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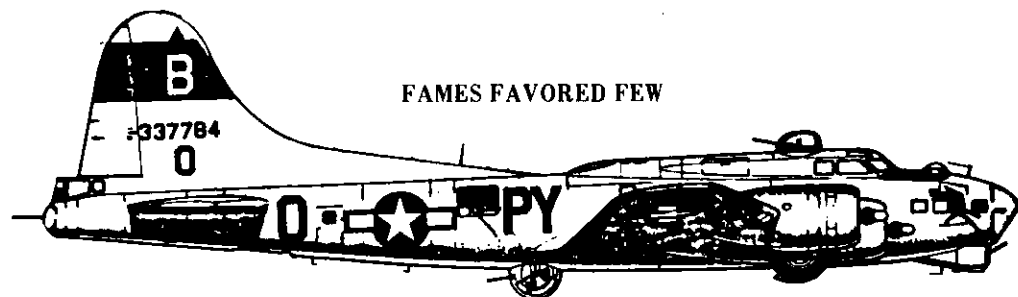
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THE SCHWEINFURT MISSION AUGUST 17, 1943

Roland L. Sargent

This is an account of what happened to one of the 92nd's aircraft and its crew reported missing after the 8th Air Force's first raid on Schweinfurt, Germany on August 17, 1943.

I had returned to the station at Alconbury on the evening of August 15 after a week's leave. The following day the group was informed of the mission scheduled for the morning of the 17th. My name was included on the list of those scheduled to go and I was assigned a mixed crew of mostly inexperienced as well as some combat experienced personnel. The plane we were to fly was a brand, spanking new B-17F that had been ferried into the base that very day. It was painted in the customary olive-drab on the top and sides with light blue undersides. Only a few of the silver models had made their appearance at that time and this was not one of them. It was a real virgin with the gun barrels still wrapped in their protective tape.

My crew for the day, in addition to me as pilot was:

Lt. Keith Byington - Co-pilot with 12 missions
Capt. Robert McNeely - Navigator, 20+ missions
Sgt. George Mikel - Bombardier-Gunner, several missions
Sgt. James Berry - Top Turret Gunner, 1 mission
S/Sgt. Charles Sailer - Radio Operator, 1 mission
Sgt. Harry Richards - Ball Turret Gunner, 1 mission
Sgt. John Whitley - Waist Gunner, 1 mission
S/Sgt. Nathan Swartz - Waist Gunner, 1 mission
Sgt. Kenneth Fahnce - Tail Gunner, 1 mission

This was to be my 11th mission. Byington and McNeely, of course, were well known to me, having been with the group almost from its beginning. Mikel I knew slightly, but the remainder of the men were complete strangers to me and we met for the first time that evening when we test-flew the ship to check it out in preparation for its baptism of fire the next day.

The history of that day, with its weather problems and repeated take off delays has been well documented, but suffice it to say that we were awakened at 2:30 a.m. for a scheduled 6:00 a.m. take-off, but we didn't actually get off the ground until about 11 a.m. after five hours of energy-sapping postponements.

When our turn to roll came, we opened the throttles to full power then released the toe brakes. After a longer than usual take-off run we staggered into the air very nearly at the end of the runway. We were loaded to the limit with fuel, ammo and bombs. The plane was stiff on the controls and seemed logy. It climbed slowly, but we got into position in group formation and then wing assembly without further problem. We headed out over the North Sea, climbing in the direction of the Belgian coast which was soon to come into our view as we gained

altitude. Our position in the group was deputy lead of the low squadron. As we crossed the coast into Belgium, a lone Spitfire passed to our left, headed in the opposite direction, toward England - the only friendly fighter we were to see all day.

A short time later we encountered the first fighter opposition, ME-109s in frontal attacks, using 20mm cannons and FW-190s coming in from the rear, firing rockets in the first, organized attacks of this kind that we had experienced. In these engagements we sustained hits in two engines, numbers one and four, which began vibrating and throwing oil; and extensive damage to the rudder and elevators from the explosions of the rockets. This latter damage sent us into a sudden and unexpected climb when the control surfaces were hit by the fragments. Forward pressure on the control column was ineffective, but we finally brought the nose down by using the elevator control tab wheel and managed to regain our position in the formation without hitting anyone in the process. Though we were unaware of it at the time, Sgt. Fahnce in the tail gun position had a malfunction in his guns during the first attacks, his arm was nicked and several fingers were struck by fragments that sliced into his compartment. The wounds were not serious, but were enough to make it difficult for him to get his guns working properly again.

