bomb had been dropped on the mainland of Germany.

Because of this, the 8th faced near extinction during the early part of 1943. Churchill had convinced Roosevelt at the Casablanca conference that due to the lack of any major combat operations on the part of the Americans in the European theater, that the 8th should finally be integrated with the British Bomber Command.<sup>5</sup> Upon hearing this, Arnold had Eaker fly to Casablanca to meet with Churchill and plead for him to change his mind. Though still not totally won over on the concept of daylight bombing, Eaker was successful in convincing Churchill to grant the 8th more time.

One result of the Casablanca conference was the authorization for the Combined Bomber Offensive (CBO). The CBO directed the joint effort of Great Britain and the United States to pave the way for the invasion of Europe through using each air force's specific capabilities: the British bombing at night and the Americans during the day. At least on paper, the 8th finally had the support it needed from the Combined Chiefs of Staff.

On his return to England a few days later, Eaker ordered the first mission against the German mainland, targeting the submarine construction yards at Vegesack. When they

arrived over the target the bombers found it completely covered by clouds, so they moved to the secondary target, another port city named Wilhelmshaven. Although partially obscured by clouds, the bombers were still able to drop the first American bombs on German soil. The 8th Air Force had its first major victory.

Over the next few months, the 8th was sending more and more bombers on sorties over Germany as reinforcements arrived from the states. And also over the next few months, the Luftwaffe was getting better and better at shooting them down. Despite improvements that had been made both to the B-17 airframe (a gun in the nose to counter the increasing German head-on attacks) and the new “combat box” formation that provided each aircraft with maximum firepower coverage from all of the other aircraft in formation, bombers and crews were falling at an almost irreplaceable rate. The answer to this problem was developing a long-range fighter escort.

At this point in the war, British Spitfires and American P-47s and P-38s were escorting the bombers on their missions to Germany, but the combat radius of these planes was such that they had to turn around and go home just after crossing the German border, leaving the bombers unescorted for up to four hundred miles on some of the longer missions. The fact that the German FW-190s and ME-109s were more maneuverable than the Allied fighters and hence better in a dogfight rarely came in to play. The Germans would remain well out of range of the bomber formations until the Allied fighters had to turn for home, then ferociously attack until the bombers could make it back to the relative safety of fighter cover on the return trip to England.

Eaker had been trying for months to get external drop tanks fitted to the fighters that were already in theater, but the tanks that were added either didn't extend the range of the fighter far enough or resulted in poorer aerodynamic handling of the aircraft. All attempts at adding the tanks were eventually scrubbed, but a savior in another form was soon on the way.

Under development at this time in the United States was the P-51 Mustang. The Mustang would have the combat range to escort the bombers all the way to the target and back home. It was also faster and more maneuverable than the German fighters. Eaker had petitioned Arnold repeatedly in 1943 to allocate P-51s to the Eighth to escort his bombers, but, as with the bombers a year ago, Arnold had to fight to get allotments over the Navy and other allies.<sup>6</sup> Until Arnold could deliver some P-51s to the European theater, the B-17s still had to fly and Germany still had to be bombed.

One of the focal points of the Allied bombing campaign was the destruction of ball bearing production facilities. The ball bearing was an integral part of the German war industry. The Ministry of Economic Warfare (M.E.W.), the British Cabinet agency that had been collecting information about potential targets in Germany since the beginning of the war, had named ball bearings as one of the top priorities due to their use in every German aircraft. This dependence was first learned when the British themselves faced a shortage early in the war after the Germans bombed one of their ball bearing plants causing a delay in aircraft production.<sup>7</sup> Not only did the German fighters and bombers

use a large number of bearings per aircraft, but ground equipment such as tanks and motor vehicles did as well. By destroying the ball bearing production plants, the Allies could, in effect, also be destroying the production capability of the factories that made military aircraft and vehicles. Ultimately, this would shorten the length of the war.

On the one-year anniversary of its first mission, the 8th launched its most complex mission of the war. In an effort to destroy the production facilities of the German fighters that were terrorizing the bombers, over 350 bombers (formed into two divisions, the 1st and 3rd Bomb Divisions) took to the skies in a dual effort to bomb both a Messerschmitt production plant in Regensburg and Germany's main ball bearing factory in Schweinfurt. Timing for the mission was critical, as the 3rd was supposed to cross into enemy territory ten minutes ahead of the 1st in order to divide the Luftwaffe and lessen the total amount of fighter opposition each division faced. As was so often the case for the Eighth, the English weather forced a change of plans.

