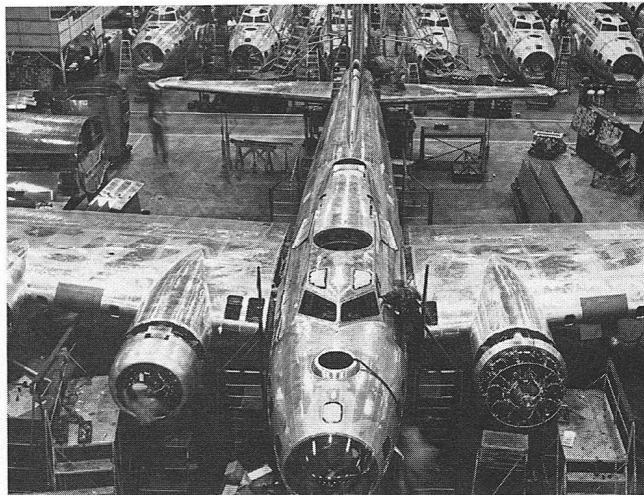


five combat missions. Flying in their Fortress "Memphis Belle," they had beaten the odds and now they were going to return to the United States for a War Bond Tour. From there, they would visit various bases where new crews were being trained for combat before shipment overseas. The ship was a B-17F-10-BO,S/N 41-24485 Marked DFA. The ship had completed only twenty-four missions on May 17, 1943 when some of the Morgan crew finished up their tour. The rest of the crew completed their missions assignments the following month. It was up to another pilot to see the valiant craft through its twenty fifth mission. The honor went to Lt/C L Anderson and crew, who took the Memphis Belle to Kiel on May 19, 1943. Although Belle was not the first to complete a tour, the bomber would receive the lion's share of publicity for the feat on its return to the United States. After a morale lifting bond tour Capt Morgan



Boeing factory, Seattle

transitioned to B-29s as a pilot and flew missions to Tokyo. The honor of being the very first B-17 to complete twenty-five missions went to "Hell's Angels" of the 303rd Bomb Group, which returned from its twenty-fifth on May 14, 1943.

Curtis L LeMay who was later to achieve fame for his fire bombing of Japan prepared his Third Air Division, 8th Air Force for take off the morning of August 17, 1943, to bomb the Messerschmitt plant at Regensburg, sixty miles southeast of Nuremberg in southern Bavaria. He knew this plant produced two hundred ME-109s a month, nearly 30 percent of Germany's single engine fighter production, so he was anxious to destroy it.

Bad weather had canceled this two pronged strike at Regensburg and the ball bearing plants at Schweinfurt for several days. Now, the weather still was bad, but if LeMay's division was to land in North Africa in daylight according to plans, the decision had to be made quickly.

It was an anniversary mission. Just a year before, the Eighth had flown its first raid against German occupied territory. In this mission, five combat wings of the First Air Division, totaling three hundred B-17s, would take off after LeMay's Third Air Division, which would lead the assault and as a consequence absorb the brunt of German fighter attacks. It would proceed from Regensburg on to North Africa. It was hoped that the First Air Division, attacking Schweinfurt, would benefit from the fact that German fighters would be refueling from their attacks on the Third Division. For further protection, eighteen squadrons of Spitfires from the Royal Air Force were assigned to protect the bombers to the limit of their fuel capacities. Meanwhile, Typhoons from the RAF and B-26s were assigned airfield strikes to keep German fighters on the ground as much as possible along the bomber routes. These plans, which revolved around precise timing, had been drafted with care, but they started to come apart right at the start.

At Bushy Park Eighth Air Force Headquarters, Ira Eaker, 8th AF CO kept constantly in touch with his Bomber Command at

High Wycombe. He had the utmost confidence in Fred Anderson despite the fact that the thirty eight year old West Point graduate had been in command for less than two months. Still, Eaker fussed about the delay in ordering the Third Air Division to take off. He had requested permission to lead the mission, but General Devers,

ETO CO, had warned him that if he did so, his next trip would be back to the United States. Hap Arnold CO, of the whole United States Air Force, had made it clear that he didn't want Eaker to fly any more missions because of the danger he might be killed or captured.

Fog on the First Air Division bases held their bombers on the ground. It started to lift at the 91st Group's base at Bassingbourne, although other East Anglia bases were still shrouded. LeMay's Third Division was finally given the word to leave. It wasn't until the division passed over Woensdrecht at 10:17 AM that it encountered its

first flak.

"Fighters at two o'clock, low!" The familiar cry alerted Captain Thomas F Kenney's 96th Group's crew with whom LeMay was flying as copilot. At 10:25, a pair of 190s drove through the first formation, hitting two bombers, and then half-rolled over the lead group.

LeMay had noted prior to this mission that German fighters had developed a new strategy of employing fighters in depth rather than in mass. Earlier, Goring had tried to meet Allied bombers over France or the Low Countries without success. Now, he ordered his fighters to concentrate along a 150 mile corridor, so fighters took off only upon approach of the bombers. When they were out of fuel and ammunition, they landed and another group took over, deeper inside Germany. In this way, earlier groups could attack American bombers again on their way home. Bomber crews enjoyed a grim joke that the Germans escorted them all the way.

Kenney happened to glance once at LeMay, just as he took off his oxygen mask, filled his pipe, and, when it wouldn't start, squirted pure oxygen from the demand system until it flamed up. While the pilot gaped at him, LeMay took a couple of puffs, knocked his pipe out, and put his oxygen mask back on.

While his Third Air Division crossed Holland, LeMay was aware that the Schweinfurt force was still on the ground because of fog. Although his bombers had managed to get off despite fog, he knew that fog was worse inland. He was still not satisfied that this was a justifiable excuse for the First Division to remain on the ground. His own crews had been practicing instrument takeoffs for weeks, so they were prepared to take off from socked in airfields.

LeMay was also disturbed by the failure of two P-47 groups to put in an appearance, to give them protection for at least the first one hundred miles into the Continent. Actually, Major Loren G McCollum's 353rd Fighter Group's thirty two P-47s had over flown LeMay's three combat wings at 10:00 AM and had taken up an escort position at twenty three thousand feet as they approached