
The Only Enlisted Man To Become An Ace

This story comes from the 99th Bomb Group. The 99th was one of the B-17's groups assigned to the 15th Air Force. The actions described in this narrative did take place, but the verifying of claims of aircraft shot down in 1943 were not as strict as put in place later to reduce the number of false claims. At the time of this incident the 99th was assigned to the 12th Air force, based in North Africa, and the mission was to Sicily to bomb a large enemy airfield. Needless to say the raid stirred up a hornet's nest of Me-109s and FW 190s.

All of the B-17 groups were assigned to the 5th Bombardment Wing, and were identified by a "Y" painted high on the verticle fin. The 99th can be identified by a diamond surround of the "Y".



Ben Warmer was nervous. Two generals were there to honor him. His squadron and considerable headquarters brass were standing in formation in his honor. They were present to decorate him for shooting down seven Nazi fighter planes on one mission. Moreover, General Spaatz had earlier conferred on Big Ben Warmer the title of "Ace"—making him the only enlisted man ace to come out of World War II!

***For extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an armed enemy .
" The captain read the citation to the assembled formation. To Ben Warmer it seemed like yesterday.***

On July 5, 1943, he had rolled out of his sack in the tent area about a mile from the airstrip. It was 0300 hours and the roar of cold engines being turned over by the ground crews shattered the silence. Ben's crew was scheduled to fly a mission later that day. At the time he awoke, he had no idea where his squadron would drop its bombs, other than that it would be somewhere in Sicily.

For days, this Mediterranean island just south of Italy had been undergoing a pounding from the air and from the sea in a prelude to invasion by the U.S. Army. Sometimes the missions to Sicily were hazardous; sometimes they were milk runs.

At the pre-flight briefing, the officers and enlisted men mingled and sat together, each crew sitting in its own tight little knot. The group's commanding officer, Colonel Fay. R. Uptegrove, strode onto the jerry-built stage, but nobody shouted at the men to rise to attention. The 99th was not a chicken outfit. The briefing was routine, but the announcement of the target caused a stir: Gerbini!

Gerbini was a Sicilian hornet's nest—headquarters of Luftwaffe Air Division III, one of the top Nazi fighter commands in all of Europe. The Gerbini complex of fighter airstrips was filled with sleek Me- 109s and -110s that guarded the approaches to Italy. Its planes had always been effective against Allied marauders. Gerbini had to be knocked out; the 99th was given the mission.

It was still cold and dark when the 99th officers completed their briefing and were driven to their aircraft. Within hours the hardstands on the air base would be cruelly hot, but now the men