Having already postponed the mission for close to two weeks due to consistent cloud cover over the targets, August 17th found Germany clear but England shrouded in fog. After delaying the mission for an hour, it was decided that the 3rd would have to take-off immediately in order to be able to land at their North African recovery bases before nightfall. While the 3rd was taking off, however, the 1st remained grounded due to the thick fog. Over three hours later, the 1st finally got off of the ground and headed towards Schweinfurt.

This delay was going to cost the 8th. With three hours in between the formations, the German fighters had enough time to attack the 3rd Division, refuel, and then take-off again to attack the 1st Division. All of this was done, once again, out of the range of Allied fighter escort. Sixty aircraft and over six hundred men were lost over Germany that day, and although both of the targets were significantly damaged, neither was destroyed.

The attacks on Regensburg and Schweinfurt worried some of the Nazi leaders. The Allied bombers had taken everything the Luftwaffe had to offer and they still proceeded to significantly damage two major factories deep within Germany. Speer warned that if the Americans kept hitting ball bearing factories, of which Schweinfurt was by far the largest (different estimates had the factories in Schweinfurt producing between forty to fifty-five percent of Germany's total output of ball bearings), German armament production would suffer within four months.<sup>8</sup> To counter the increasing and further reaching American attacks against their homeland, the Germans moved virtually every fighter from the Russian front over to protect the western flank. When the Americans returned to Schweinfurt almost two months later, instead of meeting the three hundred reported attacks from the first mission, an estimated eight hundred enemy sorties were flown.

For the next month and a half, due to the extent of their losses from the Schweinfurt-Regensburg mission and poor weather over Germany almost the entire month of September, the 8th was relegated to a small number of short missions carried out under cover of fighter escort. Eaker didn't send another mission to Germany until September

27th, when cloud cover coupled with a new but inaccurate British radar system produced poor bombing results. Arnold's impatience was growing as he continued to send reinforcements to the 8th and received little, if any, positive results in return. Despite Arnold's impatience, however, the 8th would have to wait until the weather cleared over Germany in order to launch an effective mission.

With adequate reinforcements and clear weather over Germany, Eaker launched the 8th's largest offensive of the war to date. In a series of missions that came to be known as "Black Week", the 8th launched over a thousand bombers against vital industrial targets in Germany. The first three missions (October 8th-10th) against the cities of Bremen, Gdynia, and Munster resulted in the loss of eighty-eight bombers and nearly nine hundred aviators. Four days later, October 14, 1943, the day known as "Black Thursday", the bombers of the 8th Air Force flew once again towards Schweinfurt.

The morning of October 14th started out in the same manner with which the men of the Eighth Air Force had become accustomed: cold, dreary, and foggy. "When I looked outside at the weather, it was pitch black and very foggy. I thought we can't possibly takeoff in this weather," recounted Wally Hoffman, a member of the 351st Bomb Group stationed at Polebrook and the pilot of Morning Delight.<sup>9</sup>

The pre-mission briefings contained all the information the crews needed to know before putting their lives at risk over Germany: enroute weather, flak concentrations, enemy aircraft opposition expected, and so forth. The tensest part of the briefing, however, came when the briefing officer pulled back the curtain that covered the map of Europe. In his article "Reality...Remembering Schweinfurt", Hoffman recalls this particular mission briefing.

"There is a hushed silence as everyone leans forward looking at the fateful end of the red yarn. "It's Schweinfurt" the Major says with a sardonic smile, and gives us time to think. Abruptly a buzz of voices breaks out, and one voice says 'Sonofabitch! This is my Last Mission.' And it was, as he was one of those who never made it back."<sup>10</sup>

This story was repeated all throughout England. Over three thousand men left their respective briefing room to go to their aircraft and wait either for the fog to lift so that they could take off or for the call that the mission had been canceled due to weather. On the way to their airplane, the aircrew would get dressed into the multiple layers of clothing that were necessary for survival in the sub-zero temperatures four miles above the Earth's surface. If not properly protected, the cold temperatures could wound or kill a man just as easily as a German bullet.

