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Adam Makos and Larry Alexander. *A Higher Call*. New York: Berkley Caliber, 2012.

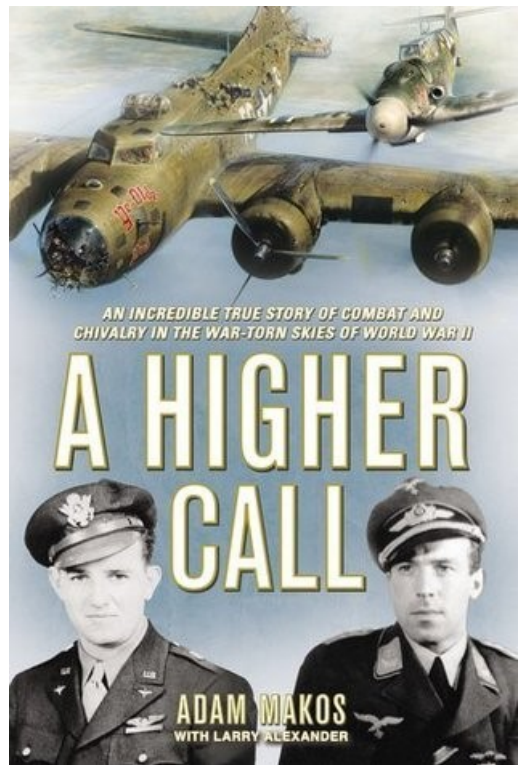
Book Review

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*A Higher Call* is a story about German fighter ace Franz Stigler and the pilot of the B-17 *Ye Old Pub*, Charlie Brown. When Stigler approached the wounded B-17 in his Messerschmitt 109, 20 December 1943, the amount of damage it sustained shocked him. *Ye Old Pub* was missing thirteen feet of its left horizontal stabilizer (p.189). Much of the vertical stabilizer was missing. Twenty-millimeter cannon fire tore gaping holes in the fuselage and destroyed the tail gunner position. Stigler could see the *Pub's* tail gunner Hugh Eckenrode dead at his station and wounded crewmembers lying on the floor. Nevertheless, Brown kept *Ye Old Pub* in the air. Stigler



decided downing this B-17 would not be a victory, but something he would have on his conscience the rest of his life (p. 202). For him, it was nothing less than shooting a man floating to earth in a parachute. Rather than leave the dying plane to the German flak crews only a few miles ahead, he did something extraordinary. When he could not convince Brown to surrender, he flew formation with the *Ye Old Pub* and guided it out of Germany. He parted with a salute. Both men would not forget the incident. Stigler would wonder if the crew made it back to England

while Brown wondered who the pilot was and why he let them escape. Both men searched, and with much effort, found one another in 1990. Thereafter, they enjoyed a friendship that lasted until 2008, the year both men died. To answer his research question, “*Can good men be found on both sides of a bad war?*” Adam Makos analyzes the incident largely from Franz Stigler’s perspective. Because of this, the readers must ask themselves the same question and confront their own bias. Co-writing with Makos is Larry Alexander, the author of *The Life of Major Dick Winters, The Man Who Led The Band of Brothers*.

In 1937, while still a civilian, Stigler began training military pilots in long distance instrument flying. And in 1938, now a corporal, he trained pilots at an officer’s school in Dresden. Amongst his students were his brother August and future ace Gerhard Barkhorn (p. 32). When his brother August died during take-off in a Ju-88 in 1940, Stigler looked for someone to blame, perhaps himself, those who manufactured the plane, or the British. One thing he was certain, his grief had turned to anger and he was going to get revenge. He believed he could best do this as a fighter pilot.

Stigler’s tour as a fighter pilot of a Me-109F began in Libya defending the skies for the Afrika Korps. As such, the reader is privy to the members of this fighter wing JG-27, their personalities and “the code.” Squadron leader, Lieutenant Gustav Roedel made clear to Stigler after his first mission, “If I ever see or hear of you shooting at a man in a parachute, I will shoot you down myself” (p. 54). “*You fight by the rules to keep our humanity*” (p. 54). Makos drives at his research question by documenting honorable acts by German pilots. For example, German Ace, Lieutenant Hans-Joachim Marseille shot down a British pilot who suffered serious burns in the crash. The Germans captured him, and after learning the needed information, at great risk, Marseille flew to England to drop a note over his airfield to let his friends know he was alive and receiving medical attention (p. 66). Furthermore, there were instances where German pilots visited a crash site to see if there were survivors. The reason for this was that they did not want the pilots to fall into the hands of the Gestapo or the SS (p. 219).

