

## Schweinfurt and the Hutchens Crew

By David Hutchens, pilot of B-17F #42-5725 "This IS IT"

*October 14, 2000, marked 57 years since the 8th Air Force bombed the ball bearing factories at Schweinfurt, Germany. This mission was flown on Oct. 14, 1943. History records the losses on this mission as being one of the highest of any single event in the air wars of World War II. We lost 60 B-17 bombers and 600 men. This day has become known as Black Thursday.*

As usual Doug Winter the 532nd operation officer woke me up in the middle of the night with a loud yell- " Get your butt out of bed you're flying today. I stumbled up to the mess hall for breakfast. The menu was good old American bacon and eggs. This was a mixed blessing because it meant that we would be flying a deep penetration into Germany. If the target were to be into occupied Europe which meant less fighters and flak we got fed powdered eggs and Spam. After eating I went up to the mission briefing room to get the bad news. The curtain was pulled back by the briefing officer and we saw along red target line going into the heart of Germany with the target labeled Schweinfurt. We let out a loud moan. Our Group had been to this target on 17 Aug 43 and the losses from German fighters had been so high that the Group had been labeled non-operational.



Capt. David Hutchens, 1943

Now to make matters worse I was told that I would have two substitute crew members in the nose to man the guns and to drop the bombs. It seems that both my regular navigator and bombardier had ruptured their eardrums during a rapid decent from altitude to escape the fighters on a recent mission so they were grounded by the flight surgeon. This was really bad news because it broke up an experienced crew who had flown together and completed 14 missions toward the magic 25. I gathered my crew at the airplane and gave them my usual pep talk. Then we all had our last minute nervous pee and climbed aboard. We started engines and went through our check list and on time signal taxied out for take off.

As I recall I made a low visibility heavy loaded instrument take off which meant that I held the brakes on while my flight engineer advanced the four throttles at near max power I took control and released the brakes. At full power and a bit of a lurch we were underway. With a full load of bombs and full fuel load the next few seconds are very critical so I didn't allow any interphone chatter. As we started our climb out to altitude I got a call from the waist gun compartment. It was reported that when I released the brakes both 50 caliber waist guns had snapped off their pivoting post and had tumbled back into the waist compartment and were lying useless on the floor. Considering the mission this was really bad news. My flight engineer and senior enlisted man stated that two guns out would be equivalent to having a gun turret out which was a legitimate reason to abort the mission. We talked this over as a crew. We didn't really want to abort. We all wanted to get another mission in toward that magic 25. When my waist gunners said that they thought that between them they could jury rig one gun and be able to fire the gun. We decided to go for it.

After getting into formation, climbing out, crossing the English Channel, and picking up our fighter support, we were under way. In a short time our fighter support had run out of their range and had to turn back. This was when the German fighters came in like a swarm of angry bees. We tightened up our formation for mutual protection. We weren't exactly defenseless. Each B-17 had at least 10 50 caliber machine guns which the Germans learned to respect. The Germans would usually pick on a Group that was flying a loose formation and gang up on a B-17 that was disabled and not able to stay in formation. Our

group was staying pretty much intact when we turned at the IP and started our run into the target. Here the sky became black with flak bursts from the ground defenses of 88 millimeter guns. Their best gunners were at this target. But there was at least some relief from those fighter attacks.

At this time my ball turret operator reported oil leaking off the left wing trailing edge. Since I was busy flying I asked my Copilot to watch the oil pressure gauges. In a short while he reported that the oil pressure on number one engine was dropping. This meant that we would have to shut that engine down, but with a feathered prop we should still be able to stay in formation. We shut the engine down and tried to feather the prop. We had lost so much oil the prop would not feather. This was really bad news This meant the prop would windmill causing a large drag on the airplane causing a big loss in airspeed so that we could not maintain our position in formation. We had to drop out of formation and the fighters came in for the kill.

As we left formation the tail gunner reported four or five fighters were closing in from the rear. I looked down and saw that there was a thick cloud cover at about 5000 ft . We were flying at about 20,000 ft. Our best chance to survive was to get into that lower cloud cover. I told my crew to hang on, I pulled all the power off and put the airplane into a steep dive. My tail gunner reported a kill on one of the fighters. Airspeed was approaching red line max and to make matters worse the left wing was in a violent vibration caused by the stress of the spinning prop on no. 1 engine. I had to slow down. My top turret gunner reported a kill on another fighter. I pulled the nose up into a steep climb and slowed the airspeed down to near stall. My ball turret gunner reported that the attacking fighters zoomed under us as we pulled up into the climb. At this point I did a wing-over maneuver and continued the dive for the cloud cover. for some reason the fighters did not continue the attack and we were in the clouds.



As we resumed flying airspeed the left wing again went into violent vibrations. I now became concerned about losing the left wing. In previous missions we had witnessed B-17s in a dive with the wings coming off .The airplane tumbles and we did not count any chutes of escaping airmen. I decided that we should bail the crew while we still had control of the airplane. I told my copilot to hit the bail out alarm and get ready to leave. Tex looked at me with those cold blue steel Texan eyes and said "Hutch lets give it two more minutes". By some miracle the wing vibrations ceased (I found out later that the prop shaft had sheared from the engine and was now

spinning free of the engine). We had a new lease on life. I told the crew we had two options. We could head for Switzerland and be interned. In my escape kit I had Swiss maps and the telephone number of our embassy. If we couldn't land we could probably ditch near the shore in Lake Geneva.. One caution-- during the escape briefing we were told that it had been reported that there were cases where Nazi sympathizers were selling escaping airmen back to the Germans. To a man my crew said let's go home

I wasn't sure of my present location. Now I really missed my Navigator. I knew we were in southern Europe so decided to pick up a northwest heading and hoped to have enough fuel to get back to England. The cloud cover held and we flew and we flew Suddenly the clouds turned black with flak bursts. There was a break in the clouds and I knew exactly where we were -- there was the Eiffel Tower-- we were over the heart of occupied Paris and were being shot at by the top German

gunners. We got back in the cloud cover and survived. We flew and we flew. Now I saw that we were over water. I was afraid we would miss England and head out over the Atlantic. I corrected to a more northerly heading. We flew and we flew and we flew. Suddenly I saw land ahead. By now I am completely confused on our location I had visions of turning too far north and with a strong wind from the west we could be back over occupied Europe. Then I saw some odd looking small twin engine aircraft with engine nacelles over the landing gear. I was low on fuel with red lights blinking. I saw an airfield, I had to land I headed for the nearest runway. My radio had been shot out but the tower gave me a green blinking light. Then I saw some familiar aircraft in the pattern, the beautiful British Spitfire. After landing an armed jeep met the airplane and guided us to a parking spot . We shut the engines down. On opening the nose hatch to leave the airplane empty 50 caliber shells poured out. I heard the comment " these blokes have been in a fight, --and we had!!

Submitted by David Hutchens