With the crews on their way to their planes, the 8th's leaders could only sit back and hope first that the weather improved and then secondly that their plan to destroy Schweinfurt was successful. The plan consisted of sending 378 aircraft from nineteen bomb groups, which were formed into three air divisions, over Schweinfurt. The First Air Division consisted of nine B-17 bomb groups, the Second Air Division consisted of three B-24 bomb groups, and the Third Air Division consisted of seven B-17 bomb groups. Each

division consisted of multiple combat wings, which were in turn comprised of at least three bomb groups.

The combat wings were organized into “combat boxes”, designed by then-Colonel Curtis LeMay. The “combat box” placed the lead group of the wing in the center of the wing, both vertically and horizontally. The second group was situated high, behind, and to the right of the lead group and the third group was situated low, behind, and to the left of the lead group. Less than one thousand feet separated the highest aircraft of the high group from the lowest aircraft of the low group. This arrangement provided the formations with the maximum protective firepower from each aircraft. When a bomber was shot down or had to abort, the remaining bombers in the group would move forward to fill the holes in the formation.

The First Air Division was to lead the train of bombers towards the target, followed by the Third Air Division, which was scheduled to be thirty minutes behind the First and on a parallel course ten miles to the south. The Second Air Division was to fly well to the south of the B-17s and then rendezvous with the other two divisions just prior to the bomb run to provide for a continuous stream of bombers over the target. Almost immediately after take-off, and once again due to the English weather, this plan began to fall apart.

Once it was determined that the weather over the target was clear and that the visibility required for take-off was above minimums, the order was given to proceed with the mission. As the bombers began to climb away from their fields, they realized that the weather briefers had been incorrect with their predictions. Instead of breaking out of the low clouds at two thousand feet, as briefed, most bombers didn't break out until six thousand feet with some remaining in the clouds until ten thousand feet. Since the bombers needed clear conditions in order to form up into the “combat boxes” that would afford them the maximum defensive firepower, the excessive cloud cover over England delayed and in some cases prohibited the bombers from joining with their pre-briefed formations.

The most significant casualty of the weather was the loss of the entire Second Air Division from the total combat force. At the pre-briefed rendezvous time, only twenty-nine of the sixty B-24s were in formation. After repeated attempts to contact the missing bombers, the air commander of the Second decided against flying into Germany with such an undersized force and instead flew a diversionary mission against the port city of Emden.<sup>11</sup> Without a single bullet being fired, the weather erased sixty bombers from the mission.

Engine problems along with other technical difficulties would send thirty-three B-17s home early, bringing the total number of bombers that would cross into German territory down to 285 bombers, almost twenty-five percent less than planned. In addition to losing over five hundred thousand pounds of bombs, more importantly to the survival of the crews was the loss of over twelve hundred machine guns that would have been used for protection against the German fighters.

Another casualty of the weather was the loss of nearly half of the fighter escort force. Of the four P-47 fighter groups that were dispatched with the mission, one failed to find any bombers after breaking through the clouds and another joined on the Second Air Division and accompanied them on their diversion. The other two groups each joined on a division of B-17s and accompanied them to the limit of their endurance. The loss of fighter escort was less pronounced than the loss of the missing bomber's guns, however, because even though the P-47s destroyed thirteen enemy aircraft, the majority of German fighters waited in the distance for the Thunderbolts to turn for home.

Once the bomber formations reached the German town of Aachen, on the German-Belgian border, the Thunderbolts had reached the limit of their fuel and had to turn for home. Without any further fighter opposition, the Luftwaffe began to ferociously attack the bombers. Single-engine Focke-Wulf 190s and Messerschmitt 109s came directly at the formations, firing their 20-millimeter cannons and machine guns and twin-engine Messerschmitt 110s and 210s would stay beyond the range of the bomber's guns and shoot crude rockets into the formations. Also in the fight were Junkers 88s, primarily used as night fighters by the Germans, and Junkers 87s, which were fixed-landing gear dive bombers that would climb above the Allied formations and drop time-fused bombs down among the B-17s.

