

## Air and Space this Week

### Item of the Week

## WAIST GUNNER BENJAMIN WARMER

Originally appeared July 3, 2023

**KEY WORDS:** Benjamin Warmer Waist Gunner B-17 Gerbini 99<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group  
348<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron Navarin Field Algeria

*Pilots were not the only aviators who could, and did, shoot down opposing aircraft. Bombers carried a number of aerial gunners, some of whom racked up impressive records. **Eighty years ago this week (July 5)**, a B-17 waist gunner named Ben Warmer shot down a total of seven enemy fighter planes attacking his bomber. His squadron was based in Algeria, and their objective was to attack targets on Sicily and Italy. Their 18<sup>th</sup> mission was to bomb the Gerbini Airfield complex on Sicily, on July 5, 1943, Ben Warmer's eighth wedding anniversary. Gerbini was an important aerodrome, heavily defended by fighter planes. Big Ben shot down seven of them that day and two more before his tour was over.*

### PILOTS ARE NOT THE ONLY ACES!

Combat pilots love success, and those who fly well and score victories are given a lot of publicity and peer respect, and rightfully so. Especially noteworthy is the five-victory milestone, which confers "Ace" status. But pilots aren't the only ones who shoot down opposing aircraft. In World War I, the Red Baron may have gotten a lot of press, but aerial gunners also began scoring victories; at least one American gunner reached Ace status. The large bombers of WWII carried a number of defensive gun positions, as many as five "full-time" gunners were aboard (other guns could be manned by flight personnel). The B-17 and B-24 had a number of hotly-contested fights, as did many RAF heavy bombers, so it should come as no surprise that 11 American gunners and 18 RAF gunners scored 5 or more combat victories!

### THE FIRST AERIAL COMBAT VICTORY

**The very first aerial combat victory ever was due to fire from a gunner** on a flimsy-looking two-seat Voisin biplane. The plane's pilot was Joseph Franz and the mechanic/gunner was Louis Quénault. They were on patrol near Reims, France, on October 5, 1914, when they encountered a two-seat Aviatik biplane. Franz pursued, and Quénault fired away with his newly-mounted machine gun. The German pilot was killed, and the observer died in the resulting crash. Franz would be awarded the Legion of Honor, and Quénault received the *Médaille militaire*.

## **AIMING STRATEGY AND FRANGIBLE BULLETS**

Aiming correctly was, of course, essential for effective aerial gunnery. Pilots had to maneuver their entire fighter plane in order to fire on a foe, and they had to be able to “lead” the target appropriately (firing ahead of the target so that it would be in position by the time the bullets got there). The skill for the pilot was pretty intuitive, and was honed by a lot of trap and skeet shooting.

Firing aft-ward or off to the side from a moving platform required training and practice to do well. A fighter making an approach from anywhere behind its target typically comes in a trajectory called a “pursuit curve.” A gunner firing aft would have to aim between the pursuing plane and his bomber’s own tail. Learning to do so instinctively was a difficult, but important, goal. The tail gunner’s aiming was an easier setup than the situation faced by the top or waist gunners aiming aft.

Pilots could practice by firing at targets towed by another plane, but that tactic wouldn’t be useful for a rear-firing gunner. An ingenious engineering solution was created later in the War, where an aircraft would have its leading edges lined with electrical plates, wired to a power source and a light in the plane’s spinner. Gunnery trainees would fire actual 50 cal. machine guns at the plane, but use a “frangible” bullet, one that has the weight and shape to follow the same trajectory that a real bullet would, but would break apart (relatively) harmlessly on impact. Hits on the target plates would cause the nose light, giving the trainee instant feedback as to their accuracy. Needless to say, the target plane had additional armor and very bullet-proof glass!

## **BENJAMIN FRANKLIN WARMER III**

Ben Warmer was born on August 27, 1914, in southern California. Not much is known of his childhood apart from his father’s working his way up the California judicial system. By his late teens, Ben had matured into a very big guy, 6’5” and some 225 pounds. That isn’t so much by today’s standards, but in the 1930s, that was huge. He received a scholarship to attend Berkeley in 1933, but a career-ending injury ended his sports career. He had to work to continue school even part time, but persevered and had all his course work, save foreign language, for a political science degree. During this time period he had several robust jobs, coached at several levels, and was a professional boxer.