The Battle of El Alamein forced a German withdrawal and as such Stigler served in Sicily where he battled with P-38s, P-40s, and B-17s before returning to Germany in 1943. Thus, the reader can analyze the tactics Stigler used to counter these planes and to devise an effective strategy against a formation of B-17s. By the time Stigler and Brown met on 20 December 1943, the German had an effective strategy. They attacked the fringe on the lowest part of the formation. B-17 crews called this spot “Purple Heart Corner” and is precisely the spot in the formation *Ye Old Pub* occupied (p. 162). Makos’s

descriptive powers are reminiscent of Alexander Dumas's *The Three Musketeers* or Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and this plays on the readers emotions. For example, "Sealing the canopy, Franz relaxed within the familiar aroma of oil, gun power, and sweat-drenched leather. Franz rapidly cycled his black rosary beads through his fingers" (p. 249). "He ran his gloved hand across the ceiling. White flakes cascaded like snow inside the cockpit," is another example (p. 175). As the action increases, passages such as, "When Jennings sat up he saw Russian holding his left thigh skyward, groaning through his mask. His lower leg hung by just a few strips of tendon. The stump of his thigh gushed blood," magnify an already tense moment (p. 186).

Stigler and his comrades absolutely despised "The Party," especially Hermann Goering who consistently squandered aircraft such as the Me-262 and publicly accused Luftwaffe pilots as cowards thereby making them the scapegoats of the Allied bombing campaign. On 19 January 1945, the day of "The fighter Pilots' Mutiny," General Adolf Galland led a group of pilots to convince Goering to step down. Among those in attendance was Stigler's mentor, Gustav Roedel, who wanted to kill Goering that day (p. 273). Galland suggested that someone just as bad would take his place making the action meaningless. Goering recognized the challenge to his authority right away and suggested he would have all of the pilots shot. Rather than take the time to build a case against the mutineers, he decided to let them continue to fly where he believed they would surely die. Presumably, he could then make up any story about them he wished. And that is how fighter wing JV-44 "The Squadron of Experts" came into being. Galland created an elite squadron of pilots to fly the Me-262 against formation of B-24, B-17, and P-51 fighters. For enthusiasts of the Me-262, Stigler provided first-hand accounts of its strengths and faults on the ground and in combat. One of them was its propensity to catch fire demonstrated in a horrifying retelling of a mishap on the runway that caused Johannes Steinhoff's Me-262 to burst into flames. He survived, but suffered burns over much of his body. By this time, Makos's use of pathos has disarmed the reader and rather than suspicion of Stigler and his friends, there is empathy. The comradeship, sense of honor, and duty Charlie Brown and his crew felt, is comparable to Stigler and the German pilots in this story.

The last section of the book discusses how Stigler and Brown searched for one another. For fear that bomber crews would fail to fire on approaching enemy aircraft, at the time of the incident, the United States Army Air Force forbid Brown and his crew to discuss the incident with anyone. Moreover, if Stigler was found out, he would surely have faced a firing squad. The search did

not begin in earnest until 1985. Stigler was now living in Vancouver, Canada. Hearing of Stigler through air show circuits, Boeing invited Stigler to the fiftieth anniversary of the B-17. In the same year, Brown told the story to his friends in the 379th Bombers Association who urged him to look for the German pilot (p. 357). Here the reader recognizes what pilots call the “brotherhood of aviators.” Stigler became something of a celebrity amongst his old enemies. In addition to the guest appearance for the fiftieth anniversary of the B-17, he was a guest of the American Fighter Aces. Just as unlikely, Brown solicited and received the help of Adolf Galland who ultimately allowed the two to connect.

Makos included the letters between the two men and they serve as excellent primary source material as do his numerous quotes taken from Stigler and Brown from interviews conducted over a four-year period. In addition, Makos used subtitles that include the time and date to help readers maintain awareness and this is especially helpful when the story switches from Stigler to Brown. Also included, are excellent period images of the planes and personalities involved in the story. Thus, the book is accessible to all readers whatever their knowledge of WWII. For the researcher, Makos included endnotes, a substantial bibliography, and a list of museums and organizations where one can view the aircraft discussed in the book.

*A Higher Call* reads fast but is more formal in tone than a novel. Nevertheless, it is difficult to keep track of the military rank of both Stigler and Brown. Most often, Makos refers to both men by their first names, Franz and Charlie. Furthermore, the book does not include an index so taking good notes is necessary. For readers accustomed to a “good versus evil” story, they will not find it in this book. The reader will have to rely on their own world-view and experiences to decide the parameters of what an enemy is. Concerning Makos’s research question “*Can good men be found on both sides of a bad war?*”—his argument drives at yes.