

Adam Makos, with Larry Alexander. *A Higher Call: An Incredible True Story of Combat and Chivalry in the War-Torn Skies of World War II*. New York: Berkley Books, 2012. Hardcover, 400 pages. \$17.27. ISBN-10: 0425252868

A Higher Call: A Story of Hope

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On December 20, 1943, Charlie Brown's B-17 Flying Fortress was on a bombing run over Germany when it sustained heavy damage. It was limping its way out of Germany when it encountered a Messerschmitt BF-107. Despite the damage done to German cities by United States bombing, the Messerschmitt did not fire on the wounded plane. *A Higher Call* by Adam Makos tells the story of the pilots and the planes.

Makos grew up listening to his grandfather's WWII stories. Later he and his friends started collecting stories and created a magazine dedicated to telling the stories of US pilots. At a reunion, Makos heard the story of Charlie Brown's plane. After meeting and talking to Brown, he decided to see if he could find the German pilot. Details were placed in various magazines and journals that might be of interest to retired pilots.

Franz Stigler, having survived the war, was living in Canada. Stigler read the ad and called Makos. Stigler finally agreed to meet Brown. The meeting of the two men was filmed as the story unfolded.

Stigler was a highly decorated and experienced German pilot. He was not, however, a member of the Nazi party. His family was Catholic and his brother was killed for being involved in anti-Nazi groups. By 1943, Stigler had been in the Germany Air Force for several years. He had seen colleagues killed by the dozens, and he was sick of war and death.

Brown's B-17 was part of a group of bombers on a mission. It sustained severe damage from German fighter planes and anti-aircraft guns. It was limping back to Britain when Stigler encountered the plane. Stigler had landed at his makeshift airport when Brown's B-17 flew over. Stigler had his fighter plane hastily refueled and ammo reloaded, and he took off. If he shot it down it would be his 25th confirmed kill and earn him the Iron Cross.

When Stigler caught up to the B-17, he was amazed that it was still flying. The plane had sustained serious damage. Brown and his crew knew their lives were probably over when they spotted the German fighter. Stigler, not wanting to shoot the badly wounded plane, signaled for them to land. Brown's crew was also in bad shape. Brown knew they would not survive a crash landing or a stay in a prisoner of war camp. Brown refused to land.

Stigler was impressed with the bravery of the crew in the badly shot up plane, which had over 300 miles to fly over the North Sea before it could return to England. Instead of shooting the plane down, he guided them past the anti-aircraft guns that guarded that section of the coast. The

gunners on the ground recognized the Messerschmitt and assumed the B-17 was a captured plane that was being used on a raid to England. Stigler escorted the plane out to sea and then returned to Germany. He never knew if the plane had made it to safety. He never told his story to anyone because he would have been shot by the Germans if his actions were ever found out.

Charlie Brown's plane limped back to England and barely made a landing. One member of his crew was killed and most were wounded. When Brown gave his report, it was classified and he was told never to speak of it. The reason—the American generals were afraid if the story of the German's gallantry was told, the American pilots might have mercy on some German planes and thus prolong the war.

For over 40 years, both pilots wondered if each had survived the war. *A Higher Call* is more than just a war story.

Many remarkable stories from this most turbulent time in American and world history have been told in the years since World War Two ended. Many more may never be told.

I, for one, am glad this one was. It's a heck of a story. One that, if you're a history buff, a World War Two buff, a lover of planes and pilots... you should read.

It is the story of grace and mercy. It is the story of respect between enemies. It is the story of the survival of the spirit during a long war. It is the story of hope.

Robert Arndt