He enrolled at the Hastings Law School in San Francisco in late 1941. He still lacked an undergraduate degree, but the enrollment invitation may have taken into account that his father was now a California Superior Court judge... After Pearl Harbor, Warmer moved to join up. The Army Air Corps had uniforms big enough to fit him, and he enlisted on April 18, 1942. Records of his early military service were lost in the 1973 Federal Records Center fire in St. Louis, but we do know that Warmer’s Basic Training site was Sheppard Field in Texas, after which he went to gunnery specialist school in Lowry Field, Colorado, in September, 1942.

Warmer was assigned to the 348<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron of the 99<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, where he became the right waist gunner of the B-17 piloted by 2Lt. J.H. Drake. His plane and 34 others were flown on the South Atlantic route to Marrakech, Morocco in March, 1943, where they would begin combat operations. It would take several weeks to get established enough to be operational.

The first combat mission (May 3) flown by the 348<sup>th</sup> did not go well. It was meant to be a seven-plus hour round-trip flight to bomb targets around Bizerte, Tunisia. The weather was poor, the bombers couldn't find the target area, and they became separated. The navigator on Drake's B-17 got them close to base, but they ran out of fuel and had to make a jump for it. At night. Exactly one month after the crew of the *Lady Be Good* overflew their base, ran out of fuel, jumped, and died trying to walk out of the Sahara. For more on the *Lady's* sad story, see: <http://www.airandspacethisweek.com/assets/pdfs/20210329%20Lady%20Be%20Good.pdf>.

Drake, Warmer, and the rest of the crew were lucky. They landed pretty close to their base and had little trouble returning "home," albeit without their bomber.

## THE RAID ON GERBINI

Attacking "Fortress Europe" via France was one approach used in the ETO. Attacking from the south through the Axis' "soft underbelly" was another. Northern Africa was a useful base for attacking Axis positions on Sicily, and Warmer's unit, the 99<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, moved to Navarin Field, Algeria, from which they would fly bombing missions to the north, both to interdict supply lines to the Rommel's North Afrika Corps and to soften up Sicily for invasion.

Aerodromes, transportation facilities, supply dumps, and other military infrastructure were the targets. The 99<sup>th</sup> laid on a bombing raid against an airfield complex at Gerbini, just south of Mt. Etna, on the morning of July 5, 1943. It would be Warmer's 18<sup>th</sup> mission. Twenty-seven B-17s flew east over Tunis, picked up an escort of ~60 RAF Spitfires over Malta, and then proceeded north. Gerbini was an important base, defended by a mixed set of aircraft, lots of them.

Three B-17s were shot down by defending fighters during the run into the target zone. Warmer and at least one other witness reported that German fighters strafed American airmen in their parachutes.

Enemy fighters seemed to be everywhere, but those who ventured close to Warmer paid a heavy price. Big Ben was a whirlwind, handling his 65-pound machine gun like it was a toy. Twelve-hundred rounds later, **seven** German fighters were gone from the skies forever.

Pilots and gunners often overclaim during the heat of an intense battle, so an amazing claim like seven fighters was not accepted without rigorous confirmation evidence. Everyone involved with the mission was interrogated, and Big Ben's seven wins were confirmed. He would go on to score two more aerial victories over Naples before he finished his fifty-mission tour. And the 99<sup>th</sup> received a Presidential Unit Citation for the mission (a very big deal!).

Seven victories on a mission, by an enlisted man no less, attracted the press. The *New York Times* and *Stars and Stripes* both wrote stories of his feat, noting that Ben had named his

machine gun, "The Judge," in honor of his father. On August 27, 1943 (his 29<sup>th</sup> birthday), Fifteenth Air Force CO Carl Spaatz pinned the DSC on Ben's chest, earned by his actions at Gerbini. They, and his two additional victories, led to an additional award, the DFC. Spaatz also noted that "gunners are not normally considered Aces, but [he] is so listed because he was so designated by his command." At least some other commands agreed. In addition to the Presidential Unit Citation, and the DSC and the DFC previously mentioned, Warmer also was awarded a Purple Heart and 20 air medals.

