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shivered in the sub-freezing temperatures.

Their electrically heated flying suits would remain unplugged until the engines were turning over and could provide the necessary power to heat the suits.

Ben Warmer checked his side of the B-17 from the outside. His field of fire was clear. He hunched down beneath the low-slung belly of the Flying Fortress, reached for the handles on each side of the hatch and pulled himself up into the plane. Usually there were jokes when Warmer pulled himself aboard. Today there were none. The men knew that Gerbini was going to be a tough run.

Each gunner methodically checked his position and his gun or his gun turret. At his right waist position, Warmer switched on the small overhead light and went through his check list, mentally checking off the items that could spell the difference between life and death for him, the crew and the bomber: oxygen mask; radio headphones; the electric leads of his flying suit. He looked like a giant grizzly and moved slowly in the confining flight clothing. But without the heavy and uncomfortable flying suits men could not live in the rarified atmosphere on high altitude bombing runs, where the temperature was 72° below zero and lack of oxygen could cause a blackout in seconds. On more than one occasion a careless gunner had removed one of his gloves and had touched the aluminum rim of the open gunport with a bare hand, only to pull it back as the searing cold turned his flesh to a white, dead chunk of ice.

Warmer checked his gun. He slammed the bolt back and forth a few times and its well oiled track and easy movement sounded satisfying as his gun swiveled easily on its mount. Then he carefully checked the ammo boxes and the neatly folded belts of cartridges that snuggled inside the wooden boxes. By the time the ground crew and gunners had checked out their end of the already gassed and bombed-up Fort, the officers were piling out of jeeps and weapons carriers. Within minutes they were aboard and the B-17 was buttoned up for the mission. The engines began to cough and then turned over.

The pilot and co-pilot each went through their long checklist while the heavily loaded bomber rumbled along the taxi line to the strip itself. It was still an hour and a half before daylight, when the green flare was fired from the control tower. The B-17s revved their engines and moved down the field. Ponderously, they lifted off the pierced steel planking that paved the landing strip set in the desert sand and were airborne. Wheels were retracted, and the planes started the long, slow climb toward the assembly point over the Mediterranean.

Sergeant Ed Worthy sat hunched on the jump seat next to his gun on the left directly across from Warmer. "I hear that the Krauts will be waiting for us on this one," he said to nobody in particular.

Ben hardly heard Worthy. His thoughts had turned to home and to the past. He was a giant of a man who had never worried about his great size until he was warned by an officer that it might keep him out of combat. At UCLA, Ben had played varsity football. After he was graduated from college in 1937, Ben was at loose ends. The world was in a turmoil, and Ben, rejecting his father's advice to become a lawyer, instead became a Secret Service agent. His father, a Superior Court judge in Los Angeles, helped Ben get his assignment: bodyguard to Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau.

Five years later, America went to war. Ben enlisted in April,

1942. He had always been interested in flying, but there were no cockpits that could hold his 275 pounds. Assignment officers in what was then the U.S. Army Air Corps marveled at his physique and planned to make him a physical education instructor. But Ben Warmer wanted to fight. "Too tall," one personnel captain told him. "Too heavy," said another officer. Ben was downcast. Most of his friends were in combat units, but all he had to show for his time in the service was a Good Conduct Medal and letters of commendation telling him what a great Physical Ed instructor he was.

One day Ben wandered onto the weapons range. Fledgling gunners were receiving an introduction to the .50-caliber machine gun when one of the instructors called Ben over to heft the 65 pound weapon. "How about letting me fire it?" Ben asked. The gunnery sergeant said all right. Ben swung the gun on its mount and sighted at the target. He held the handles tightly and squeezed the trigger. The men on the firing line stood awed as Warmer scored hit after hit.

Veteran gunnery instructors knew that too often "the gun fires the man rather than the man fires the gun." However, in the massive fists of Ben Warmer, the .50-caliber machine gun was as docile as a .22 rifle. Seeing the crowd of enlisted men standing on the rifle range an officer came over to see what was up. When he saw Warmer's mastery of the machine gun, he was overwhelmed. "You're a natural as an instructor," he said.

But I want to fight," Warmer replied. Another job as an instructor, even as a gunnery instructor, would be too much to take, but he took it. He went through gunnery school, hoping against hope that he'd be shipped out to a bomber unit rather than to a training command. It was early March, 1943, when Ben won a reprieve from a Stateside assignment. The battle for North Africa was in full swing at the time, and the Germans were rolling up victory after victory, while their Luftwaffe used its air superiority to stop U.S. bombers. More planes and crews were rushed to the war zone. Among the reinforcements was Ben Warmer.

By the time the North African campaign had ended, with the destruction of Rommel's Afrika Korps, Ben Warmer was a veteran of 12 combat missions. The 12th Air Force then turned its attention across the Mediterranean to Sicily and Italy.

Warmer remembered this first mission well— Pantelleria, a 32-square-mile island off the Italian boot. It housed an important Luftwaffe fighter base and nearly 15,000 heavily armed Axis troops. In early May, 1943, the 12th and 9th Air Forces began the task of reducing the island to rubble. For ten days and nights, B-17s, A-26s, U.S. Navy dive bombers and Royal Air Force bombers pounded the island with high explosives. But during the first four days, the island's air defense force mauled the lumbering Flying Forts. Five Me-109s cut Ben's plane out of the formation and proceeded to chop it up.

After two passes, two of the B-17's propellers were idly spinning and oily black smoke gushed from one of the shot-up engines. A third pass by the Nazi fighters severed the control cables to the rudder and it began flapping in the windstream. Enemy machine guns raked the wounded bomber fore and aft. Luckily nobody was killed. They managed to fight off the Nazi fighters and limped back to North Africa. But the plane was too badly damaged to land. "Let's bail out," the pilot snapped into the intercom mike. "Jump clear as soon as you can." Like a good captain, the pilot stayed until last. The bail-out sequence called for Warmer to jump just before the pilot. The pilot counted each member of