

# First of the Few

On his first combat mission, Sgt. Maynard Smith earned a unique place in the Air Force heritage of valor.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

**E**IGHTH Air Force bombers and fighters began arriving in England during the spring of 1942. The first heavy bomber mission against targets in Occupied Europe was flown on August 17, 1942. Maj. Gen. Ira Eaker, head of VIII Bomber Command and soon to lead the Eighth Air Force, had high hopes of sending massive formations against the Luftwaffe and Germany's war-supporting industry before the end of the year. That was not to be.

The buildup of men and planes was slower than anticipated. Half of Eaker's force was sent to North Africa in late 1942 and early '43, and what was left in England was frequently diverted in a fruitless campaign against German submarine pens along the Bay of Biscay on the west coast of France. The pens, with their eleven-foot-thick reinforced concrete roofs, were impervious to any bombs the AAF had at that time, and were heavily defended by antiaircraft guns and fighters.

On May 1, 1943, Sgt. Maynard Smith, a B-17 ball-turret gunner known to his friends as "Snuffy," participated in a memorable strike against the pens at Saint-Nazaire, familiar to bomber crews as Flak City. He was assigned to the 423d Squadron of the 306th Bombardment Group, one of the Eighth's battle-tested outfits, based at Thurleigh. Smith enjoyed two distinctions: As a replacement, he was on his first combat mission, and at age thirty-two he was ten years older than most of the rest of the crew.

Shortly after bombs-away, Smith's B-17 was hit repeatedly by

flak and cannon fire from FW-190s. The oxygen system and intercom were shot out, and intense fires broke out in the radio compartment and waist section. The situation became so critical that the waist gunners and radio operator bailed out into the sea. The tail gunner had been hit in the chest by shell fragments and was in serious condition.

Smith decided to stay with the plane, tend to the tail gunner as best he could, and fight the fire. He was isolated from the crew up front and at first did not know whether they

had bailed out or been killed, but since the B-17 seemed to be holding formation, he assumed that the pilot, at least, was alive and at the controls.

As long as the fighter attacks continued, Smith alternated between manning the waist guns, fighting the fire, and helping the tail gunner. When heat in the radio compartment began to detonate machine-gun ammunition, he threw exploding .50-caliber belts out through a hole burned in the side of the fuselage.

The attacks by fighters finally stopped, and Smith concentrated on the fire. When all extinguishers were empty, he wrapped himself in protective clothing and put out the fire with his hands. Then, fearing that the heat had weakened the B-17's fuselage, the short, slight Smith threw out everything in the rear of the plane that wasn't too hot, too heavy, or bolted down. With a heroic assist from Snuffy Smith, the battle-scarred Fortress made it across the Channel to a landing near Land's End, the extreme southwest tip of England. That B-17 had flown its last mission.

Six weeks later, Sgt. Maynard H. Smith was awarded the Medal of Honor, the first enlisted airman ever to win the nation's highest decoration. He is one of only five enlisted airmen—four in World War II and one in Vietnam—to be so honored.

After the Saint-Nazaire strike, Sergeant Smith flew five more missions before being grounded. By that time, the submarine menace had faded, some of the pens had been blown up by rudimentary guided glide bombs, and the Air Force acknowledged that further attacks would be a waste of effort.

Those superhardened, heavily defended targets had tested the skill and bravery of many airmen, among them a small but courageous sergeant who was first of the few among his peers to wear the Medal of Honor. ■



On July 15, Maynard "Snuffy" Smith, by then a staff sergeant, received the Medal of Honor from Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson.