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The American and British fighter planes didn't have the range that they later had, either. Their pilots could accompany us only limited distances past the coast of France before having to turn back for home. In the months to come they would get drop tanks - and the P-51s - that enabled some of them to fly all the way to Poland and back. But we had to do without them. We had an almost constant Luftwaffe 'escort.' From field after field as we flew in and out of Germany, their fighters would come up like hornets and work us over. In fact, the Messerschmitt 109's and the Focke-Wulf 190's were mauling us so badly in 1943 the Americans briefly considered going in at night the way the Royal Air Force did.

Adding to our flight crew's stress before we even started on the September 6th mission was a sad and violent accident that nearly killed two of our crew members. Our Crew Chief and Top Turret Gunner, Leo Liewer, and our Ball-Turret Gunner, Kenneth Rood, fell from a Jeep on their way out to the plane and were seriously injured. Since both men were extremely well-liked and since both had to be replaced at the very last moment, it cast a deep gloom upon the rest of us. Their two replacements, Sgts Ralph Biggs and Guido DePietro, were good men but they were sudden and total strangers as we took off together for Stuttgart.

The 306th Bomb Group, to which we belonged, did not have the lead position that day. We flew in a high box formation to the right and to the rear of the leaders. In those days, German fighter attacks often followed a standard pattern. On our way into Germany they seemed to attack more from the right, perhaps because this gave them the sun at their backs. Their procedure was to come up along side of us but out of range. Since they were faster than we were, they would soon pull ahead of us, then wheel over and hit us head on. The Germans had quickly figured out that the most vulnerable part of the B-17 was the front of it. We flew the B-17 E and F models. The later B-17 F and the B-17 G would be fitted out with two extra guns in the nose in what was called a chin turret. But at that time, in 1943, we didn't have them.

The German fighter pilots whom we encountered were very good and certainly courageous, though I sometimes wondered if some of them, on occasions, were as scared as we were. They often flew close enough for us to see their faces. On one of our earlier missions, the plane flying off my wing had to move out so that the on-coming German fighter, whose pilot may have been dead by that time, could go between us. As we flew to Stuttgart that day the Luftwaffe, as usual, came up to greet us. I don't recall the number of attacks but, during one of them, an ME-109 knocked out our number two engine, the inboard engine on the left side. After a bullet or shell fragment punctured an oil line, the oil pressure dropped to zero, so I had to stop the engine and feather the propeller to keep it from spinning out of control.

Losing power in an airplane is always serious business but losing power on a bombing mission brings extra worries because you start falling behind and become easier prey for enemy fighters. Being thus suddenly crippled, we could no longer keep up with the planes in our squadron. Looking back on it now, after all these years, we might have fared better if I had turned back then and there and flown back to England. But, because the target seemed within our range and because of the on-coming bomber groups behind us, I decided to fly on to Stuttgart. A measure of safety existed inside a formation. Within it, you may have been just another schooling fish but outside of it, all by yourself, especially as a cripple in broad daylight, you offered German fighter pilots, eager to add to their list of bomber kills, a tempting morsel.

On we flew. "It's not long to the target," I kept telling myself. "As soon as we drop our bombs, I will dive as fast as I can for the deck, then skim at tree-top level across Germany, across France, across the water and back to England" This, of course, was wishful thinking, for we kept losing ground.

After falling behind our own group, we joined the next one and then the next. We were just a straggler, struggling to stay up with that stream of bombers. As it turned out, it was over an hour from the time we lost our engine to when we finally salvaged our bombs. Though I had no way of knowing it, someone up front had made a fateful mis-judgment.

We learned later that a Brigadier General sat in the lead plane and that, when he couldn't see the target under a smoke screen and cover of clouds, he elected to make a second pass. This could be considered a brave and determined action but, unfortunately, it triggered a disaster for the bomb groups coming behind him. It may have upset the meticulous flight plans that had been decided upon back in England and the confusion was compounded by the inability of the following air crews to see target objectives covered up below. Big bomber groups have to move ponderously. They cannot maneuver easily and quickly. They have to make slow, flat turns so that the inside planes of the inside squadrons won't lose too much speed and stall out. So this, too, may have created problems.

It seemed to me, as just a lone cypher in that great mass of airplanes, that we had all been sucked into a kind of giant whirlpool flying aimlessly over southern Germany. All this was wasting time and time meant burning fuel. The 8th Air Force lost 45 bombers that day, more than half of which went down from a simple lack of gasoline. In our own case, our co-pilot, Keith Rich, who had been monitoring our fuel gauges, kept giving me ominous reports. We were getting into deeper trouble and we knew it.

Even before our Bombardier, Robert Huisinga, dropped our bombs on some target of opportunity, Keith and I were aware that we could no longer get home. We didn't have enough gasoline to reach the coast of France, much less the coast of England. With our three good engines going at full manifold pressure and high RPMs to stay aloft with that load of bombs, we had gone way over normal fuel consumption. With no chance of getting back, we had two options. One was to keep flying toward France until we ran completely out of fuel. There was no longer any thought of going down to tree-top level because you cannot parachute from there. Both of us thought, however, that we could get as far as France where we could all bail out with some hope of escape. The other option was to go to Switzerland which lay a half-hour's flight away. But Rich and I decided not to go to Switzerland. That seemed like quitting. We agreed we should go as far as we could before giving up.

Then, just after we made that decision, our Tail Gunner, Henry Hucker, called over the intercom in great excitement to say that Number Four engine was on fire. (That's the outboard engine on the right side.) I looked out past Keith to help him check it out. It wasn't really on fire-although from Hucker's point of view it must have looked that way. The engine had simply overheated, causing pre-ignition in the cylinders and sending black smoke pouring out of the cowl flaps. There was nothing to do but to throttle back on it. Now, with the last of the American bombers flying fast away from us, we were reduced to only two fully functioning engines. This caused Rich and me to change our minds. We told the crew we were going to try to get to Switzerland while we still had a chance to do so. Our Navigator, Gordon Bowers, gave us a heading and we turned toward the south.