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12/31/12 3:00pm

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Why A German Pilot Escorted An American Bomber To Safety During World War II (http://jalopnik.com/5971023/why-a-german-pilot-escorted-an-american-bomber-to-safety-during-world-war-ii)



Once in a while, you hear an old war story that restores your faith in humanity. Usually it involves a moment of quiet in the midst of chaos; some singing (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_truce) or the sharing of a few condiments (<http://gradworks.umi.com/14/85/1485771.html>). But how many of them take place in mid air?

This is the remarkable story of a crippled American bomber spared by a German fighter pilot. After the two planes' pilots had a mid-air moment of understanding, it didn't seem likely that they'd ever see one another again. Only they did, and became closer than brothers.

Here's how it all went down.

It was a few days before Christmas in 1943, and the Allied bombing campaign in Germany was going at full tilt. Second Lieutenant Charlie Brown was a freshly minted bomber pilot, and he and his crew were about to embark upon their first mission — to hit an aircraft factory in northern Germany.

Brown's B-17F Flying Fortress (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boeing_B-17_Flying_Fortress), dubbed Ye Olde Pub (http://www.military.com/Content/MoreContent1/?file=dday_0033p1), was typical of American heavy bombers of the time. Along with an 8,000-pound bomb capacity, the four-engine plane was armed with 11 machine guns and strategically placed armor plating. B-17s cruised at about 27,000 feet, but weren't pressurized. At that altitude, the air is thin and cold — 60 degrees below zero. Pilots and crew relied upon an onboard oxygen system and really warm flight suits with heated shoes.

As Ye Old Pub approached Bremen, Germany, German anti-aircraft batteries opened up on the

formation. Unfortunately for the pilots and crew of Ye Olde Pub, one of the anti-aircraft rounds exploded right in front of their plane, destroying the number two engine and damaging number four. Missing one engine and with another throttled back due to damage, Ye Olde Pub could no longer keep up with the formation.



B-17s were known for being able to soak up a lot of bullets and anti-aircraft flak and still make it home, but that came at a cost. The armor plating protecting crew and vital areas of the plane was heavy and affected cruise speed. Although armed with a number of heavy machine gun turrets, there were still areas of the aircraft that were vulnerable to attack by enemy fighter planes. The U.S. Army Air Corps addressed this problem by placing many planes in staggered formation (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Combat_box) that allowed bombs to be dropped while multiple planes could cover the defensive gaps of other planes in the formation with overlapping fields of fire.

The drawback to this arrangement was that individual planes couldn't take evasive maneuvers (they'd risk damage from friendly bombs or machine gun fire), and stragglers were completely open to attack by enemy aircraft. Think about a small group of quick, agile cowboys chasing a herd of buffalo. They're both dangerous to one another, but if one lumbering buffalo leaves the safety of the group, there's not much hope for it.

Things went from bad to worse for Brown and his crew. Falling behind the formation, Ye Olde Pub weathered merciless attacks from 15 German fighters. The bomber's machine guns got one of them, but the damage they sustained was immense. The tail gunner was killed and four were injured, including Brown, who caught a bullet fragment in his right shoulder. The only defensive guns left in service were the top turret and the nose gun, and the bomber's hydraulics and oxygen systems had also been knocked out. The plane went into a spiral, plummeting earthward.

What happened next is according to the memory of Brown, who told interviewers years later (http://www.military.com/Content/MoreContent1/?file=dday_0033p1) that his mind was a bit hazy at the time; his shoulder was bleeding and he needed oxygen.

I either spiraled or spun and came out of the spin just above the ground. My only conscience memory was of dodging trees but I had nightmares for years and years about dodging buildings and then trees. I think the Germans thought that we had spun in and crashed.

Ye Olde Pub was spared further harassment by enemy fighters. Somehow, he and the co-pilot managed to get the plane flying level again at about 1,000 feet of elevation.

On the way out to the sea, Ye Olde Pub passed a German airfield. Lt. Franz Stigler, a Luftwaffe fighter pilot just in from shooting down two B-17s, saw Ye Olde Pub limp by. Naturally, he scrambled to give chase. But what he saw arrested any aggression he may have had. As he told interviewers in 1991, he was aghast at the amount of damage the bomber had sustained. Its nose cone was missing, it had several gaping holes in the fuselage. He could see crew members giving first aid to the wounded, and most of the plane's guns hung limp, unmanned as they were.

I saw his gunner lying in the back profusely bleeding..... so, I couldn't shoot. I tried to get him to land in Germany and he didn't react at all. So, I figured, well, turn him to Sweden, because his airplane was so shot up; I never saw anything flying so shot up.

