

On 22 March the B-17s hit the docks at Palermo. Each of the two dozen 301st bombers delivered its payload of twelve 500-pound bombs from twenty-five thousand feet. The airmen saw explosions and sheets of flames in the dock area, before their aircraft were rocked by a huge explosion. Lieutenant Kenneth Slaker (419th) recalled that he was in a left turn from the target when: "we received a severe jolt and the controls were buffeted so bad[ly] that I knew that we had been hit. I called for a crew check in."¹¹⁵ Apparently an ammunition ship blew up and destroyed thirty acres of dock area, leaving a 1,000-by-150-foot hole in the side of the Piave Pier. Spaatz called this mission the most devastating air raid thus far, and the 301st was commended by numerous air marshals and generals — Tedder, Spaatz, Doolittle, and Atkinson — for this action.¹¹⁶

The defending fighters attacked before the bombers reached the flak area, but inflicted no serious damage. As the B-17s departed the target, fifteen to twenty fighters returned to the attack. In short order, Lieutenant Robert Duval's aircraft (352d) was on fire and Lieutenant James Hair's aircraft (352d) was hit in the gas tanks. Hair's left wing caught fire between the engines, with flames similar to an acetylene torch curling across the wing. The Fort exploded at nineteen thousand feet and only three to five chutes were observed coming from the bomber.¹¹⁷ Lieutenant Harbour Middleton's aircraft (352d) was also badly battered by flak and fighters, which knocked it out of the formation. Lieutenant John McGee, Middleton's buddy, made a 360-degree turn to cover the wounded bomber, a practice that later became a court-martial offense as it weakened the formation's defensive firepower. The German fire knocked out two of Middleton's engines and severed the aircraft's right-wing spar, as well as its main longitudinal girder. In addition, there were approximately two hundred bullet holes in the B-17. Although the Boeing was junked, it had returned another crew home — and even more miraculously, without injury.¹¹⁸