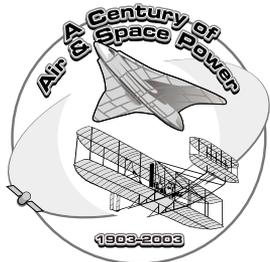


Regensburg/Schweinfurt

The Last Unescorted Raids of World War II in Europe

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The strategic bombing missions conducted in August and October 1943 against Regensburg and Schweinfurt, Germany, were the greatest American air battles of World War II by any measure—including numbers of aircraft lost. The combined loss of 120 bombers and their crews to



German antiaircraft and fighter action, coupled with 60 additional aircraft out of commission from battle damage, threatened Eighth Bomber Command's operational coherency and forced the command to stand down temporarily. This tactical failure presented a serious challenge to the Army Air Forces' (AAF) reliance on strategic bombing theory and its primary emphasis on gaining air superiority. The raids yielded little effect on German aircraft and armaments production, ultimately leading AAF leaders to modify their approach from precision daylight bombing to area attacks against German cities and industrial areas.

Through the remainder of 1943, following the disastrous raids, Gen Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, AAF chief, made wholesale changes in command, leadership, and tactics. Gen Carl Spaatz, Gen Jimmy Doolittle, and Gen William Kepner came to England to provide fresh insight on bombing and gaining air superiority. They pushed hard to develop effective fighter-escort tactics that foreshadowed success in 1944. By the spring, the P-51, equipped with drop tanks and expanded internal fuel cells, arrived to revitalize the strategic bombing campaign.

In 1944 the bombers began to penetrate German defenses with acceptable losses. The new air-to-air warfare favored American fighter tactics. The destruction of German industry and transportation continued apace, and the Luftwaffe, subjected to attack with new ferocity, saw its elite fighter-pilot force destroyed in a vicious attrition campaign that it could not win. Despite the tactical successes enjoyed by American crews, insufficient evidence

prevented any meaningful measurement of bombing effectiveness. Germany's dispersal and concealment of much of its industry further complicated the targeting and assessment problem for American airmen. Consequently, bomber crews found themselves striking targets multiple times to ensure that the Germans did not reconstitute their industrial capabilities.

Although they were a tactical failure, the raids on Regensburg and Schweinfurt represented a key turning point in both the war and the history of American military aviation. Airpower leaders pressed to the limit their doctrine of conducting high-altitude precision bombing during daytime without escort but found it wanting in the face of sophisticated and determined enemy opposition. Thousands of airmen lost their lives pressing home the attack against densely defended target complexes. Air leaders realized they needed to alter their assumptions about aerial combat—and they did so. The twin disasters of Regensburg and Schweinfurt thus represented a painful but necessary step in the maturation of American airpower theory, doctrine, and operational effectiveness.

To Learn More . . .

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