Stigler kept his distance, always staying out of the line of fire of the two guns still in service, but managed to fly within 20 feet of the bullet riddled B-17. He tried to contact Brown with hand signals. His message was simple: Land your plane in Germany and surrender or fly to Sweden. That heap will never make it back to England.

A bewildered Brown stared back through his side window, not believing what he was seeing. He had already counted himself as a casualty numerous times. But this strange German pilot kept gesturing at him. There was no way he was going to land the plane, but the pilot stayed with him, keeping other attackers off until they reached the North Sea. When it was clear that Brown wasn't staying in Germany, Stigler saluted, peeled off, and flew out of Ye Olde Pub's nightmarish day.

When Franz tried to get me to surrender, my mind just wouldn't accept that. It wasn't chivalry, it wasn't bravery, it was probably stupidity. My mind just didn't function in a clear manner. So his choice then was to kill us or try to get us to go to Sweden, since we wouldn't land.

The bomber made it back to England, scarcely able to keep 250 feet between itself and the ground by the time it landed in a smoking pile of exhausted men and shredded aluminum. Years later, Brown would say that if Stigler had been able to talk to him, offering the land in Germany or fly to Sweden ultimatum, he probably would have gone to Sweden. But Ye Olde Pub did make it, and Brown got a much needed stiff drink handed to him when he got off the plane.



The incredulous debriefing officer, wowed by Brown's story, went off to tell the brass what had happened. He recommended Brown's crew for citation, but the glory was short-lived. Brass quickly decided that word getting out about a chivalrous German fighter pilot could endanger the lives of other crews if it caused them to let their guard down. All details of Ye Olde Pub's first mission were classified Secret.

Stigler was never able to speak of his actions that day, as it would have meant certain court martial. He flew many more missions, though, becoming one of the world's first fighter jet pilots. By the war's end, he was one of only about 1,300 surviving Luftwaffe pilots. Some 28,000 had served.

After the war, Charlie Brown returned home to West Virginia and went to college, returning to the Air Force in 1949 and serving until 1965. Later, as a State Department Foreign Service Officer, he made numerous trips to Laos and Vietnam. But in 1972, he hung up his government service hat and moved to Miami to become an inventor.

Stigler finished the war amidst ruin. Anti-Third Reich post-war authorities in Germany were unimpressed with his exemplary service record, and the economy was wrecked. He subsisted on food stamps and work as a bricklayer's helper for a while, but moved to Canada in 1953. There, he enjoyed success as a businessman.

Many years went by without either man ever thinking much about what had happened on that day in 1943. But in 1986, then retired Colonel Charlie Brown was asked to speak at a big combat pilot reunion event called Gathering of the Eagles. Someone asked him if he had any memorable missions during World War II. Brown thought a minute, then dredged up the story of Stigler's salute which had been buried somewhere in the dirty corners of his mind for decades. Jaws dropped. Brown knew he would have to try to find the man who had spared his life.

After four years of searching vainly for U.S. and West German Air Force records that might shed some light on who the pilot was, Brown hadn't come up with much. So he wrote a letter in a combat pilot association newsletter. A few months later, Brown received a letter from Canada. It was from Stigler. "I was the one," it said. When they spoke on the phone, Stigler described his plane, the salute; everything Brown needed to hear to know it wasn't a hoax.

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From 1990 to 2008, Charlie Brown and Franz Stigler became like brothers. Introduced by the bond of that first powerful meeting, their friendship was cemented over the years. The two men remained close throughout the rest of their lives, dying within several months of each other in 2008.

There are so many parts of that beautiful story that could have turned out differently. In any event, Stigler probably wouldn't have shot Brown's crippled plane. He was a veteran pilot with an iron sense of right and wrong; a man who would never kick another while he's down.

But what if Stigler had been executed for his disloyalty? What if Brown had landed in Germany (<http://www.merkki.com/murderinc.htm>) or hadn't made it across the North Sea? What if Stigler had stayed in Germany and never learned how to speak English? Yes, things could have been different, but that chance encounter in 1943 was destined to become a chance encounter again in 1990. But more importantly, it's proof to the rest of us that something great done now can change your life much, much later.

Adam Makos just wrote a book about the Brown-Stigler rendezvous – A Higher Call: An Incredible True Story Of Combat And Chivalry In The War-Torn Skies Of World War II ([http://thedianerehmshow.org/shows/2012-12-20/adam-makos-higher-call-incredible-true-story-combat-and-chivalry-war-torn-skies-wor?](http://thedianerehmshow.org/shows/2012-12-20/adam-makos-higher-call-incredible-true-story-combat-and-chivalry-war-torn-skies-wor?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+WAMU885DianeRehm+(The+Diane+Rehm+Show+from+WAMU+and+NPR))utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+WAMU885DianeRehm+(The+Diane+Rehm+Show+from+WAMU+and+NPR)) – which goes into much greater detail about the two men behind an amazing occurrence.

