

from Verlag Nürnberger Presse, December 20, 2018

A Hero Because He Did Not Shoot

by André Ammer

75 years ago today one of the most notable stories of the Second World War occurred over the skies of northern Germany. A German fighter spared a heavily damaged bomber of the U.S. Air Force and escorted it to a safe return flight over the North Sea. Half a century later, the flying ace from Regensburg and the US pilot met again.

REGENSBURG - Franz Stigler hears the enemy plane long before he sees it. He has been battling U.S. bombers and hunters for several hours and is dead tired when he lands on the Jever airbase, but adrenaline has sharpened his senses. A B-17 flies toward him so slowly and low that it looks like it's about to land. Stigler throws his cigarette away, jumps into his freshly refueled and rearmed Messerschmitt Bf 109 and takes up the pursuit.

Quickly the Regensburger has caught up with the bomber and is surprised that he is not shot at. As he approaches, the reason becomes clear to him. The plane, piloted by 21-year-old Charles Brown, is almost defenseless. Although the Boeing B-17 is nicknamed "Flying Fortress" because it is still capable of flying even with heavy damage, this machine has been incredibly damaged. That she can even hold herself in the air is close to a miracle.

Stigler sees that the fuselage and wings of the machine, nicknamed "Ye Olde Pub", are littered with fist-sized holes. One of the four engines has failed, two more run roughly, only a stub is left on the left elevator.

Finally, the German sees that the tail gunner of the B-17 is dead. His blood fallen onto the twin MG is frozen to red icicles. Because exploding shells have torn down most of the closure in the middle section, Stigler has a clear view of the interior of the aircraft, where crew members are attending their wounded comrades.

The Knight's Cross is within reach

The very first mission of Charles Brown as Commander ends in a fiasco. When the U.S. bomber federation bombarded the Focke-Wulf aircraft factories in Bremen, the aircraft of the 21-year-old pilot is badly damaged by the flak fire of the Germans. On the return flight, several fighters attack the "Ye Olde Pub".

With a crazy dive maneuver, Brown escapes enemy fire, but a few miles off the German North Sea coast, his fate seems to be finally sealed. Franz Stigler is determined to get the B-17 out of the sky. He only lacks a single enemy target to receive the Knight's Cross. However, in view of the pitiful sight of the enemy plane, he simply cannot manage to press the fire button of his onboard cannon. The Bavarian flying ace decides that "I do not want to have this on my conscience for the rest of my life" and tries to persuade the bomber crew to land.

Salute in farewell

When Charles Brown does not agree, Stigler decides to pilot the "Ye Olde Pub" across the flak belt of the Germans on the coast. If he forms a close formation with the bomber, the German soldiers with their antiaircraft guns could believe that there is a special mission on the way - this is the Regensburger strategy. After all, the German Air Force has repaired some crashed or emergency landed enemy aircraft and has used them for test flights.

The strategy works; unmolested the two planes pass the defensive ring. Stigler stays at the side of the B-17 bomber for a few minutes, salutes, makes his departure and brings his Messerschmitt home. Brown manages an emergency landing in England, with nine of the ten crew members surviving the mission.

The American bomber pilot and his camera crew are required by their superiors to maintain strict secrecy. Should this knightly gesture of a German become public, this could weaken the fighting spirit of the Allies - such is their fear. Stigler, too, is not allowed to breathe a word of what happened, because he would then be sure of high treason charges.

The incident has triggered a change of heart in the 28-year-old Regensburger. Henceforth Stigler, who completed 487 flight missions during the Second World War, no longer values the achievement of the Knight's Cross. The fighter pilot, strongly influenced by his Catholic parents, has always been skeptical about National Socialist rule. Already at an early stage, the war is lost. Nevertheless, he volunteered to serve in the air force because he wants to take revenge for his dead brother.

Franz Stigler and his brother August, four years older, had a close relationship since childhood. Both were fascinated by aviation and were involved in the Flying Club in Amberg, where the family moved several years after the birth of their

younger son. They were supported by their father, who was a pilot in the First World War.

First solo flight at twelve years

Already at the age of twelve, little Franz completed his first solo flight in a school glider, studying aeronautical engineering after graduating from high school and then flying for Lufthansa. Later, he is recruited as a flight instructor for the Luftwaffe, where he trains his brother to become a bomber pilot. "War, however, was the last thing he wanted," writes U.S. author Adam Makos, who researched the story of Franz Stigler and Charles Brown over many years of work.

In October 1940, however, August Stigler dies during a night operation over London. His brother is then a fighter pilot deployed and fighting among others in North Africa and Sicily against the Allies. He is wounded several times in action; once his plane is on fire, another time he must make an emergency escape in the waters of the Mediterranean.

Franz Stigler, who according to the wish of his mother should actually have been a priest, is especially influenced by his squadron leader Gustav Rödel during this time. "We fight according to rules to preserve our own humanity," the charismatic lieutenant tells him before the first enemy flight. "Should I ever see or learn that you're shooting at a man on a parachute, I'll shoot you in person," Rödel threatens him as well, and the Regensburger remembers that phrase when he has his sights on Charles Brown's B-17. He would have been guilty of such a crime if he had shot down the "Ye Olde Pub", he says decades later in an interview.

Following Germany's capitulation in May 1945 and a short interment as prisoner of war, Stigler emigrates with his wife to Canada and works there as a mechanic in a lumber camp. The couple has a daughter, but separates in 1954. Three years later, Stigler marries again, on December 20, 1943. He no longer thinks about the past. However, a letter from Boeing in 1985 brings the memory to life again.

Tears on the phone

Retired, the former aviator has bought an old Messerschmitt and can be found in air shows by American veterans. Boeing has become aware of him and invites him to a ceremony on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the first flight of a B-17. Stigler now asks if the young American pilot and his comrades actually made it to England. At the same time, Charles Brown begins to research who this German fighter pilot was and why he let the "Ye Olde Pub" escape.

Finally, he puts a search ad in Jägerblatt, a journal of the Association of German fighter pilots. Stigler, who has subscribed to this magazine, reacts immediately and writes to the American. On January 23, 1990, Brown calls him from Florida and has details like the damage to his B-17, to demonstrate that his call is genuine. When Stigler mentions the strategy of the flight over the North Sea, Brown bursts into tears and shouts: "My God, it really is you!"

A little later, the two meet in Seattle and become friends for life. Together, they travel across the North American continent and share their story at veteran associations and air shows. Stigler, who died in 2008, is still honored in the United States today. In his old home in Regensburg, on the other hand, there is nothing to honor an officer who endangered his own life in order to save the helpless enemy.