

load his machine gun. "starboard gun clear." Warmer reported.

"Left gun clear," Worthy followed "Ball turret gun clear," the gunner below sounded off.

Tail gun clear," drawled the Texan in the rear.

"Topside guns clear," the turret gunner above checked in.

"Nose guns clear," the forward gunner chimed in.

The pilot nodded to the co-pilot. The B-17 was ready for action.

There was no fighter escort on this one. It was too long a hop for the single-engine P-40s and P-38s. The 99th was on its own. At Luftwaffe headquarters in Gerbini, radar and sensitive microphones had spotted the B-17s. On the landing strips in the nearby valleys, gray-uniformed flight officers acknowledged the orders to scramble. In pairs and in groups of three and four, the black-crossed Me-109s and Me-110s revved up and then took off, turning south toward the approaching B-17s. Luftwaffe Division III was out to smash the 99th.

The clouds lay far below the bombers, and the pilot on Warmer's plane soon spotted the glob of brown that slowly enlarged into Sicily.

"Test fire guns!" the pilot ordered. Warmer tilted the nose of his machine gun at the pale blue water below and fired. "Starboard gun okay," he sang out. The other gunners also opened up and the sound of machine-gun fire thundered above the steady rumble of the engines.

"Now keep alert," the pilot warned. "We can expect bandits at any time." The coast of Sicily came beneath them. Someone in the flight of bombers had spotted the enemy fighters and relayed the news to his pilot who in turn broke radio silence over the command channel to warn the flight of the oncoming Germans. Warmer's pilot relayed the information to his crew. "We've got 'em at two o'clock high and nine o'clock low," he warned. A moment later he broke in with a warning that "we've now got 'em at six o'clock high.

"Any of you guys spot 'em yet?" he asked his crew. Warmer strained and squinted in the bright sunlight. "I can see 'em now at three o'clock high from starboard," he sounded off.

There was no flak yet. The enemy interceptors would first have their crack at the formation and then pull away over the target. There was no sense in being shot down by one's own flak.

"One coming in at three o'clock!" Warmer shouted and began tracking the fast-moving fighter. The top turret and belly turret gunners swung their guns starboard, toward the Me-109 coming in. If it broke above or below the B-17 in a dive or climb, they'd be ready. Ben squeezed the trigger. The Messerschmitt blew apart in the air. It was Warmer's first kill of the day.

Then the top turret guns opened up. "One coming your way, Ben!," shouted the gunner above. Warmer dropped to his knees and deflected his gun upward, waiting for the German to flash overhead. But it had gone into a steep climb instead, and when he heard the guns above continue firing he knew that the enemy fighter wasn't about to pass in his direction. "I've got it," the top turret gunner shouted. "Confirmed," the co-pilot shouted back as he looked up through the plexiglass roof and watched the Me-109 stall and flash downward straight into the ground.

A gaggle of ten Me-110s suddenly appeared off to the right. "A bunch of 'em at two o'clock high!" Ben shouted. "I see 'em," the top turret gunner answered. He swung his turret guns in the direction of the attacking flight.

One Me-109 flashed in front of Warmer's gun, too fast for him to snap off a burst. Another bore in behind it, machine guns blinking. Ben sighted down his barrel and tracked it for a moment before opening up. His tracers slammed into the engine housing and the propeller suddenly began to spin slowly. He had knocked out the engine. The enemy fighter slowed to a glide and Warmer was all set to rake it again when the cockpit hatch was pulled back and the pilot clambered out. "I got number four!" Ben hollered. He watched the German bail out.

"Ben, one coming your way," Worthy shouted from behind. Two fighters flashed overhead, one trailing smoke from Worthy's gun. Warmer stitched a bullet pattern through the German's tail section, chopping the elevator and rudder into pieces. The plane quickly nosed down.

The inside of the B-17 was littered with empty shells that rolled across the floor. Warmer took a deep breath. Another German fighter came in, and he felt the pounding of bullets. Instinctively, he pulled back and from the corner of his eye saw sunlight pouring in through the jagged holes that appeared beside him. "Close," he muttered.

Two more planes attacked and he swung the machine gun to meet the threat from 2 o'clock. The lead plane seemed to be plunging right at him, spitting fire from the leading edge of its thin wings. The tracers reached out for him and he tensed awaiting the slugs that would hit the B-17's thin aluminum skin and braces. But the tracers fell short. The German loomed in his sight. He squeezed the trigger and the fighter broke left and down, trailing oily black smoke and fire. "I've got another," Warmer called out.

Another fighter came at his gun port and he led it for a brief second before opening fire. But the pilot was gun shy. He broke off and slid out of sight.

Ben's B-17 was under attack from all sides now. The voices on the intercom were blurred and confusing. "Watch that baby at nine high!" the pilot shouted. "Two bandits at two o'clock," the copilot shouted. "Watch 'em Ben." "Got 'em," Warmer replied.

Two coming in at six o'clock low," the belly gunner said. "Two coming in at six o'clock straight," the pilot shouted after spotting the attacking pair in his rear view window. "C'mon, what the hell's the matter with that tail gun!" The accordion sleeve that joined Warmer's gun to the plexiglass covering his gun port suddenly whipped away and sub zero wind from the slip stream slashed through the gap and hit Ben's face. His goggles clouded up and he ripped them off. Behind him he heard Worthy call for help. "Something wrong with my oxygen," Warmer's partner gasped. "C'mon, Ben," he coughed.

Warmer quickly played out his own oxygen line and unplugged his electric suit and intercom. He tripped and fell on the loose shell casings that rolled along the floor like marbles, but made it across to Worthy. It took him just a moment to see that enemy bullets had hit Worthy's oxygen bottle. There was a spare nearby. He ripped it off the wall and plugged in Worthy's hose. It took just a moment for the oxygen to take effect. Worthy nodded that he was okay. Wrapping a belt of bullets around his neck and shoulders in order to feed his guns, he continued his deadly fire and accounted for two more enemy aircraft.

The B-17 banked sharply and headed south in the direction of home. The formation of bombers tightened up again. The fight wasn't over. Enemy fighters were certain to be waiting for them.

"Here they come," Warmer's pilot called out. "Watch it, Ben,"