



the top turret gunner warned. "Three o'clock high." The Messerschmitt dove in hard. The steep angle of his dive caused the Nazi pilot to undershoot his target, however. His tracers arched beneath the belly of the Fort. The enemy pilot jerked his nose up and the tracers lifted toward the B-17 and Warmer's amidships position. Ben returned fire from what seemed like point-blank range, but before he had finished firing at the enemy plane, his machine gun clicked empty for the third time that morning.

The nearest box of ammunition belts was stacked ten feet away. The bombers were now at 10,000 feet and Ben had no need of his oxygen mask or his electric suit. He ripped off his mask and yanked the oxygen hose coupling and the heating lead wire from their plugs on the fuselage wall. Stumbling across the shell-littered floor, he made it to the ammo boxes, grabbed some, and returned to his position.

There was no time to clamp the ammo box in place. Instead, he jerked the ammo belt out of the box and loaded his gun with it. Then he draped the belt across his shoulders—just in time to receive a warning that more planes were boring in toward his right waist gun.

"What's the matter with the right waist gun?" the pilot called. Worthy explained what had happened and reported that Ben was hooking up again back at his right waist position.

The Luftwaffe had sent 100 fighters against the 99th. In a matter of minutes, 22 had been knocked down or damaged. But there was still the bomb run and ten minutes to go before the target appeared. Meanwhile, two of the B-17s had been shot down.

Enemy fighters were circling around the tight formation of B-17s like Indians attacking a wagon train. The object was to break up the formation of bombers, each of whose guns protected the next B-17 in the flight. A gaggle of 110s came out of the sun, and as soon as they came within sighting distance, Worthy opened up. "I've got one," he shouted, "and they're coming your way, Ben!"

One by one the enemy flight passed overhead, within range

of Warmer's gun. He squeezed the trigger and his tracer chased from the tail along the fuselage, hammering into the cockpit of a German fighter. It peeled over, the pilot dead or severely wounded, and dived straight down, out of control. "Another one," Warmer shouted again.

"Confirmed," the top turret gunner snapped before warning that more bandits were coming in from six o'clock high. Ben Warmer had shot down five German planes in one day—and the bombers were just reaching the target!

Bomb bay doors open," the navigator said. "Bombs away," the bombardier announced as the plane lifted markedly. "Now let's go home"

The citation began to sound like a parody of a wartime movie, the hero grabbing a machine gun and firing it cradled in his arms. Ben

blushed as the captain read on:

Two Me-109s shied off and passed overhead so that the top turret gunner was able to finish off one. A third German passed over the bomber and into Warmer's sights. He opened up and his bullets struck the Messerschmitt before it passed out of range. The enemy fighter suddenly erupted into a fireball. Number six that day for Ben Warmer.

"Coming at you, Ben," the belly gunner shouted from below. The giant figure with the ammo belt draped across his right shoulder swung the .50-caliber gun easily, waiting for the enemy fighter. There it was. The Messerschmitt veered off and sailed across his line of vision. He swung the machine gun along the line of flight of the Nazi plane, like a duck hunter leading his quarry. He had a bull's eye on the cockpit. A bit of pressure on the trigger and the tracers led into the cockpit of the 109. It winged over and fell, with a dead pilot at the controls.

By this time the Germans had lost half of their fighters. Five of the B-17s were down, and three others were losing altitude.

The last enemy plane shot down was number 9 of the day for Warmer and victory number 13 for his crew. Of the 100 enemy fighters that tried to stop the 99th, 42 had been shot down. Ben's record, which led to his DSC and later a lieutenant's commission, still stands. It was the greatest single feat by any U.S. aerial gunner in World War II.

Nine confirmed kills raised him to a place among America's eagles. His name now appears alongside those of the great aces—Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, Captain Joe Foss, Captain Bob Johnson and Major "Pappy" Boyington. He had proved that you don't have to have "brass" to be an ace.

Warmer, a former Secret Service bodyguard won the DSC for downing seven planes on one mission.