“We were briefed to be met by about five hundred enemy fighters of various sorts. It turned out to be about seven hundred with fighters having come in from the Russian front. We saw every thing imaginable thrown at us. Fighters, usually twin-engine, lined up at beyond our gun range and began launching rockets that appeared to be like a telephone pole as they passed by us and exploded. Some enemy aircraft flew above us towing bombs on long cables hoping to entangle the cable on a Flying Fortress. We had never seen so many enemy fighters before or afterwards,” recalled John Piazza, a gunner in the 92nd Bomb Group stationed at Alconbury, which was attached to the First Air Division.<sup>12</sup>

The 306th Bomb Group, also flying as part of the First Air Division, had lost three of its eighteen planes to mechanical problems shortly after crossing the English Channel. Two more went down to enemy fire before the P-47s left the formation at Aachen leaving the 306th missing five aircraft from the formation before any serious combat had begun. The German fighters were relentless in their pursuit of struggling units and the 306th was no exception. Six of the remaining thirteen were shot down prior to the target area with two more being shot down on the return trip home. In all, only seven of the aircraft from the 306th managed to bomb Schweinfurt and only five made it back to their base at Thurleigh.

As bad as the losses were for the 306th, the 305th Bomb Group's losses were worse, in fact the worst of the day. Scheduled to be the low group of the lead wing, the 40th Combat Wing, the 305th was eight minutes late to the assembly point. Upon finally reaching this point, the group commander tried to contact the lead group of the 40th but was unable to do so. Not wanting to waste any more time, the group moved to another assembly point where they came in visual contact with the 1st Combat Wing. Like the

40th, the 1st was also missing its low group. After making radio contact with the 1st's commander, the 305th slid into position as the 1st's new low group. The assigned low group of the 1st, the 381st Group, later joined up on the wing's high group, the 351st, over the English Channel.

While the low position was still the least enviable position in the wing due to the greater susceptibility to flak and enemy fighter attacks, members of the 305th were possibly feeling a little relieved because they were no longer a member of the lead wing, which in recent weeks had been a frequent target for German frontal attacks. This relief was short lived however, when the air commander for the battle, Col. Bud Peaslee, ordered the 1st to take the lead because his wing, the 40th, was missing its low group. Operating procedures prohibited the lead wing from entering Germany with any less than three groups due to the German's new tactic of using frontal attacks. The 40th moved above and to the left of the 1st in a non-standard formation.

Having the extra aircraft above them in the formation didn't help the 351st's position as the low group. Thirteen of the original sixteen aircraft dispatched were lost prior to reaching the target area. The remaining three did manage to bomb the target and return to their home base at Chelveston. Conversely, the extra firepower did help the other groups in the 1st. Each of the other three groups only lost one aircraft. The 40th, offset as it was in its non-standard formation, lost nineteen of its thirty-seven aircraft.

"The intercom was a constant chatter as the crew called out Luftwaffe fighter locations," remembered Gene Carson, a tail gunner with the 388th Bomb Group stationed at Knettishall. "I knelt in silence. I had nothing to say . . . No one had to tell me there were bandits at six o'clock and there was no need for me to report their presence. The Luftwaffe was all around us. . . . We were being mauled."<sup>13</sup>

While the German fighters concentrated on the First Air Division, the Third Air Division proceeded to the target relatively unscathed. Aided in part by the thirty-minute time lag behind the 1st, the 3rd also benefited from a planned course diversion near the German border that took it well south of the 1st's penetration course into Germany and away from the heaviest concentration of German airfields. As a result, the entire 3rd Air Division of over 140 planes lost only two more aircraft than did the 351st Bomb Group during the course of the mission.

Despite the unrelenting fighter attacks and constant flak barrage, the bomber pilots handed control of their aircraft over to their bombardiers for the most crucial part of the mission. The next five minutes would determine if the mission would be a success, and, more importantly, whether or not all of the lives lost in the process would be in vain. The first to arrive over the target, the 91st Bomb Group, had an unobstructed view of the five major ball bearing production factories. As had been practiced and preformed many times before, the lead bombardier released his bombs when the target was in his crosshairs and the remaining bombers in the formation released on lead's mark. With Schweinfurt billowing smoke below, the unrelenting bombers from the 1st turned back to the west. Unfortunately for them, their day was not yet over.

The 3rd reached Schweinfurt approximately ten minutes after the first and found the entire target area covered with large clouds of smoke. Having no other option, the lead bombardier set his crosshairs on a bridge to the southeast of the factories. On his mark, the entire division dropped their bombs, primarily on the southern half of the factory complex as well as the marshalling yards that led to Schweinfurt from the city of Wurzburg.<sup>14</sup> Their mission complete, the 3rd turned to follow the 1st back to the fighter escorts that would give the beleaguered bombers some relief from the Luftwaffe and accompany them to their bases in England.

