

Gunners



USAF photo



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Virtually from the beginning, military airplanes have had gunners—waist gunners, tail gunners, nose gunners, and more. The position reached its apogee in World War II, when USAAF fielded 297,000 of them to ride shotgun on heavy bombers. The photo above, from March 1944, depicts one of the Air Force's most famous gunners, Sgt. Maynard H. "Snuffy" Smith, who earned the Medal of Honor for heroism on a May 1943 B-17 mission over France. He saved the lives of six wounded crew members, put out a fire raging through the bomber, and used .50 calibre machine guns to drive off wave after wave of attacking German fighters. Inset: Gunners remained important in later conflicts. Here, Korean War-era B-26 Invader gunner Sgt. C. W. Ledbetter sports an A-2 jacket emblazoned with bomb images signifying the number of missions he has flown.