Photo credit: YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=nNmypZ9lv94); Wikipedia

★ ▼ Discuss

68 discussions displayed because an author is participating or following a participant. 1 additional replies awaiting review.



71 participants



Intending_Acceleration (<http://...>)



It's a little less amazing when you consider that one pilot's side was slaughtering people by the millions, and the other side was intentionally carpet-bombing civilians en-mass (yes, the Germans were taking potshots with V2's into England, but allied forces were

22 participants



cardcheat (<http://card-cheat...>)



Whenever I read a story like this, I'm always saddened by the pointlessness of war and the loss of human life. These stories demonstrate that we are capable of behaving humanely to each other, yet it only seems to happen briefly.

LEVELING entire cities.)

12/31/12 4:11pm (<http://jalopnik.com/its-a-little-less-amazing-when-mother-side-that-again-12274097>)

Lozzle (<http://lozzle.kinja.co...>)
I don't see what that has anything to do with what happened between these two men. They were doing their job, fighting for their country and acting upon orders. One man went out of his way to not be THAT GUY(something you're doing) and actually helped out the "enemy".

Don't try to rain on the parade, this was a great story.

12/31/12 4:19pm (<http://jalopnik.com/i-dont-see-what-that-has-anything-to-do-with-what-happ-122740515>)

I look at the mail, well this W...
I second that Lozzle.

A star in a dark sky.

12/31/12 4:37pm (<http://jalopnik.com/i-second-that-lozzle-a-star-in-a-dark-sky-122740582>)

12 participants
Ridge Runner_5 and 67 others

bonboon (<http://bonboon.kin...>)
at the same time, cocksuckers such as Robert Johnson were strafing German pilots who had bailed out.

Team USA! :P

12/31/12 4:31pm (<http://jalopnik.com/at-the-same-time-cocksuck-122740560>)

doomday (<http://doomday.ki...>)
I been looking up google and can't find any info, can you send me a link?

12/31/12 5:32pm (<http://jalopnik.com/i-been-looking-up-google-and-can-t-find-any-info-122740889>)

Vincenzo71 (<http://vincentco...>)
Helluva guitar player too

12/31/12 5:54pm (<http://jalopnik.com/helluva-guitar-player-too-122740628>)

Bry and 8 others...

Turbineguy (<http://turbinegu...>)
I first read about this a few years ago. It's an amazing story, and one of those things that happens in war that you never hear about until later. In this case, much later. Lt Stigler showed true gallantry in doing what he did, at obvious great risk to himself. It's wonderful that the two pilots were able to meet before they passed.

The owner of my company flew P-47s and P-51s in 1945 out of Martlesham Heath in

The Christmas Truce during World War I is another fine example. The two sides were slaughtering each other one minute and giving gifts and playing football the next. Of course its naive, but it sort of depresses me that they couldn't have continued that sense of compassion and brotherhood for more than a few fleeting moments. Did no one step back after that and think, exactly why do I want to kill these guys?

12/31/12 4:29pm (<http://jalopnik.com/whenever-i-read-a-story-like-this-im-always-saddened-b-12>)

ThePrederick (<http://thepred...>)
The Christmas truce is one of the things that brought into focus how utterly, completely unnecessary and sad WWI was. Not all, but a lot of those men really all wanted to leave well enough alone, and go home.

12/31/12 4:41pm (<http://jalopnik.com/the-christmas-truce-is-one-of-the-things-that-brought-i-1227>)

Diffikult D (<http://diffikultdee...>)
So WW II was pointless? Everyone should have just let Hitler run until he got tired?

12/31/12 5:54pm (<http://jalopnik.com/so-ww-ii-was-pointless-everyone-should-have-just-let-h-12>)

Zoom and 18 others...
7 participants

Joel Pons (<http://captainato...>)
I honestly feel like war is not a good idea.

12/31/12 8:45pm (<http://jalopnik.com/i-honestly-feel-like-war-is-not-a-good-idea-122741295>)

ranwhenparked (<http://ranw...>)
never really a good idea, sometimes just the only option. As in WWII, which was unavoidable and had to be done. WWI, however, was a terrible, terrible idea all around and just should not have happened at all, and if it didn't, then WWII probably wouldn't have happened either.

1/01/13 2:16am (<http://jalopnik.com/never-really-a-good-idea-sometimes-just-the-only-optio-1227>)

Joel Pons (<http://captainato...>)
In general is such a bad idea. The things that lead to war are also unnecessary. I think the stupidest part about it is that once you're dead, you're gone. It really doesn't matter what happens afterwards because you are gone from this world into an unknown state. So what's really the point? People just screwing things up for other people. I feel like a lot of things are made overly complex.