During the return trip home, the bombers were again tormented by an innumerable amount of German fighters. The Luftwaffe pilots who had attacked the bomber formations on their way into Germany were now refueled and ready to renew the onslaught. The B-17s that they met on the way out of Germany made easier targets because there were fewer of them and many of those that remained were already operating on less than four engines or otherwise badly battered. The 3rd bore the brunt of the attacks on the return leg as the 1st benefited from a more southerly route across Germany and France. The only defense that the bombers could offer was to keep their formations tight and their gunners firing until the Thunderbolts arrived, presumably near the border town of Aachen.

When the bombers reached the German border, there were no friendly fighters in sight. The weather had once again dealt a crucial blow to the members of the 8th Air Force. The fog that had almost caused the cancellation of the mission had persisted, and in some cases gotten worse, causing the escorts to remain grounded. Although not as numerous or as ferocious as the attacks over Germany, the Luftwaffe continued to harass the bomber force across the occupied countries and in a couple of instances all the way to the English Channel.

Just because the crews had made it back to the Channel didn't mean that they were in the clear. "At the ending of a mission . . . (the English Channel) was not always a safe haven. The RAF Search and Rescue boats were always standing by to pick up grounded flyers. . . . Not until we touched down, taxied to our hardstand and cut engines did we feel a measure of comfort," Piazza reminisced.<sup>15</sup>

Others weren't as lucky. A fitting ending to the deadly day was waiting for the crews over England. The weather, combined with the struggles of the battered bombers, was at least in part responsible for the final five lost bombers of the day. Low on fuel and unable to find any airfield to land on due to the low clouds, the crews of these airplanes decided to abandon their aircraft. All five planes were lost, but all fifty crewmembers survived. This brought the total number of bombers lost over the past ten hours to sixty making the trip to Schweinfurt the costliest single mission in the history of the 8th Air Force.

"First it was a feeling of wonder that we were alive and had made it back to good old mother earth in one piece, plus an inner appreciation of being alive which I have to this day," said Hoffman.

“After being debriefed and a shot of “Old Crow”, we hit the sack as we were totally exhausted both mentally and physically as the mission had taken everything out of us. I think for everyone who flew at that time this was true. When you say “We Gave Our All”, that is a true expression.”<sup>16</sup>

The crews had done their part; it was now up to the intelligence officers and the analysts to assess the damage done to the 8th Air Force. After receiving the results, Eaker sent Arnold a cable that detailed the 8th’s losses and once again requested additional bombers, long-range fighters, and drop-tanks for the shorter-range fighters. He concluded by saying “There is no discouragement here. We are convinced that when the totals are struck yesterday’s losses will be far outweighed by the value of the enemy material destroyed.”<sup>17</sup>

In fact, Eaker was discouraged. He had not received the complete results from the attack yet, but he knew that with the depleted force that had actually dropped bombs on Schweinfurt, there was little hope that the ball bearing factories were bombed out of commission.<sup>18</sup>

As with the first attack on Schweinfurt, he had hoped that Harris would follow the 8th’s attack with a night attack on Schweinfurt. Harris, however, was adamant about not attacking what he deemed panacea, or cure-all, targets. In his autobiography, *Bomber Offensive*, Harris defended his position, saying that every time the Americans went to one of these targets, their resources were so depleted as to not return for a couple of months, giving the Germans ample time to rebuild or replace everything that was destroyed. He also defended not attacking Schweinfurt specifically, saying, “They (the target experts) paid no attention to the fact that Schweinfurt was too small and distant a town for us to be able to find and hit in 1943.”<sup>19</sup> Yet he failed to mention that Bomber Command had indeed flown missions further into Germany than Schweinfurt, including multiple missions to Berlin, as early as 1941. He also failed to mention that finding the fire-lit Schweinfurt would have been easy on that clear night over Germany and that Luftwaffe opposition would probably have been light and unorganized as a result of the multiple missions that the fighters flew against the Americans earlier in the day. Instead, another opportunity was missed to inflict even greater damage on Schweinfurt.

