

A Higher Call: An Incredible True Story of Combat and Chivalry in the War-Torn Skies of World War II¹

Reviewed by Major Marcia Reyes Steward*

“In the moment when I truly understand my enemy, understand him well enough to defeat him, then in that very moment I also love him.”²

I. An Act of Love in a World of War

The purpose of combat operations is to seek out and destroy the enemy.³ Such purpose could not be more clearly demonstrated than during World War II combat operations, where nearly 6,000,000 American and German soldiers lost their lives.⁴ Yet in the midst of such a destructive war, a German soldier takes a chance for the simple sake of humanity—for the love of a fellow human being. Instead of seeking out to destroy his enemy, on 20 December 1943, German Air Force Pilot Franz Stigler chooses to spare the lives of and protect the American Soldiers aboard a B-17 bomber.⁵

Through the eyes of Franz Stigler, *A Higher Call* recounts the effects of war on the human spirit and the resulting resilience and courage it cultivates. The author skillfully takes the reader through World War II from the perspective of a young German boy who grows into a seasoned and decorated fighter pilot. An experienced author of World War II accounts,⁶ Adam Makos, who himself

underwent a life-changing event,⁷ artfully narrates the experience of being an Air Force pilot during World War II. While he uses descriptive prose to bring readers into the details of World War II, there are drawbacks that take away from the overall reading experience. However, with its lessons on leadership, reference of international law topics, and most importantly, the revelation of the deep connection that can exist between human beings on two different sides of a war, *A Higher Call* is a book that deserves its place on any judge advocate’s reading list.

II. Benefits and Drawbacks

Makos is clearly a gifted storyteller. His use of vivid imagery,⁸ intense descriptions of suspenseful events,⁹ and brief moments of humor¹⁰ make anyone forget they are reading a historical account of World War II. However, one expects a book recounting historical events to contain sufficient sources and citations as an indication of accuracy and reliability. Such citing is lacking in *A Higher Call*, making it difficult for readers or history students to verify

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¹ ADAM MAKOS, AN INCREDIBLE TRUE STORY OF COMBAT AND CHIVALRY IN THE WAR-TORN SKIES OF WORLD WAR II (2012).

² ORSON SCOTT CARD, ENDER’S GAME 238 (1986). *Ender’s Game* is a novel about the training of military geniuses in the arts of war. *Id.*

³ See generally U.S. DEP’T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 3-90.6, BRIGADE COMBAT TEAM para. 1-1 (14 Sept. 2010); U.S. DEP’T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 3-21.20, THE INFANTRY BATTALION para. 1-1 (13 Dec. 2006); U.S. DEP’T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 1-100, ARMY AVIATION OPERATIONS para. 1-5d(2), at vii (21 Feb. 1997). “As soldiers, we must kill or be killed, but once a person enjoys killing, he is lost.” MAKOS, *supra* note 1, at 66.

⁴ *By the Numbers: World-Wide Deaths*, NAT’L WWII MUSEUM, <http://www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education/for-students/ww2-history/ww2-by-the-numbers/world-wide-deaths.html> (last visited Dec. 8, 2014). The United States lost 416,800 American Soldiers and 418,500 civilians during World War II. Germany lost 5,533,00 soldiers. Between 6,600,000 and 8,800,000 German civilians lost their lives. *Id.*

⁵ MAKOS, *supra* note 1, at 1, 199–208.

⁶ *Id.* at 1–7 (Introduction). Adam Makos began his writing career at age fifteen when he decided to start a newsletter on World War II aviation. The newsletter, entitled *Valor*, developed into a magazine through college, and Makos began working full-time for the magazine upon college graduation in 2003. *Id.*; Adam Makos, LYCOMING COLL., <http://www.lycoming.edu/profile/alumni/makosAdam.aspx> (last visited Dec. 8, 2014); see also ADAM MAKOS, VOICES OF THE PACIFIC: UNTOLD STORIES FROM THE MARINE

HEROES OF WORLD WAR II (2013); ADAM MAKOS, DEVOTION: AN EPIC STORY OF HEROISM, BROTHERHOOD, AND SACRIFICE (forthcoming May 2015) (detailing the experiences of two Navy pilots in North Korea and a sixty-three-year-old promise).

⁷ MAKOS, *supra* note 1, at 2–3. Makos had intended on traveling to France with his high school French club the summer following his freshman year. Instead, he changed his mind and traveled to Walt Disney World with his family that same week. The 747 jetliner that carried his teacher and sixteen classmates to France exploded midair off the coast of Long Island. *Id.*

⁸ See *id.* at 78 (“Then he slid under his blankets and pulled them over his head so spiders would not crawl across his face.”); *id.* at 84 (“Banking westward, he wove through the heavenly white river, following his compass until he popped into the blue, alone, above his desert home.”); *id.* at 93 (“The engine whined, coughed, and belched white smoke before settling into a powerful rhythm.”).

