

# A Survivor's Heart

By Laurie Snyder



Young Morton C. Warnow Photo provided by Kimmen Sjölander, Ph.D.

*"We shall draw from the heart of suffering itself the means of inspiration and survival."*

— Winston Churchill

When a parent dies, the journey from sadness to acceptance is frequently a challenging one – even for adult offspring. Memories resurface as closets are emptied. New mysteries emerge as letters or photos are discovered in desk drawers or dusty attics.

The odyssey of Lafayette resident, Kimmen Sjölander, Ph.D., a professor in the University of California, Berkeley's departments of Bioengineering and Plant and Microbial Biology, began when a woman in Texas, Helen Milewits, found a Purple Heart bearing the name of Morton Warnow among the possessions of her own deceased father.

An 8th U.S. Army Air Force private during World War II, Milewits' father, Nathan Beckman, personalized medals for his unit's wounded. In this case, Beckman misspelled the name as "Warwow" and then inexplicably brought the medal home. After he died, Milewits asked Purple Hearts Reunited ([www.purpleheartsreunited.org](http://www.purpleheartsreunited.org)) to find the man who had earned it. PHR phoned Sjölander after determining that her father, Morton C. Warnow, was its rightful owner.

Born in Brooklyn in 1925, Warnow enlisted in 1943. Assigned to the USAAF's 612th Squadron, 401st Bombardment Group H in Deenethorpe, England, he participated in successful strikes on Pas de Calais, and was aboard the Dynamite John when

36 planes hit Peenemünde – Germany's rocket manufacturing hub – on July 18, 1944.

Then, his luck changed. "Sgt. Morton C. Warnow, waist gunner on a B-17 who had been reported missing in action July 20, is a German prisoner, having been shot down in a raid over Germany. He is the son of Mark Warnow, conductor heard on CBS," announced the Sept. 11, 1944 issue of "Broadcasting: The Weekly Newsmagazine of Radio Broadcast Advertising."

"Our plane got two engines knocked out after we dropped our bombs" on Leipzig, said Staff Sgt. Ken Fritts in "One Story of a B-17 Aircraft Combat Crew – WWII," a memoir penned by the plane's pilot, Lt. Jack Frederick. A third lost power on the way home. "We had a choice: ditch that B-17 in the North Sea or bail out" over Holland. "The Nazis were shooting at us in our parachutes as we were floating down. I landed on my back in a farmer's garden. ... As I hit the road I looked up and here comes a Hitler Youth in uniform on a bicycle carrying a sub-machine gun."

They were interrogated harshly – Warnow even more so. His dog tag identified him as Jewish. "He had a lot of mistreatment as you can imagine, but he would never talk about it," said Sjölander.

Afterward, the Germans sent the officers to Stalag Luft I and the enlisted from one prisoner of war holding pen to another – and via train boxcars to Stalag Luft IV. "When we got to camp we had a lot of men injured by bayo-

nets and by dogs biting them," said Fritts. Separated again into two groups, they spent 19 months there, enfeebled by poor food, flimsy clothing and the camp's open latrines, unheated huts and inferior medical facilities before being forced into winter death treks across Poland, Czechoslovakia and Germany with 80,000 western Allied POWs.

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Above the purple, enamel heart with its profile of George Washington garbed in Continental Army uniform, lies the Washington family's coat of arms set between two sprays of leaves. "For Military Merit" is inscribed on the reverse – along with the medal winner's name. Medal photos provided by Purple Hearts Reunited and U.S. Army (public domain)