Desperate for a victory in the face of the huge losses incurred, the preliminary results of the battle were overly optimistic and exaggerated by senior Army leaders. At a press conference on October 18th, Arnold boldly exclaimed, “Now we have got Schweinfurt!” The Army Air Forces classified magazine *Impact* stated that the factories were so heavily damaged that “our bombers may never have to go back.”<sup>20</sup>

While not to the extent that the Army Air Force was reporting, the Schweinfurt factories were significantly damaged during the raid, so much so that Hitler placed Albert Speer in charge of protecting the industry against further Allied attacks. After the war, interviews with Speer revealed that the October 14th attack destroyed almost forty percent of Schweinfurt’s total production capacity.<sup>21</sup> If the bombers had returned shortly thereafter, he concluded, German armament production would have been at a standstill.<sup>22</sup> The

bombers did eventually return to Schweinfurt, ten more times as a matter of fact, although by the time they returned Speer had begun dispersing the undamaged machines vital to bearing production deeper inside of Germany.

At this point in the war, Eaker had no way of knowing the extent of the damage to the ball bearing factories. What he did know was that sixty of his bombers had been shot down, another 142 were damaged, and six hundred of his men were either dead or missing. While he might have believed that the American losses would be outweighed by the damage inflicted on Schweinfurt, he must have also wondered how long he would have to keep sending his men deep into Germany without adequate fighter support.

Eaker's discouragement over not totally destroying Schweinfurt was short-lived on account of finally receiving some long-awaited good news from the states. Two weeks after the battle, as a direct result of the massive losses over Schweinfurt, Arnold directed that all P-51s Mustangs and the majority of the longer-range P-38's were to be allocated to the European Theater.<sup>23</sup> Eaker at last had the long-range fighters that he had been requesting for over a year. Once his bomber force was replenished, he could send more bombers against Germany more often without incurring huge loss rates. Everything that he had envisioned for the 8th Air Force was finally falling into place. Unbeknownst to Eaker though, the organization that he had created from scratch almost two years previous was about to be taken from him.

At a meeting in Cairo in early December, Arnold expressed his displeasure with the mission rates of the 8th Air Force. He had trouble understanding why a larger percentage of available assets were used in other theaters and he questioned Eaker's training programs and target priorities. Arnold thought that there was a problem in the 8th that needed to be fixed. "Only a new commander divorced from day to day routine could achieve this," in Arnold's view.<sup>24</sup>

Arnold's British equivalent, Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal, a friend and supporter of Eaker, argued that Eaker was doing the best that he could with the resources that he had. He explained once more about the poor weather hindering operations and that when the missions were launched, Portal explained, "Air operations in Europe and the Pacific could not be compared. In no other part of the world were our bomber forces up against some 1,600 German fighters over their own country."<sup>25</sup>

Also discussed in Cairo was the creation of a unified command in the Mediterranean Theater similar to the arrangement the Allies had in the European Theater. Worried that having two commands would lead to two different opinions and directives on the best way to defeat Germany, the Combined Chiefs of Staff also created the position of Supreme Allied Commander to provide unified guidance to the two theaters on the destruction of Germany.

When the command structure suggested at the Cairo conference was finalized, Arnold had found a way to remove Eaker from command of the 8th Air Force without disgracing his old friend. The creation of the Mediterranean Theater Command meant that there

would have to be an Allied Mediterranean Air Force Commander. With Spaatz reassigned to England as the commander of the newly created U.S. Strategic Air Force in Europe, Dwight Eisenhower, Roosevelt's choice for Supreme Allied Commander, agreed with Arnold to move Eaker to the Mediterranean position saying, in a cable to Eaker, "...it would be a waste to have both you and Spaatz in England." He continued, "We do not (repeat not) have enough top men to concentrate them in one place."<sup>26</sup>

After repeated attempts at trying to change the mind of his superiors to let him stay in command of the 8th, this cable from Eisenhower effectively closed the door on Eaker's protests. He was well aware of Arnold's impatience with the lack of missions and knew the main reason for his transfer; Portal had informed Eaker of Arnold's comments at the Cairo meetings. Despite his negative comments towards Eaker, Arnold sent Eaker a letter of congratulations on his new assignment, stating, "Your new assignment...pays tribute to your talents as an organizer and a leader."<sup>27</sup> After a few final orders and more than a few good-bye speeches, Eaker was on his way to the Mediterranean to assume his new command. Jimmy Doolittle, famous for his leadership in the raid on Tokyo earlier in the war, replaced Eaker as 8th Air Force Commander.

