

in a gathering fog.

While the 100th Group had lost twelve aircraft, the 390th had lost eight and the 95th Group of the 13th Wing lost five. The Luftwaffe decided to knock out the lead wing and they just about did it. The bombing destroyed large sections of the city and knocked out its electrical system completely. The intensity of the air battle is indicated by the high claims made by the crew members of the Fortresses. The B-17 crews claimed 183 enemy aircraft destroyed on the mission. German records show that only twenty four of their fighters went down that day. Of the 313 aircraft dispatched, 77 aborted, 30 were shot down resulting in 306 crew members missing in action. One of the missing was the son of the US Ambassador to Britain Lt John Winant who was taken prisoner.

The highest scoring gunner "Ace" to emerge from the great daylight air battles of 1943 was S/Sgt Donald W Crossley, a 25 year old B-17 tail gunner in the 95th Group. In his 25 missions he received credit for the destruction of 12 enemy aircraft, the only 8th Air Force gunner to run his victory score into double figures. Much of Crossley's success can be attributed to his great interest in marksmanship and skill developed through shooting as a hobby. Before enlisting, when he worked for a steel company in Follansbee, Virginia, his passion for shooting was pursued through membership in three different rifle clubs.

With the original 95th Group combat complement arriving in the UK in April 1943, Don Crossley was tail gunner on Lt John W Johnson's crew. His first two victories were credited the following month and his third on 11 June. On this date the Johnson crew were flying the B-17 "Little Lady" when attacked by fighters over the target. A mechanical problem developed in Crossley's tail guns rendering them inoperative. At about the same time one of the nose guns used by the navigator was hit by enemy fire and damaged. Hearing this over the interphone, Crossley went to the nose, removed part of the mechanism from the damaged gun, and was able to use this in getting his guns back into operation. Shortly afterwards when another fighter attack developed he was able to obtain fatal strikes on an FW-190. Two days later, on the hotly contested Kiel raid, the Johnson crew was flying B-17 "Easy Aces," an appropriate nickname in view of Crossley claiming his fourth and fifth enemy fighters to become one of the first gunner aces in the Group. "Easy Aces" was a reference to a popular radio show of the forties.

After this mission the crew received a new long range B-17F which was named The "Brass Rail" after a well known American restaurant chain. Over the next few weeks Crossley flew on most of the major raids and his score mounted steadily. On another mission to Kiel, 25 July 1943, "The Brass Rail" came under fighter attack and although Crossley was able to claim one of the enemy, the bomber was badly shot up, a cannon shell exploding in the cockpit mortally wounding 'Johnny' Johnson. The copilot flew the bomber home and in subsequent operations became the new crew captain. Over the Ruhr on 12 August, "The Brass Rail" was again under attack and Crossley claimed another double to raise his score

to 11. His 12th and final victory was achieved on his 22nd mission in September 1943, following which he received the simultaneous awards of the DFC and cluster. The 3rd Division planned to use Crossley as a lecturer and instructor in the zone sighting method of firing once he had completed his tour, so that other bomber gunners might benefit from his expertise.

Black Week

October 14, 1943 would become another fateful day in "Black Week" for the Eighth Air Force. The mission was the second attempt to knock out the ball bearing factories at Schweinfurt. The official publication "The Combined Bomber Offensive" stated: All told more than 300 enemy aircraft participated in the battle and these made 700 separate attacks on the bombers during the principal fight.

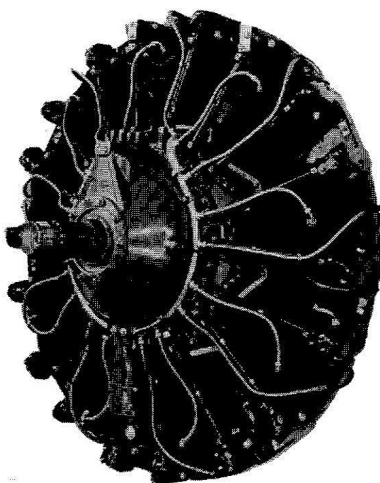
The first enemy maneuver was to attack from the front at very close range with a screen of single engine fighters firing 20MM cannon, and machine guns. Following this screen were a number of twin-engine fighters in formation, firing rockets from projectors suspended under the wings. The rocket firing craft began their attacks at a distance and did not come in nearly so close as the single engine fighters. The Fortress formations were subjected to great numbers of rocket projectiles.

After the single engine fighters had made their initial assault, they refueled and returned to the battle, this time attacking from all directions in an attempt to confuse the gunners in the heavy bombers. Then followed the second effort of the enemy twin engine fighters, which attacked principally from the front and rear. The rocket firing craft seemed to concentrate upon a single combat wing until their ammunition was exhausted. After these maneuvers, all enemy fighters centered their attention on the bombers that had been crippled by the organized attacks.

The 305th Bomb Group was the hardest hit that day en route to Schweinfurt, losing a quarter of the total lost by the Eighth Air Force, fifteen out of eighteen planes. "I watched from my left window as the 305th, flying low and to our left, away from the other groups, lost one plane after another," related Capt. Charles Schoolfield, leader of the 306th Bomb Group formation. "First they got the last plane and then chewed up through the formation until they almost completely destroyed it."

In the fury of the assault it was difficult for Schoolfield, as the group leader, or Lt. Curtis L. Dunlap, flying as tail gunner and formation observer, to keep track of what was happening. When the shooting slackened, Schoolfield was shocked to learn that he had only five planes left. The 306th birds huddled together for mutual protection as they came down the forty second bomb run, tailed only by the 92nd Bomb Group. The 306th dropped its 1,000lb bombs, and sixteen of them landed within a 1,920 ft circle.

Having bombed on a heading of forty five degrees, the planes came around to the left and headed west on a withdrawal route that took them south of Paris and then north toward England. Schoolfield's badly damaged plane staggered along as the leader. At one point, with a fire in the number three engine, Schoolfield



Wright R-1820 Engine for the B-17