Crash-Landing at the Rhine

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

COURTESY OF CHRISTOPHER WARNER

Tom Warner piloted a glider like the one at left in the largest single-day airborne operation in history on March 24, 1945. Note the landing deterrent known as "Rommel's asparagus."

A DOUGLAS C-47 SKYTRAIN WAS FLYING through smoke from German anti-aircraft fire over Wesel, Germany, when Flight Officer Thomas Warner cut loose the tow line connecting it to his Waco glider. Then the 23-year-old Arkansan began his pre-landing ritual by kicking out the glider's escape-hatch panel, which would allow him to exit quickly—assuming he survived the rough touchdown, snipers, and spray of machine-gun fire on the ground. Making a safe arrival even less certain were rows of "Rommel's asparagus," logs planted in the ground, sticking upward, to make Allied landings especially treacherous.

Code-named Operation Varsity, the attack in which Warner was participating on March 24, 1945, was the largest one-day airborne operation in history, sending the first invading force since Napoleon across the Rhine. The objective was to breach Nazi lines near Wesel, Hamminkeln, and other nearby villages, and push toward the German capital of Berlin to end the war. The operation began with glider pilots landing ahead of paratroopers behind the well-fortified enemy lines to deliver troops and equipment. High casualties were expected. At the controls of the engineless planes known as "flying coffins" sat a unique breed of soldier serving as both pilot and infantryman—a situation that more or less doubled the odds of being killed.

On that hazy March morning, Tom Warner, flying with the 99th Squadron of the Ninth Air Force's 441st Troop Carrier Wing, survived a controlled crash-landing and a barrage of German bullets. Hundreds of other glider pilots were injured or killed. In the end, the Allies captured more than 3,000 German soldiers while helping clear the way for the advance toward Berlin.

Warner's efforts in Operation Varsity, and in September 1944's Operation Market Garden in Holland, earned the Distinguished Unit Citation, Silver Air Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster, four Bronze Service Stars, a Bronze Service Arrowhead, and the Order of William Orange Lanyard. Warner died in 1999.

Submitted by CHRISTOPHER WARNER, *great-nephew of Thomas Warner.*

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