On his way to Italy, Eaker was informed that Prime Minister Churchill was in North Africa and would like to have a word with him. Eaker met Churchill in Marrakesh where the Prime Minister thanked Eaker for his service and congratulated him on his new, larger assignment. Then the former opponent to strategic daylight bombing made one of the most telling comments on Eaker's time with the 8th Air Force; "This gives me an occasion to tell you that your representations to me at that time have been more than verified. Around-the-clock bombing is now achieving the results you predicted."<sup>28</sup>

Churchill was correct with his statement. With the addition of the Mustang to escort the bombers, the Allies were able to penetrate deeper and more often into Germany than ever before. By mid-1944, the Luftwaffe was offering little to no opposition to the foreign aircraft that penetrated their airspace. On D-Day, Allied warships were untouched in their venture across the English Channel and Allied bombers were unmolested by enemy aircraft as they dropped their payloads on the beachheads. In his autobiography, *Global Mission*, Arnold states, "What had happened to the German Air Force?...Had our daylight bombing been effective? Had our plans for 'round the clock' bombing of Germany borne fruit? We needed no further proof."<sup>29</sup>

Some, due to the excessive loss rates and poor bombing results, consider missions such as Schweinfurt a failure. The critics of these missions, Schweinfurt in particular, fail to take into account what came about as a result of the mission. Besides heavily damaging the five main ball bearing factories in Schweinfurt, the bombing also created a massive reorganization of the German bearing industry that caused a slowing in the production of bearings. There might not have been an immediate drop in the production of bearing-dependant aircraft, but without the attack on Schweinfurt, production of these aircraft and other war-related machines would have continued on longer than it did.

Shortly after Eaker's departure, the 8th was able to send over one thousand bombers on a single mission. It was sustaining a lower loss rate on these missions than during Eaker's tenure as commander and the bombing results were better than during Eaker's tenure. All of these improved numbers are a direct result of the addition of the P-51 Mustang to the inventory of the 8th Air Force. The same P-51 that Eaker had requested over a year before he was relieved of command.

The second battle of Schweinfurt is a microcosm of all of the reasons that Eaker was replaced as commander of the 8th Air Force. The poor weather that was constantly hampering the 8th's ability to conduct missions was responsible for the loss of sixty bombers before the divisions even crossed into occupied Europe and was a contributing factor in the destruction of five bombers whose crews bailed when they were unable to find a landing strip. It was also responsible for the grounding of the 3rd Air Division's egress escorts.

The majority of the aircraft lost on the mission to Schweinfurt were lost because of the lack of fighter escort any further than the German border. Repeatedly over the past year and a half, Eaker had requested the allocation of P-51 Mustangs to escort his aircrew into Germany. Before the P-51s were available, he had asked for external fuel tanks for the existing fighters. Despite the multiple requests and the large amount of losses on every deep penetration mission, Arnold could never get the 8th the resources they needed to conduct a successful operation against the Germans until Eaker had already been reassigned.

After the week that culminated with the Schweinfurt raid, the 8th had to stand down for a few days until they had replaced the lost aircraft and repaired the damaged ones. Throughout his time in Europe, Eaker had been promised replacements and reinforcements that would bolster his numbers and enable the 8th to mount the large-scale attacks that were necessary both for protection of the bombers and for destruction of the selected target. When it was time for these reinforcements to arrive, something else would come up and the bombers that were supposed to be given to the 8th were instead given to other commands, other services, or other countries. At the same time Eaker was denied assets while he was still expected to continue with the bombing campaign. When he could not keep up the pace of operations that was expected of him, because of all of the factors stated above, Arnold criticized him for proceeding too slowly.

And finally, because of British resistance to the concept of strategic bombing, the American raid on Schweinfurt was never followed by what would have been a crippling British attack. Ever since Eaker had arrived in England, Harris had been trying to convert Eaker to the concept of area bombing. His dislike of the strategic bombing concept never caused him to deny Eaker any help that he was able to offer, but he refused to attack the targets that the Americans felt were the most important.

The second mission to Schweinfurt was an important battle in American military history. On the outside, it damaged the major producer of a crucial component of the Nazi war-machine. More importantly, on the inside, it was the catalyst for the sweeping changes

that were necessary to ensure the maximum destruction of Germany as fast as possible with the minimum loss of human life. And once again, in an effort of such magnitude that had never been put forth before or duplicated since, it showed that no matter what the opposition, the American soldier will never be turned away without completing his objective.

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