

The Good Samaritan. July 14 2013. Nigel Taber-Hamilton.

In the early morning hours of a cold, December day, about 5 days before Christmas in 1943, a 21 year old West Virginia farm boy, U.S. Air Force 2nd Lt. Charles Brown – Charlie to his friends – followed his 9 crew-mates up the belly ladder of a four engine B-17 “Flying Fortress” – nicknamed (as all B-17's were) “Ye Old Pub” and shortly thereafter took off for a bombing mission over northern Germany.

It was the crew’s first mission. It was uneventful until the plane approached the target - a military factory in Bremen, 65 miles south of the North Sea coast. Accurate anti-aircraft flak shattered the Plexiglas nose, knocked out the number two engine and damaged the number four engine which had to be throttled back to prevent overspeeding. The damage slowed the bomber and Brown was unable to keep up with the formation and the plane fell back as a straggler - a position from which “Ye Old Pub” would come under sustained enemy attacks.....

Skip forward about 15 minutes, to the cockpit of the premier German Luftwaffe attack fighter, an Me 109, and former Bavarian farm boy and 2nd Lt. Fritz Stigler. Stigler had seen “Ye Old Pub” flying “low and slow” – “to escape past the German air defenses”, he thought. Now was his chance. Because Stigler wasn't just any fighter pilot. He was an ace. One more kill and he would win The Knight's Cross, Germany's equivalent to the Medal of Honor. He rose above and behind “Ye Old Pub”, pushed down the nose of his 109, and covered his gun trigger with his right index finger.

So is this another war story where the gallant American heroes fight off the dastardly German attacker? Or will they bravely go down in flames with guns blazing?

Stigler recalled later that he immediately noticed something odd – no one was firing at him. He slowed, and came close to the rear of Ye Old Pub – in what was left of the rear gun position there was the a man lying very still, his white sheep-skin flying jacket drenched in blood.

And it was no surprise that he was dead. Most of the rear of the plane had been shot away. The top half of the vertical stabilizer – the “shark’s fin at the rear – was missing, as was one of the two small wings – the horizontal stabilizers – below it.

In the preceding 10 minutes, Ye Old Pub had suffered sustained attacks from over a dozen enemy fighters. Number 3 engine was severely damaged, meaning the plane now only had one good engine out of four. All the internal hydraulic and electrical systems were also severely damaged. Few of its guns worked, most of the crew were now wounded, including Brown, who’s shoulder was bleeding heavily.

An easy kill for Stigler, and a sure “Knights Cross”. And revenge for the death of his brother, also a Luftwaffe pilot, killed in aerial combat early in the war.

But Stigler didn’t pull the trigger. Instead he moved to one side, from where he could see gaping holes in Ye Old Pub’s fuselage, and through them, crew members trying to give first aid to their

wounded comrades. Stigler later said there appeared to be more holes than plane, that he never saw a plane – before or after – so badly damaged that was still flying.

And, he said, at that moment he was remembering something his commanding officer had said to him: “we are fighter pilots, not murderers; if you ever shoot the parachute of a bailed out airman I’ll shoot you!” “There is something worse than death”, his commander continued, “and one of those things is to completely lose your humanity.” This plane, he thought was like a bailed out airman – totally defenseless. It would be morally wrong to attack it. Instead, he pulled up to the end of Ye Old Pub’s wingtip, and caught the eye of the pilot – Charlie Brown. Across Brown’s face there appeared a “we’re all dead men” look of horror. At first he thought the German pilot was toying with them.

At that same moment Stigler determined that he had to do everything in his power to help his enemies either land safely or fly away from the danger zone. This was a very dangerous decision for him – if any Nazis found out he’d done this he would have been summarily executed.

And so, fingering his rosary, he shepherded Ye Old Pub out toward the North Sea, knowing that German anti-aircraft batteries might not recognize the B-17’s silhouette, but they would certainly recognize his 109, and hold their fire, thinking both planes German.

Once the B-17 reached open North Sea waters, Stigler saluted toward Brown and the B-17 crew, and turned his plane back toward Germany. He later reflected that “what was at stake here was not only their lives but my humanity. Were I to have attacked I would have lost any shred of human decency; I would have been a monster.”

And Jesus said, “[who], do you think, was a neighbor to the [men] who fell into the hands of the [enemy]?” [The lawyer] said, “The one who showed [them] mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

It’s easy to be nice to people we like, or who are “like us”. Harder to those we don’t know, even harder if they’re in some way different. Hardest still if we’ve come to believe we should hate them. The story of the Good Samaritan is a reminder to us that what is so often also at stake in any situation where someone needs help is our humanity as much as their need.

There are more twists to this story. Ye Old Pub limped safely back to England with the loss only of the tail gunner. Brown and his crew were ordered not to say anything about this encounter – no one wanted any airman in Ye Old Pub’s 379 Bomb Wing to get the idea that enemy pilots were human beings, after all. They needed to try and kill them. They tried to bury the story. And – for a while – they were successful.

As one retired officer later noted, that attempt at suppressing the story gave him hope for humanity. “As any drill sergeant will tell you,” he said, “it’s really hard to train most human beings to kill other human beings – we don’t want to kill each other”.

Remembering Stigler and the B-17 crew is a reminder to us that incidents like this have

happened throughout history; and they tell us that **our humanity can win out over our hatred**, BUT it requires of us the will to “make it so”.

Eventually, word of this incident got out. Brown told the story, and in the telling he realized he wanted to thank this faceless German pilot. He tried, everything – scouring U.S. and German military archives, attending pilots’ reunions telling his story. Nothing worked. Finally he put an ad in a German newsletter for former Luftwaffe pilots, retelling the story and asking if anyone knew the pilot, and providing his name and address.

On January 18, 1990, a letter arrived in Brown’s mailbox. It said this:
"Dear Charles, All these years I wondered what happened to the B-17, did she make it or not?"
It was Stigler. He he’d left Germany after the war and moved to Vancouver, B.C. in 1953
They met, and became fast friends. There’s much more to this story that’s wonderful but not time to tell it here, except to say two things: first, that as the friendship deepened, Brown’s 50 years of nightmares went away. And, second, that Brown organized a get-together with Stigler and the other surviving members of Ye Old Pub, at which he showed pictures of all those people who now lived, children, grandchildren, and all those families with so many happy memories, as a result of Stigler’s act of mercy.

Stigler & Brown died within months of each other in 2008. A relative going through Browns books found a book in his library o German fighter planes. It was a gift from Stigler to Brown. Inside, Stigler had written this: “In 1940, I lost my only brother as a night fighter. On the 20th of December, 4 days before Christmas, I had the chance to save a B-17 from her destruction, a plane so badly damaged it was a wonder that she was still flying. The pilot, Charlie Brown, is for me, as precious as my brother was.

Thanks Charlie.

Your Brother,

Franz

And Jesus said, “Go, and do likewise”.