

# A Higher Call

By Rod Fraser



*"The Guardian" by Nicolas Trudgian, courtesy of [ValorStudios.com](http://ValorStudios.com)*

YOU MIGHT BE interested in a charming story of humanity and chivalry during the air war over Germany. *A Higher Call* was written by a young man, Adam Makos, who has an interesting story of his own to tell. I intend to review his book and set out an account of the author in these pages.

The incident giving rise to the main story took place on December 20, 1943, when 22 year old Second Lieutenant Charlie Brown, a farm boy from West Virginia, was the pilot of a Boeing B-17F bomber. The aircraft was dubbed 'Ye Olde Pub' by

the crew. Charlie, and his crew of nine, were on a bombing run to Bremen. If all went well, they would drop their bomb load, and return home safely.

Charlie was an interesting young man. While attending high school, he worked evenings as a janitor at the local elementary school and served in the National Guard on weekends.

After graduation, he transferred to the full-time army and from there to the Army Air Corps. When the United States entered the war, he trained as a pilot to fly B-17s ('Flying fortresses') and was sent to the United Kingdom to be part of the 379<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group, Eighth Air Force, at RAF Kimbolton.

On the night in question, during the approach to Bremen, *Ye Olde Pub* was hit by flak. Number 2 engine was damaged and rendered inoperable, the Plexiglas nose of the aircraft was shattered and Number 4 engine was also damaged, but operable when throttled back to a slower speed.

Due to the damage, Charlie's B-17 was unable to remain with the squadron and struggled on its way back to England. It was attacked by a number of German night fighters. Number 3 engine was hit and reduced to half-power. The oxygen, hydraulic and electrical systems were hit badly and the rudder was shot away (in part).

The loss of electrical power jammed most of the machine guns, substantially reducing the B-17's ability to defend itself. The tail gunner was dead and other aircrew were either wounded or freezing in below-zero temperatures. Charlie was injured with a bullet fragment in his shoulder.

The aircraft dropped down to a low altitude and Charlie told the crew he was going to fly the plane home. He invited those who wanted to bail out to do so, but no one wanted to hazard the risk.

As the aircraft made its way across Germany, it was spotted by Lieutenant Franz Stigler who was on the ground refueling and rearming his Messerschmitt Me-109G6. He noticed the damaged B-17 flying low in the sky above him and soon took off to give chase.

As he drew close enough to attack, Franz observed the B-17's rear guns were disabled, the fuselage full of holes and the tail section seriously damaged. He could see crew members huddled together caring for the wounded and freezing—in no position to offer resistance.

Franz made a decision. He was not going to press the attack and destroy the aircraft. He motioned to Charlie, first trying to get him to land and then used hand signals asking him to turn to Sweden. When those efforts failed, he escorted the B-17 over the

coast (and German flak batteries) to the North Sea, fully expecting the aircraft to crash on its way home and all aboard to perish.

Just as he turned his aircraft for home, Franz Sigler caught Charlie's eye and saluted him. With no further ado, he plotted his course to return to his squadron.

Charlie didn't crash *Ye Olde Pub*. Although the B-17 had difficulty maintaining altitude, and it was nip and tuck for the last hour, Charlie landed the aircraft safely at RAF Seething.

When later asked why he had risked flying such a badly damaged aircraft back to England, Charlie replied, "Well sir, I had one dead and three more seriously injured crew members who had little or no chance of surviving a bail out; and fortunately, I could not see the rear of the aircraft to know how badly it was damaged."

I don't wish to give up the many details of this rich and detailed story, as Makos' book does a wonderful job of exploring the war years, as well as the early and later lives of Brown and Sigel. But I will say this: it does have a happy ending. After many years, the two pilots are reunited, become friends and tell Adam Makos their inspiring story.

I THINK READERS will find another aspect of this tale interesting—the author’s background and history. Due to the influence of two grandfathers during their early years, Adam Makos and his brother became interested in the Second World War.

This was not surprising. The two old men—both veterans—told the boys stories of the war, took them to air shows and helped them build model airplanes. By the time of their teenage years, the two boys were fascinated with the war years.

So much so that they—together with a friend—started a newsletter at a time when Adam was 15 years of age. They wanted to be journalists and chose to focus on their favorite topic—World War II. The three boys borrowed a parent’s computer and printed their publication on an ink jet printer. Adam noted, “it was three pages long and had a circulation of a dozen readers.”

Within a year or two, the boys were traveling regularly to air shows, museums and reunions, interviewing WWII veterans, and telling their stories. The focus was on “fighter pilots, bomber gunners, transport crewman and anyone that flew”.

Adam recalled, “People began to notice our little magazine. Tom Brokaw, who penned *The Greatest Generation*, wrote us a letter to say we were doing good work. Tom Hanks met us ... and encouraged us

to keep it up.” And there were others.

By the time the boys were finished college, they started working for their magazine fulltime. There were two journalistic rules that guided them, “get the facts right... [and] ... tell stories that show our military in a good light....”

About a year out of college, at the age of 23, Adam heard rumors of an interesting story about a B-17 aircraft that had been shot up badly during the war. There was a twist to the story, but no one knew the details. Adam sent the bomber pilot in question (Charlie Brown), a copy of his magazine and a letter asking for an interview.

Charlie agreed to the interview, but suggested Adam speak to Franz Stigler first—if he wanted the real story. “Franz is the ... hero” in this tale, Charlie confided. “When you have his story, come visit me and I’ll tell you mine.”

Adam did as Charlie suggested. He interviewed Franz Stigler first, and then met with Charlie Brown. Based on these interviews, he wrote two articles in the magazine. The first one was a hit with readers, so he followed up with a sequel.

When it was clear this story was popular with their readers, Adam asked Charlie and Franz if he could write their story as a book. The two veterans

agreed and Adam graduated from magazine journalist to non-fiction author. Over the next four years, he wrote the story that would become *A Higher Call*. It was a New York Times bestseller and is still a popular book.

The experience of Adam Makos, and his two young colleagues, is inspirational. Who would have thought that a simple hobby, undertaken by three boys with extra time on their hands would have such a successful outcome, many years later?

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