

SYMBOL OF TRIUMPH

World War II. May 1945. Allied military victory in Europe by air, naval and ground forces. Jubilation by the living. Profound sorrow for those who made the supreme sacrifice. This story is about one particular unit—the 305th Bombardment Group—whose actions were linked to those of the 42nd Infantry Division. The common bond was Schweinfurt, Germany.

After VE Day, Major General Harry J. Collins, Commander of the 42nd Rainbow Division, sent to Major General Carl A. Spaatz, Commander of the Eighth Air Force, a large Nazi flag that had flown over Schweinfurt when the Division captured the city just weeks earlier.

General Spaatz personally selected the 305th Bombardment Group to receive this trophy. The 305th was based at Chelveston Airfield, north of London, England and near the town of Rushden. Chelveston was one of three bases from which B-17 Flying Fortresses flew their missions. The field was capable of accommodating about 3,000 personnel and sixty Flying Fortresses.

Schweinfurt, center for the manufacture of low-friction ball and roller bearings, was a major strategic target for allied bombing attacks. Roughly half of the German bearing and roller industry was located in this city. Missions deep into the continent from England very often were without fighter cover because of the distances involved. Fighter escorts typically had to turn back over Aachen, which was just inside the border of Germany. The first mission of the 305th occurred on August 17, 1943 during which two aircrafts and crews were lost. The 305th's second mission, however, was without parallel.

“Rightly called ‘Black Thursday’ by veterans, the October 14, 1943 mission to Schweinfurt, Germany was the most arduous of the war. Incredibly, of the 15 group aircraft able to participate in the mission [*18 B-17’s took to the air under adverse weather conditions but three aborted*], the Luftwaffe claimed 13, and 130 crewmembers. Rocket-firing German Messerschmitt-110’s and Messerschmitt-210’s destroyed most of the 305th BG before they even reached the Rhein River—some 115 miles short of the target.”¹ “In just 22 minutes, 10 of the 15 B-17’s from the 305th Bomb Group had fallen to the enemy.”²

“Only three of the group’s B-17’s made it to the target area—one of those crews released its bomb load while the aircraft burned. Only two B-17’s and their crews managed to survive the long trip back to England. Of the downed airmen, 40 died and 20 were wounded, while another 79 became prisoners of war. Four airmen evaded capture and eventually returned to duty, while the remaining crewmen spent the war interned in Switzerland. No group ever again suffered the horrendous 87 percent attrition rate the ‘Can Do’ group did that October day.”³

“Chelveston’s loss ratio was probably the heaviest ever suffered by any American air unit.”⁴ “The “305th suffered more casualties than any of the 19 other bombardment groups that participated.”⁵

For that October 14, 1943 mission, “291 B-17’s left England, 229 bombed the target, and 60 bombers were lost. Crew casualties amounted to 639 men.”⁶ “The battle over Schweinfurt has been called the most savage battle in the history of air warfare.”⁷ “Many historians consider it the world’s greatest one-day air battle of World War II.”⁸

“The 305th lost 117 airplanes during the war and 665 men were killed in action.”⁹

The presentation of the Nazi flag to the 305th took place in June 1945. The banner headline of the *Rushden Echo & Argus* newspaper proclaimed, “Chelveston Holds The Schweinfurt Flag”; a picture caption read, “A great assembly in the main hanger greets the arrival of the Schweinfurt flag.”¹⁰

Colonel Henry G. Macdonald, Commanding Officer, presented the eight-by-fifteen foot flag to members of the 305th Bomb Group saying,

This flag behind me was flying over the city of Schweinfurt when the Forty-second “Rainbow” Division captured the German ball bearing center with only sixty casualties. Major General Collins, commander of the Forty-second, decided the captured emblem would be a fitting symbol of triumph for the Eighth’s air warriors. Accordingly, he sent the flag to General Spaatz, who selected the Three-oh-fifth because our operations were typical of the Eighth’s performance on the crucial Schweinfurt missions. I’m sure you all join me in thanking the “Rainbow” Division for this trophy, which is the first of its kind to be given to an air force in this theater. The inscription reads, “The ‘Rainbow’ has avenged your losses at Schweinfurt.”¹¹

“In April 1945, after more than 20 bombing attacks in 18 months, much of the city of Schweinfurt was left in ruins. Although only the ball bearing factories had actually been targeted, collateral damage to the city center and surrounding areas was severe. Over half of the houses in Schweinfurt were uninhabitable. During the war, the city’s population dropped by 50 percent due to departing refugees.”¹²

The final ground assault against Schweinfurt began April 6, 1945 when the Rainbow Division, having been directed to take the ball bearing capital,

moved out of Wurzburg and started northward...with the 4th Division on the right and the 3rd Division on the left. Chief obstacle to be overcome in taking the city would be the rings of 88-mm. guns which defended it. These guns were originally placed as anti-aircraft defenses to guard the ball bearing factories, and they had made the city one of the most costly targets ever attacked by our air force. Now the same guns could be used as a defense against ground troops. Town by town the Rainbow advanced toward Schweinfurt, moving forward against fire from 88-mm. guns and automatic anti-aircraft weapons as well as infantry defenses. By April 10 the Division had fought its way through the outer defenses of the city. It was decided first to completely circle the objective. Now air power was called in to smash the German artillery defenses. The [medium] bombers flew three raids on the city and a total of 192 planes dropped their bomb loads on its defenses. When the 88-mm. guns opened fire on the planes our artillery opened fire on them and effective counter-battery fire destroyed many of the installations which would have checked the Rainbow advance. Despite counter-battery fire, 15 planes were damaged. The 42nd Division artillery also poured shells on all roads leading out of the city and prevented any mass flight of enemy troops from the city. The three infantry regiments attacked from different directions and, despite fierce opposition, moved into the city—a city almost entirely destroyed by bombing and artillery fire. Rounded up in the city and its outskirts were 3,000 prisoners, which made a total of 6,680 German soldiers captured by the Rainbow since it left Wurzburg. During the same time the Division cleared 100 square miles of Nazi territory and captured 50 towns and villages.¹³