England, and has told many incredible stories, but none like this one.

12/31/12 3:42pm (<http://jalopnik.com/i-first-read-about-this-a-few-years-ago-it-is-amazing-122740336>)


1 participant

 **Zoom** (<http://zoom.kinja.com>)

I've been watching a WWII marathon today. The situations these people were in, and the sacrifices some made are indeed incredible. Being a bit of a WWII buff, I no longer question the meaning of the phrase "The Greatest Generation."

Good Night, All. And God Bless in the New Year.

12/31/12 5:53pm (<http://jalopnik.com/i-ve-been-watching-a-wwii-marathon-today-the-situation-122740910>)


 **BlackSheepRedShoes** (<http://...>)

I was watching a movie set during WWI today and having the same feelings. I was discussing it with my father as the characters went up over the trenches and I asked him "Could you go? Could you do it?" He said "Well, ordinary people did it, so I guess if I had to I could."

Ordinary, but extraordinary. I don't know how. It's the same thing I think every time I watch anything about Iwo Jima.

A happy and safe new year to all.

1/01/13 2:43am (<http://jalopnik.com/i-was-watching-a-movie-set-during-wwi-parallels-122741891>)


 **\$kaycog** (<http://skaycog.kinj...>)

Just wow! I have chills running up and down my whole body and tears in my eyes.

12/31/12 3:15pm (<http://jalopnik.com/just-wow-i-have-chills-running-up-and-down-my-whole-b-122740157>)

We obviously need some structure but what do we really need? Food, water, shelter. Like why are we shipping things all over the world? Wasting natural resources that are for money which is a made up concept. I think that in a couple hundred years a lot of things that we are doing now are going to look really stupid.

1/01/13 4:27am (<http://jalopnik.com/in-general-is-such-a-bad-idea-the-things-that-lead-to-122741>)

 Hufandpuf and 3 others...
2 participants

 **tektoo** (<http://teddorset01.ki...>)

AWESOME! Even in times of ware there are still human beings being "human" to one another.

12/31/12 5:53pm (<http://jalopnik.com/i-ve-been-watching-a-wwii-marathon-today-the-situation-122740910>)

Awesome Story!

12/31/12 3:55pm (<http://jalopnik.com/awesome-even-in-times-of-ware-there-are-still-human-be-122740910>)

 **SickSixJames** (<http://sicksixj...>)

Much like the Christmas Truce of WWI.

12/31/12 4:24pm (<http://jalopnik.com/much-like-the-christmas-truce-of-wwi-122740524>)

 **f_monk** (http://f_monk.kinja...)

You mean like instead of urinating on corpses?

12/31/12 6:15pm (<http://jalopnik.com/you-mean-like-instead-of-urinating-on-corpse-122740957>)

 **pugotarra** (<http://pugotarra.kinja.com>)

Wow. This is the sort of thing that makes me keep coming back to Jalopnik. Really moving story.

12/31/12 3:22pm (<http://jalopnik.com/wow-this-is-the-sort-of-thing-that-makes-me-keep-comi-122740157>)

 **YukaCL** (<http://yukacl.kinja...>)

Amazing story, wow. I'm almost moved to tears, hahaha.

And this: "He was a veteran pilot with an iron sense of right and wrong; a man who would never kick another while he's down."

I don't think is a sense of "right or wrong". It's another type of respect and self pride. When you know what means to be hurt and recognize a true fighter, then you show respect. And most of all, you will want to fight that person when it's fine/healthy to

prove yourself as well. I love fighting and feel this way, so it could be another way of seeing it. Also, if you analyze the decision Stigler made, it was a terrible war and strategic decision. That man flew back with knowledge of the adversary; could have seen stuff he shouldn't have and so on... But he thought "hell, I want to meet that man and maybe fight him face to face". Or he just thought: "damn, that man deserves to go home". It's usually the simpler choice, ain't it? hahaha

Anyway, nice browar-story. Thanks.

12/31/12 3:28pm (<http://jalopnik.com/amazing-story-wow-im-almost-moved-to-tears-hahaha-a-12>)



Turbineguy (<http://turbinegu...>)



Gallantry, by any other name..

12/31/12 3:36pm (<http://jalopnik.com/gallantry-by-any-other-name-122740290>)



Les_Toreadors (http://les_to...)



Yeah I agree it's not really right or wrong, but even the fiercest of adversaries can show mercy to the fallen sometimes.

He was just astounded at the B-17 absorbing everything thrown in it and no one left to man the guns. He decided not to finish the bomber off just for the sake of an easy free kill. In a sense, he felt the -17 was a "worthy adversary" for going through as much as they did and let them go.

1/02/13 2:23am (<http://jalopnik.com/yeah-i-agree-its-not-really-right-or-wrong-but-even-th-1227>)

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