Warmer's fiftieth and last mission was on October 10, 1943. He returned to the United States and went on a major war bond drive traveling show, and later was a guest lecturer at the Nevada Advanced Gunnery School in Tonopah. He was commissioned as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant on September 30, 1944, and honorably discharged from service on July 2, 1945. Other than his participation in war bond drives, he never received any public recognition of his contribution to WWII.

After service, Big Ben returned to his native southern California, where he had a successful business career. In retirement, he really enjoyed deep-sea fishing. He succumbed to a heart attack on December 6, 1977; his ashes are interred in Ontario, California.

## OTHER ACE GUNNERS

No other aerial gunner has accomplished an "Ace-in-a-day" record, but other aerial gunners have victory totals that justify "Ace" status or more. Big Ben stands ninth in total aerial gunner victories for Allied fighters. Five RAF gunners reached "Double Ace" status; two American gunners were "Triple Aces," and another was a "Double." All had more victories than Warmer's nine.

Topping the list was Michael Arooth, a B-17 tail-gunner in the 8<sup>th</sup> AF, with 17 victories. Warmer is the Allied list's only waist gunner; most of others were tail-, top-, or ball turret gunners. Two American Ace gunners were SFC Richard Thomas and ARM2 Paul Ganshirts, both front turret gunners on Navy PBVs, each with five victories.

Sgt. Quinlan, the tail-gunner of the famed B-17, *Memphis Belle*, had eight confirmed victories. SSgt. Maynard Smith, a B-17 waist gunner, scored no aerial victories, but he still earned a Medal of Honor for his actions over France in May, 1943 (covered in an A+StW Item of the Week [here](#)).

Accurate record-keeping is difficult, but German and Italian air combat losses against bombers were severe. The bombers of the Eighth Air Force alone claimed over 6,200 confirmed kills. RAF bombers claimed nearly that many.

## REFERENCES

First Combat Victory: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/air-space-magazine/first-aerial-combat-victory-180952933>

National Museum of the USAF: <https://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/Visit/Museum-Exhibits/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/1519669/gunners>

The Free Library:

<https://www.thefreelibrary.com/%22Big+Ben%22%3a+Sergeant+Benjamin+F.+Warmer+III%2c+flying+ace.-a0108551526>

National Museum of the Mighty Eighth Air Force: <https://www.mightyeighth.org/blog-post-4/>

War History Online: <https://www.warhistoryonline.com/military-vehicle-news/the-forgotten-aces-air-gunner-aces-of-wwii-image-heavy.html?chrome=1>

Roster of Allied Ace Aerial Gunners: <https://ww2aircraft.net/forum/threads/air-gunner-aces.27065>

Watry, Charles and Duane Hall, 1986, *Aerial Gunners: The Unknown Aces of World War II* (paperback), ISBN-13: 978-0914379011

Air & Space Forces Magazine: <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/0491gunners>

Together We Served: [here](#)

Scott AFB Support Force Squadron: <https://375fss.com/MoreInfo/GYMS/Warmer-Fitness-Center.php#!>

Bob Penoyer: [https://www.bobpenoyer.com/raid\\_on\\_gerbini.htm](https://www.bobpenoyer.com/raid_on_gerbini.htm)

History Collection website: <https://historycollection.com/americas-aerial-gunners-in-world-war-ii-were-believed-to-be-an-unstoppable-force>. NOTE: The original meaning of the B-17s nickname, *Flying Fortress*, did not refer to its aerial gunnery defensive protection is stated in this reference, but was rather due to its planned role as a scout/bomber to protect our shores.

There was even a 1943 movie entitled "Aerial Gunner!" Two soldiers in air gunnery school vie for the same woman, but their tough instructor bore down hard on them to prepare them for the Pacific... With Keith Richards (not that one) and Robert Mitchum in an uncredited role.

See: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0035614>

Last Edited on 2 July 2023