The fighter attacks continued for a while longer before gradually peetering out, but not before claiming one of the low squadron planes piloted by Lt. J.D. Stewart which went down near Euskirchen, strewing chutes in its path as it fell. Lt. Frank Smith, navigator on that crew had been badly wounded in the shoulder by a 20mm shell before bailing out and spent many months in German hospitals and POW camps before he finally was returned home.

After this the group continued on the route to the target area without further significant opposition. After the turn at the I.P. we endured the usual cloud of heavy flak on the bomb run over the target, dropped our bombs with the rest of the group, swung in a wide circle away from the searching bursts of flak and began the long journey homeward.

There were no enemy fighters in sight for an interval as we continued in a northwesterly direction, no flak bursts marred the blue sky; things were quiet. Suddenly a loud bang sounded close by outside my cockpit window. A quick look revealed a round hole, about the size of a 50 calibre bullet on the top of number two engine cowling. Immediately the fuel pressure indicator for that engine began a swing back to zero. Something

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The Schweinfurt Mission *continued*

from above had struck us and severed a fuel line. We shut down the engine and feathered the propeller. Someone up ahead - perhaps one of the gunners in our own formation - must have fired his guns and struck us, putting one of our undamaged engines out of commission. As a result of this we were forced to add more power to the other three engines just to maintain our formation position. Two of these had been running in a damaged condition since the earlier fighter attacks and were losing oil.

We continued on our homeward course; now with a sense of uneasiness, looking ahead to the rendezvous with our fighter protection still some minutes away. Soon after, when we saw the first tiny specks ahead about where we expected to meet them, we felt a sense of relief. However, this quickly turned to dismay when the oncoming fighters revealed their identity by swooping down on us, filling the air with bursting 20mm shells and streaking tracers. Immediately the formation began evasive action, diving and climbing, turning and twisting - and with every move the formation was slowly pulling away from us.

The clear, blue sky became a gigantic, miles-long struggle between the groups of homeward bound bombers and the aggressive, attacking fighters.

Gradually we fell further behind; all the planes of our group were now ahead of us. At that point the needle on number one engine oil pressure gauge swung convulsively back toward zero. Quickly we tried to catch it. We pulled back the throttle and the propeller pitch control; the feathering button was pushed - and nothing happened. The propeller was still a blur of motion, but it wouldn't feather. It was turning, but giving us no pulling power, only drag. With the two right hand engines at full throttle, we had the control wheel all the way over to the right to counteract their pull to the left. Cylinderhead temperatures were indicating in the red. Our arms ached from the efforts to hold the ship level. The rudder trim tab control spun uselessly - the control cables must have been shot away. Perspiration stood out on our foreheads above our oxygen masks as the two of us struggled to maintain control. Then number one propeller ran wild; winding up in a crescendo of shrill sound that knifed into our eardrums above the roar of the straining two right hand engines.

We continued to drop back and became one of the many damaged stragglers that were beginning to dot the sky between the spaced, tightly knit formations of the other groups. Some of these, like us, with stationary props, or trailing smoke in similar conditions of distress, and others being mauled by gangs of circling fighters, the focal point of tell-tale, flickering white flashes. Suddenly, ahead and to our right, a brilliant, yellow flash seared the sky, followed by a huge cloud of black smoke. One of the stragglers had exploded. Pieces of debris flew in all directions, some trailing yellow flame and smoke in irregular patterns through the air. The largest pieces - the four engines - fell straight down, quickly disappearing into the depths, while the smaller fragments fluttered slowly down behind. The black cloud of smoke with its arching, outflung streamers hung in our vision too long as we seemed to crawl along our way.

Then the fighters found us and drove in with such determined assaults we were forced to dive and turn once again in an effort to avoid their attacks. But the damaged plane responded too slowly. Cannon shells slammed into us, exploding with sharp, staccato bangs. The voices of the gunners on the intercom carried a desperate tone. Again and again the fighters came in. On each firing pass the plane shook and trembled under the pounding of the shells. Smoke streamed out from number four engine. The ball turret power was knocked out and its guns silenced, leaving its operator, Richards, unhurt but useless to our defense. Fighters came in from astern, their cannon shells leaving white vapor trails behind as they flashed past just over the top of the wing. We pushed forward on the controls and went into a dive, trying to stay out of the path of those shells, but they followed us down - and caught us. Smoke and dust filled

