



*The 99th Bomb Group of the 15th Air Force was indentified by the letter "Y" with a diamond shaped surround. The three dashes under the serial number indicated which squadron the ship was assigned to. This aircraft had painted cowl rings as well as a painted fuselage band underneath the star.*

the crew whose chute he saw crack open. But he actually felt Warmer leave the ship. The huge gunner reacted on the bomber like a load of high explosives leaving the bomb bay. Only then did the pilot abandon the burning B-17 and parachute to safety.

The voice reading the citation brought Ben Warmer back to the present. "... while on a bombing mission over Sicily," the captain intoned, "his bomber was attacked by a large number of enemy aircraft."

"When wasn't there a large number of enemy aircraft?" Ben thought. The missions were all the same: the same sights, the same sounds, the same smells and the same tight feeling. Like that memorable mission over Naples. He remembered leaning against the machine gun jutting from the bomber's right waist window. The Flying Fortress had been airborne for five hours and Ben had left his bucket seat to stretch his legs.

The Naples mission had taken place on May 27, 1943—and it had been damned cold at 25,000 feet. The warning came unexpectedly: "Bandits at twelve o'clock high!" Another voice warned that others were sighted at 3 o'clock low.

"Here they come," the aircraft commander shouted. Like a swarm of bees attacking an intruder, the tiny specks in the distance grew bigger. They quickly materialized into Me-109 fighters. The Luftwaffe was up.

Tighten up the formation," ordered the 99th Bomb Group's CO, Colonel Upthegrove, using the command channel that linked the pilots of the 348th and 349th Bomb Squadrons. From the target below, flak rose into the formation of B-17s. Occasionally, the hot, jagged metal would rip through the leather flight suits of American airmen aboard the bombers, killing, wounding and maiming.

"Bandits coming in at nine o'clock high," the top turret gun-

ner of the lead bomber shouted. The B-17 shook from the rapid fire of the twin .50s in the top turret and the single machine gun in the right waist window.

"Ben, passing under at three o'clock low," the topside gunner shouted. Warmer, bundled up in leather and fleece, grabbed the handles of his machine gun and pushed the muzzle down. A plane flashed out from beneath the B-17 and rolled into his sights. He squeezed the trigger and the gun shook in its mount. The enemy fighter seemed to stall in the sky, then it faltered and nosed down, streaming smoke and flame.

Warmer scanned the skies for more enemy fighters. They were swarming all over the formation, but those which flashed across his sights were too far out of range. From his vantage point in the waist gun port, he could see the battle unfold. Thirty of the four-engine bombers had taken off from the 99th's base outside Algiers. Twenty-four were destined to return from that raid on Naples. Warmer was to see two of the bombers go down in flames. No parachutes blossomed. He cursed bitterly. He had

friends in those planes.

"Bandit coming in at six o'clock low," the tail gunner called out. "Breaking left in your direction, Ben." Warmer waited. The Messerschmitt flew right before Warmer's machine-gun muzzle. He squeezed the trigger. Tracers streaked after the climbing German plane, etching a trail of bullet holes that crept to the plexiglass cockpit shield shattering it into pieces and hitting the pilot. The Messerschmitt, out of control slid into its death dive. Warmer gleefully shouted again. Two kills in one day!

As the B-17s moved into their bomb run, the bombardiers took control from the pilots. Each plane unloaded its cargo on the harbor complex below, then it seemed to bounce 30 feet higher, relieved of its bomb burden. The formation of B-17s then turned south and headed out scurrying for North Africa and home. The German fighters chased the bombers for 100 miles, then broke off contact rather than risk running out of fuel.

Warmer felt the sweat start to drip into his eyes as he stood listening to his citation. "Although most of the attack was directed against his part of the bomber Sergeant Warmer remained by his guns and with great accuracy brought down five of the enemy aircraft."

Ben thought that nobody could write about what it really had been like up there on July 5, 1943 . . .

As they approached the target the routine checkout started for the gunners. "Pilot to crew," the aircraft commander called. "Check your suits, oxygen and guns." Warmer made another quick check, making sure that the electric heating leads of his suit were plugged in, with enough wire loose to give him freedom of movement. His oxygen tank pressure read normal and he proceeded to