



Or Go Down in Flame: A Navigator's Death Over Schweinfurt

W. Raymond Wood

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Though Anglo-American air power may be unrivaled in today's world, this was certainly not the case during Europe's last great war. Decades ago, when our airmen flew against Germany, horrific casualties resulted on both sides, and certain battles fought by the Allied powers can be termed nothing less than calamitous.

"Black Thursday," the second Schweinfurt raid, was the most savagely fought air battle in U.S. history, and a milestone in the course of World War II. On October 14, 1943, the U.S. Eighth Air Force launched nearly 300 bombers deep into German territory to destroy the ball-bearing plants at Schweinfurt, hoping this would bring enemy industry to a halt.

On that clear, sunlit day, hundreds of German fighters raced among the unescorted B-17s, guns blazing, knocking down plane after plane, each with ten men aboard. Other German aircraft flew just outside machine-gun range of the tightly packed formations, lobbing rockets that exploded into thousands of pieces of shrapnel. U.S. bombers that split off from a formation, either wounded or disoriented, became prey for the agile packs of German fighters who would set upon them like wolves thirsty for a kill. By the end of the day, the flight path of the Flying Fortresses was marked across the breadth of Germany by towering pillars of smoke from crashed machines, fiery tributes to 600 lost airmen.

W. Raymond Wood was just a child when his brother was lost in the Schweinfurt raid, and the minute details of this book is the result of his multi-year effort to illuminate "Black Thursday" as no writer has before. He not only reveals the experience of the American flyers in this famous battle, but that of the civilians on the ground and the enemy fighters who flew against the bomber stream, including the Me-110 pilot who in all probability destroyed his brother's plane with a rocket.

Illustrated with 48 pages of photos and original documents, this book examines the air war against the Third Reich, then brings the reader into the center of harrowing air combat, and finally chronicles the little-known operations after war's end to retrieve and identify our dead.

The young navigator who sacrificed his life over Schweinfurt, after first being buried in the German village in which he fell, was at last recovered by RAF and American War Graves teams, who returned his corpse to Nebraska, where his family had anxiously awaited news of the discovery of his remains. In this book, Wood has provided not only an important work of historical research, but also the intimate account of a death in one of World War II's greatest battles.

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