the cockpit as they pounded us. It appeared useless - our luck had run its course. Without help, badly damaged, the center of attention of a group of determined enemy fighters who had but one objective in mind, the result was inevitable. We struggled out of the dive and I gave the order to abandon ship. It was time to get out. I reached down and yanked the handle of the bomb bay door release, dropping the doors wide open. The altimeter registered 15,000 feet. I jerked off my oxygen mask, yelled to Byington to get out and unbuckled my seat belt. I climbed out of the seat, grabbed the chest pack from its hook behind the seat and clamped it in place on my harness. Bending down I peered back through the plane - it was as empty as a deserted house. The bomb bay doors gaped in front of me. I turned and dropped down between the seats into the nose compartment, released the escape hatch latch and saw it drop away. McNeely and Mikel were crouching on the floor, their chutes on, looking expectantly at me. The plane lurched suddenly. "Here she goes", I thought and beckoned Mikel out through the open hatch, pushed McNeely after him, then went out myself, head first.

As the blast of air hit me and I went over on my back, the ball turret guns, pointing straight down, flashed past just above me and I was clear of the ship. Then I seemed to be hanging, suspended in space, with a great wind blowing in my face and a roaring in my ears. My flying coveralls and loose straps flapped violently under the buffeting, but there was no sensation of falling. I started to spin as though caught in a great whirlpool of air. As I turned over and over I caught a glimpse of our plane slanting earthward, leaving a long plume of smoke behind, followed closely by several of the harrassing fighters. To stop the dizzying spin I stretched one leg out straight. The spinning stopped and I was falling face down. One arm held out stiffly turned me over and I was looking up at the sky. The thought in my mind was to delay opening the chute as long as possible to lessen the chances of discovery by the Germans. I had no idea how far away the ground was, but knew I must have fallen a long way by then, so decided to open up. I groped for the rip cord, found it and yanked hard, expecting immediate results. To my great surprise, nothing happened! Looking down at the chest pack I saw the streamer of white silk slowly rising out of the open flaps like a cobra out of a snake charmer's basket. Then - a stunning blow on the face and a bone-jarring jolt that knocked the breath out of my body in one wrenching gasp. So violent was the opening that I seemed to be yanked back upwards.

When I had recovered enough, I looked up and saw the white canopy above me and felt the grip of the leg straps on my thighs. It had worked. High above me several other chutes dotted the sky. Looking around, I saw I was over open country, then remembering some mission notes I had tucked in my coverall pocket, I found them and tore them into bits, scattering the pieces to the winds. Turning my attention to the ground below, I saw a chute just collapsing against the earth. An orchard evolved out of the general panorama; a road and a man on a bicycle - a farm house, then a field - the ground was coming up fast. I pulled hard on the risers and bent my knees.

WHAM! I hit the ground and went head over heels. A sharp pain shot through my left ankle. Momentarily stunned, I lay flat on my stomach on the ground. The chute collapsed in folds beside me. I remained motionless for a few minutes while I gathered my wits. I had come down in a field of sugar beets and the green tops screened me where I lay stretched out. I rolled over and unbuckled the chute harness, pulled off my Mae West and raised up one elbow.

A man dressed in rough work clothes was approaching and he stopped as he saw me move. I stared at him. He raised his hand, showing he meant me no harm, so I raised my hand in a similar manner. Then more men came into sight and joined him, standing in a semicircle, looking down at me in silence. Finally, sitting up, I motioned to my ankle, indicating that it was hurt, but they made no sign that they understood. Then, still not sure of

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CORRESPONDENCE

July 8, 1981

Dear Shel:

Got my "92nd Bomb Group News" today and while filing it away I reviewed the last "News" (March, 1981). Page 5 of this "News" asks for identification of people. So - the second photo, top right is that of Jim Shanks crew. Jim Shanks is number 4, rear row. Jack Glasco is number 5, rear row. The last time I saw Shanks was in January or February, 1952 at Lowry AFB. Seems he stacked a B-29 into Denver but was ok, though he did lose a couple of fingers. Jack Glasco got his own crew and was later shot down. I lost track of him. The plane in the rear is "Devil May Care" this I know for I flew my first mission in this bird. I also have it's name on my A-2 jacket. Seems the radio room in the bird had "Steve's Static Shack" burned into the door. The guns in either top or ball turret were labeled "Piss and Moan" Abelman really is Sgt. Abelman. Joe Spencer was a Lt. rather than Sgt.

See ya,
Jack Sargeant

August 5, 1981

Dear Sheldon:

You may be aware that I have corresponded with Ed Braun for some time and, indeed, visited with him and Bernice, together with my wife and John Hadfield, after last year's 8th AF Reunion. We were all disappointed that during our few days in St. Louis we did not get to meet you.

