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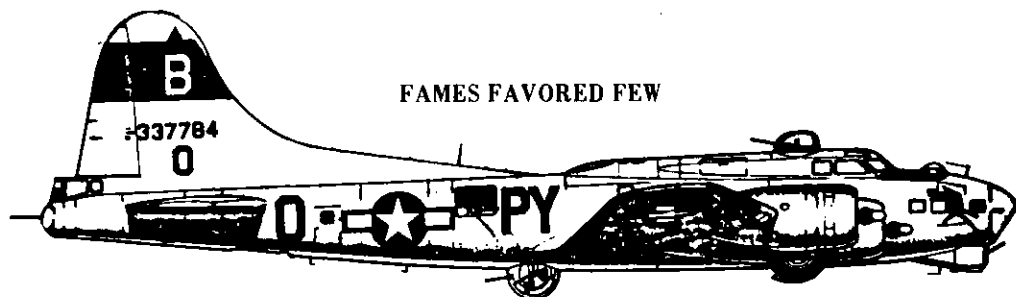
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# 92nd Bombardment Group NEWS



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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 Fahncke - 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. Fahncke 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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