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MEDAL OF HONOR WINNER

TSGT ARCHIBALD MATHIES

The purpose of this research paper is to describe in detail the circumstances surrounding the awarding of the Medal of Honor to TSgt Archibald Mathies, United States Army Air Corps. In addition to the act itself that resulted in the awarding of the Medal of Honor, I will explain the origins of the Medal and the events leading up to the act of heroism. Let's take a look at the origins of the Medal of Honor.

The Medal of Honor is the highest military award for bravery that can be given to any individual in the United States of America. Conceived in the early 1860's and first presented in 1863, the medal has a colorful and inspiring history which has culminated in the standards applied today for awarding this respected honor.

Apart from the great honor which it conveys, there are certain small privileges which accompany the Medal of Honor. Its recipients can, under certain conditions, obtain free air transportation on military air craft within the continental United States on a "space available" basis. A veteran who has been awarded the medal for combat in any war is eligible for a special pension of \$200 per month, starting from the date he applies for the pension. The medal of Honor is presented to its

recipients by a high official "in the name of the Congress of the United States." For this reason it is sometimes called the Congressional Medal of Honor. As a general rule, the Medal of Honor may be awarded for a deed of personal bravery or self-sacrifice above and beyond the call of duty only while the person is a member of the Armed Forces of the United States, or while engaged in military operations involving conflict with an opposing foreign force, or while serving with friendly foreign forces engaged in armed conflict against an opposing armed force in which the United States is not a belligerent party.(3:-) Now that you understand the origins of the Medal of Honor and the significance of it, let's look at the events that led up to the actual act of courage.

The air war over Europe was technically at a stand still with the edge very close to going to the Germans. The Germans rebuilt damaged factories almost as fast as the American bombers could destroy them. Airframe factories and aircraft engine factories were spread out all over Germany. Finally the American intelligence service realized that all of these factories had one thing in common.....they needed ball bearings to manufacture the critical components that supplied the German military aircraft industry. Most of these critical parts manufacturing plants were located in the Schweinfurt, Halberstadt, Oschersleben and Brunswick areas. The decision was made to concentrate a massive bombing effort in that area in an attempt to cripple the German

aircraft manufacturing industry.

General Carl A. Spaatz had been planning raids against the German aircraft industry on a large scale for some time, but it wasn't until January 11, 1944, that weathermen predicted a break in the bad weather over central Germany. To deal the German air force a crushing blow, Spaatz needed a week of good weather. When the January 11 forecast looked promising, 633 B-17s and almost an equal number of other aircraft were sent to attack the ME-109 production factory at Oschersleben, the JU-88 fighter production plant at Halberstadt, and the ME-109 parts and assembly plant at Brunswick. Unfortunately the favorable weather did not hold and nearly half of the bombers were recalled. The others proceeded to their targets as this was the start of probably one of the most important bombing campaigns of the war. An important thing to remember is that without proper fighter escort, the bombers were extremely vulnerable to Luftwaffe attacks in the target area. And on this day, the P-51 escort fighters were present in very small numbers due to the bad weather. They fought valiantly, but due to the superior numbers of Luftwaffe fighters, 34 bombers and their crews were lost. In spite of the heavy losses, photo reconnaissance showed extensive damage to all three targets. However, due to the persistent bad weather, the massive bombing attacks planned for Germany had to be delayed until February. This twist of fate would have a

tragic effect on the life of TSgt Archibald Mathies.

There were still doubts about the weather prior to the first scheduled attacks on February 20. The weather projection for the target area was good, but clouds hung heavy over English bases, and icing conditions were reported at several altitudes. All during the night of February 19, the weather planes checked conditions. After studying weather reports, noting heavy icing predicted during climb out to get above the clouds at eight thousand feet. It was clear that the bombers would have to make the climb on instruments and assemble above the clouds in darkness. The risks in flying in these conditions were so dangerous that the commanders of the fighter squadrons refused to send their planes without a direct order from Spaatz. After much discussion with top advisors General Spaatz decided to order the fighters to take off.

Activity was intense before daybreak as sixteen combat wings of three air divisions, with over one thousand bombers, assembled high above the English coast. In support of the massive effort were seventeen groups of escort fighters from the Eighth and Ninth air forces, plus another sixteen squadrons from the RAF Fighter Command. Spaatz and his staff had selected twelve German aircraft factories as targets, two of them as far away as Poland. Most were in the Brunswick-Leipzig area where assembly plants were located. This central force was escorted all the way, and

some American fighter groups refueled and flew two missions.

For the Germans below watching the six hundred or more bombers overhead, it must have been an awesome sight, and one foretelling their ultimate fate. TSgt Archibald Mathies was part of the largest air armada in history. This was undoubtedly the greatest single formation of aircraft ever flown on one mission in the European theater.

One of the planes taking part in this historic air raid was the B-17 known as the 'Mizpah' in which TSgt Mathies rode as flight engineer. As the plane was approached Leipzig, it was attacked by a squadron of enemy fighters. Mathies and his fellow crew members, manning the 50 caliber machine guns on the Mizpah, fought valiantly. However, in spite of their heroic efforts, an enemy fighter was able to complete a successful strafing run. The copilot was killed instantly. Damage to the plane was so severe that Mathies was sure it was all over when the pilot was wounded and rendered unconscious in a subsequent attack. As the Mizpah fell out of formation, TSgt Mathies, assisted by the navigator, struggled to keep the plane from spinning out of control. Once they were able to regain control of the plane, they managed to fly the airplane back to base and send a Mayday distress call to the flight tower. They asked permission to try and land the stricken bomber now that the rest of the crew had bailed out. The 351st Group's commanding officer, Colonel Eugene A Romig, after taking to the air and

flying alongside the crippled bomber, decided the airplane could not be landed safely. "Abandon the airplane," he told them by radio. Mathies and the navigator told their commander that the pilot was still alive, and that they would not abandon him. Romig reluctantly agreed, fearing that their valiant attempt would be unsuccessful. His fears were justified because Mathies, the navigator and the pilot were killed when the third attempt to land ended disastrously. As a result of his heroic efforts, TSgt Mathies and the navigator were awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously. (1:-,2:-,4:-,5:-)

TSgt Archibald Mathies participated in one of the most important air missions of World War II. He willingly risked and ultimately gave his life in an attempt to save the life of a fellow crew member. He could have easily bailed out with the rest of the crew and was even ordered to bail out later and refused. His unselfish, heroic act made him one of only four enlisted men to win the Medal of Honor during World War II.

The information in this paper should serve as inspiration to all U.S. Air Force enlisted personnel. We should be extremely proud that some of the most heroic acts of World War II were committed by enlisted members who were not seeking this type of recognition. They simply did what they knew was right and what their hearts told them to do.

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