Did Ed tell you that I volunteered to act as local contact for the 92nd if it was felt that one was needed? Quite a number of veterans visit the area, some of whom are members of the Memorial Association; others are not, and these we try to recruit on your behalf, provided that we get to meet them. We enjoy good relations with the various landowners at Podington and our local knowledge is such that we can usually make a veteran's visit somewhat more informative and enjoyable than it might otherwise have been. We can also offer other help, such as assistance in tracing old friends in the neighborhood, or delving into British records on behalf of anyone engaged in research. In short, we like to think we are here to provide whatever helpful service possible. I have used "we" above in recognition of the fact that there is a small group of us involved; however, the latest development is that, as my time has become very limited of late, John Hadfield has volunteered to act as the main contact henceforth, with myself as alternate. If you are agreeable, John would be grateful if this information could be published in the newsletter. By the way, John asks me to pass on his thanks for the recent request in the newsletter for photographic material; no results yet, but he's hoping.

Have you been contacted by Stratton H. Bull? He is a 92nd veteran who visited us in May, having made contact through the local Tourist Advice office. He knew nothing about either the Historical Society or the 92nd Memorial Corporation, so we gave him your address. In case he had not been in touch, he lives at 507 South Commerce St., Natchez, MS 39120.

Another recent visitor to the base was Victor Cherbak, although we didn't get to meet him. He saw a list of names and addresses of our group which we posted on one of the buildings and as a result got in touch later. I understand that he has subsequently written to you.

There is much more to tell regarding our activities and plans, but perhaps I should leave it to John H. to do this. You should hear from him soon.

Yours sincerely,
John Mills

NOTICES

Those members planning to attend the 8th AF Reunion in St. Paul, Minnesota October 15-18, 1981, should write Sterner Sorenson, the 92nd Bomb Group coordinator, so that he will have an idea of how many he can expect.

Copies of the "Route as Briefed" are down to 187 remaining, triangle "B" tie tacs are down to 3. We will reorder both B-17 and the triangle "B" tie tacs in time for the reunion.

The Schweinfurt Mission *continued*

where I had come down, I tried a few words in French, the only foreign language of which I had any knowledge, asking if this was Germany. They understood this and shook their heads. One said "La Belgique". I was in Belgium, not Germany. That gave me hope.

I struggled to get up and the men immediately reached down to help me. Others were arriving on the scene and soon there was a group of a dozen or more men, women and children standing around in the middle of the field staring curiously at me. Using my scant knowledge of the language I told them I was an American pilot. This immediately seemed to break the ice for they all looked pleased and nodded their heads in approval, crowding around, smiling, clasping my hand and saying, "Bonjour", "Courage" and "Bonne chance!" All this time I had been standing on one foot, leaning on one of the men for support, anxious to get out of such a conspicuous spot and under cover. Even as I was thinking this, three ME-110s flew low overhead and I knew it was time to leave.

I will stop this account here, for what followed is still another story. However, briefly, I learned later from witnesses of our air fight that our plane had exploded shortly after we had bailed out and that the wreckage was scattered across several neighboring villages. I had come down in the tiny village of St. Huibrechts-Hern, about 20 miles northwest of Liege. McNeely, Byington and I were reunited that night. For ten days in the Belgian underground we evaded capture until we were cornered in a small hotel in civilian clothes by the Gestapo, not far from the Gare du Nord in Paris, apparently through a double agent member of the underground. We were imprisoned in Fresnes prison on the outskirts of Paris and were accused of being spies. We were threatened with execution and thrown in with the other political prisoners, saboteurs and the like to await our fate. We had no communication with the outside world and no one except the Gestapo knew where we were. Fortunately for us through the combined efforts of the U.S. Air Force, the International Red Cross and the German Luftwaffe, we were located in time to get us out of that predicament and into a regular prisoner of war status, in which we spent the remainder of the war, mostly in Stalag Luft III in Sagan, Germany. We encountered only one of the other members of the crew, Mikel, about a year later, who also turned up in Sagan after many harrowing experiences.

I didn't find out until after the war was over that three of our crew, Berry, Richards and Fahnce had all made it out of occupied Europe through the efforts of the underground and made it back to England and then to the States. Sailer had been wounded in the fighting before bailing out, was captured immediately and taken to a hospital. He eventually was returned home.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

This narrative was inspired by a letter from Dr. J. Bussels of Belgium, printed on page 3 of the March '81 Newsletter. Photos of George Mikel and unknowns are on page 6.

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