Moving now to the present, Mr. John Craven, Newsletter Editor of the 305th Bomb Group Memorial Association, wrote, "At our reunions a large Nazi flag has been displayed, always to memorialize the 305th's second mission to Schweinfurt where 13 of the 15 planes sent didn't make it back. So a Nazi flag has been part of our tradition."¹⁴ Mr. Glenn Nelson, writing about the flag said, "It reminds us of that day of the raid on the ball bearing plants in Schweinfurt, Germany. We called it 'Black Thursday' because we were almost completely wiped out and it took some time to rebuild our combat crews and aircraft as well as morale."¹⁵ Mr. John Collins, Jr., Colonel USAF (Ret), was a pilot and Operations Officer of the 305th Bomb Group from September 1943 to October 1945. In his words, "The presentation [*of the flag*] remains one of the finest stories in World War II history and a source of great pride to the members of the 305th."¹⁶

In order to ensure preservation of the flag for future generations, it was donated in 1967 to the United States Air Force Museum at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio. "The banner is part of the national collection of the Air Force. It is on display in the Museum's Air Power Gallery, where it helps tell the story of the end of World War II in Europe. The inscription on the banner reads: *'The Rainbow has avenged your losses at Schweinfurt in the summer of 1943. This flag was captured by the 222nd Inf. 42d (Rainbow Div.) on April 12, 1945. Harry J. Collins, Maj. Gen.'*"¹⁷ The display placard reads, "*Nazi banner captured at Schweinfurt, Germany by the 42d Rainbow Division, U.S. Army, on Apr. 12, 1945. It was sent to the AAF's 8th Air Force in England by the Commanding General of the Rainbow Division in recognition of the heavy losses of aircraft experienced by the 8th in bombing the ball bearing plants at Schweinfurt in 1943. Donated by Lt. Gen. William E. Kepner, USAF (Ret), Orlando, Fla.*"

The author is greatly indebted to: John Collins, Jr. of Alexandria, Virginia, John Craven of Middlebury, Vermont, Marlyn Gillespie of West Des Moines, Iowa, and Glenn Nelson of Cleveland, Ohio, all of the 305th Bomb Group Memorial Association; Ardella Ramey of PSI Research/Hellgate Press; Leslie Shores of the American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming; and Susan Carlson of the Air Force Museum, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio. Without their help the writing of this history would not have become a reality.

So ends the chronicle of the Schweinfurt **symbol of triumph** that began sixty years ago at Chelveston Airfield in England. Members of the 305th Bombardment Group and of the 42nd RAINBOW Division justifiably take pride in their respective roles.

George A. Cramer (Sgt), Weapons Platoon,
Company K, 232nd Regiment, 42nd Infantry Division
May 2003



The photograph of Colonel Henry G. Macdonald presenting the Nazi flag to members of the 305th Bomb Group at Chelveston, England in June 1945 is by courtesy of the Wilbur H. Morrison Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.



The photograph displaying the Nazi banner in its showcase in the Air Power Gallery is by courtesy of the USAF Museum at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio. Of necessity, because of its dimensions, the flag has been folded and draped for viewing. Display placards on the walls contain the inscription on the flag and a description of its origin, as quoted in the above paragraph.

ENDNOTES

-
- ¹ TSgt. Gary W. Boyd, McGuire AFB, N.J., *Journal of Aerospace and Defense Industry News*, October 19, 1999, pages 1,2
- ² George C. Kuhl, *WRONG PLACE! WRONG TIME!, The 305th Bomb Group & The 2nd Schweinfurt Raid October 14, 1943* (Schiffer Publishing Ltd, Atglen, PA, 1993), Page 103
- ³ TSgt. Gary W. Boyd, McGuire AFB, N.J., op. cit.
- ⁴ *Rushden Echo & Argus*, "Epic of Notable Men and Missions," June 8, 1945
- ⁵ *CAN DO NOTES* of 305th Bombardment Group (H) Memorial Association, February 1984, Volume 3, Issue 1, page 2
- ⁶ <http://www.thirdreichruins.com>, February 16, 2003, *Third Reich In Ruins* by Geoff Walden
- ⁷ *CAN DO NOTES*, op. cit.
- ⁸ George C. Kuhl, op. cit., *Preface*
- ⁹ Wilbur H. Morrison, *THE INCREDIBLE 305TH, The "Can Do" Bombers of World War II*, (Duell, Sloan & Pearce , 1962), page 187
- ¹⁰ *Rushden Echo & Argus*, op.cit.
- ¹¹ Wilbur H. Morrison, *FORTRESS WITHOUT A ROOF, The Allied Bombing of the Third Reich* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), pages 344, 345
- ¹² <http://www.thirdreichruins.com>, April 1, 2003, op.cit.
- ¹³ 42nd "Rainbow" Infantry Division, History *World War II* (Army and Navy Publishing Company, Baton Rouge, LA, 1946)
- ¹⁴ Letter from John Craven of December 29, 2002
- ¹⁵ Letter from Glenn Nelson of March 22, 2003
- ¹⁶ Letter from John Collins, Jr., Past President of the Memorial Association, of January 16, 2003
- ¹⁷ Letter from Susan Carlson, Registrar, Collection Division/MUC, United States Air Force Museum, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, February 20, 2003