⁹ *Id.* at 56–57 (describing Franz’s first combat flight as he would “dive, hit, climb, repeat”); *id.* at 81 (“He panicked. Hauling back on the stick, he pulled his fighter into a screaming climb, up and away from the onrushing enemy . . . [H]e saw a terrifying sight behind his tail.”); *id.* at 122 (“From six feet under water, Franz looked up and saw the waves above him.”); *id.* 306 (“He felt himself grow cold as the thought struck him. I just killed myself.”); *id.* at 320–21 (describing a plane explosion and the gruesome injuries suffered as a result).

¹⁰ *Id.* at 24, 32–33, 91, 113 (“[He] mentioned he had a brother in the Navy and said that he ‘had no idea where he went wrong.’”); *id.* at 132, 138 (“You’re too nice a kid for this army. Check out the Air Corps.”); *id.* at 217, 288 (“Hitler, Goering, Himmler, and all of their friends are out on a boat at sea . . . There’s a big storm and their boat sinks! Who’s saved? . . . ‘Germany!’”); *id.* at 351.

the accuracy of the events Makos describes.¹¹ For instance, Makos claims that a small and unknown percentage of American pilots would shoot German pilots who were in their parachutes or after they landed.¹² Makos provides no support for such a strong allegation.¹³

Additionally, distracting to the reader is the heavy use of asterisks instead of footnotes, along with the style choice to separate sections by date or time instead of clear labels.¹⁴ Despite these drawbacks, the book is replete with lessons on leadership and camaraderie that any Army officer is sure to benefit from.

III. Leadership, Duty, and Camaraderie

As the book expertly portrays, the principles and ideals of leadership, duty, and camaraderie transcend national boundaries. Throughout the pages, examples of leadership within the German Air Force remind readers what the true focus of leadership is: taking care of subordinates.¹⁵ After having flown 300 combat missions and becoming leader of his own squadron, Franz no longer strives for victories or prays for himself. Instead, he prays that he will lead well and “get his boys home.”¹⁶

A further leadership message emerges in the discussion of Colonel Maurice Preston’s command of the American 379th Bombardment Group. Colonel Preston’s innovative leadership skills included the welcoming of ideas from his subordinates through feedback forms passed out after every mission.¹⁷ The use of feedback to improve leadership ability is the concept envisioned behind the Army’s Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback (MSAF) 360 program.¹⁸ General Ray Odierno, U.S. Army Chief of Staff, considers feedback as a tool to increase self-awareness, thereby facilitating leadership growth.¹⁹ He states, “[M]ulti-dimensional feedback is an important component to holistic leader development.”²⁰

More pointedly outlined throughout the book is the sense of camaraderie that develops between soldiers that fight together in combat, whether they are friends or adversaries.²¹ This concept is evident when the American crew of a badly damaged bomber decides to stay aboard to assist their pilot instead of parachute out to safety;²² when a German Air Force pilot saves an American from execution by Schutzstaffel (SS) officers;²³ and when a Russian pilot parachutes out of a badly damaged plane at the encouragement of a German pilot.²⁴ It is not uncommon for combat soldiers to feel more of a bond with an enemy soldier than with their own countrymen.²⁵ Through shared hardship and risk of death, the bonds created between

¹¹ Compare MAKOS, *supra* note 1, at 385–92 (showing a lack of sources in the notes and bibliography pages for some chapters and listing only one to three sources for others), with STEPHEN AMBROSE, *CITIZEN SOLDIERS: THE U.S. ARMY FROM THE NORMANDY BEACHES TO THE BULGE TO THE SURRENDER OF GERMANY JUNE 7, 1944, TO MAY 7, 1945*, at 493–514 (1997) (listing eighty-two sources for cites that begin in the prologue and run through all nineteen chapters), and LAURA HILLENBRAND, *UNBROKEN: A WORLD WAR II STORY OF SURVIVAL, RESILIENCE, AND REDEMPTION 417–67* (2010) (listing sources for cites on nearly every page of the book).

¹² MAKOS, *supra* note 1, at 301 (describing law of war violation in an asterisk statement at the bottom of the page in Chapter 21).

¹³ If support was provided for this fact, it was not clear in either the main text nor in the Notes section listing the four different sources cited in Chapter 21.

¹⁴ Makos uses asterisks throughout the book to annotate additional information or give further explanation. Some of the asterisk statements should have been in the main text of the book, MAKOS *supra* note 1, at 82, 123, 230, while others state unusual collateral facts, *id.* at 107, 195. If fully engrossed in the reading, it is easy to lose sight of the small asterisks within the text. Additionally, Makos’s use of footnotes within the asterisk statements was unusual. *Id.* at 66, 100, 117, 126, 127, 131, 159. Further, every section was labeled chronologically, but in a distracting way: “Nearly five years later, 1937;” “Several Nights Later;” “Three Weeks Later;” “One Month Later;” “Several Days Later;” “That Same Evening;” “Three and a half hours later, 11AM.” *Id.* at 68, 71, 80, 98, 175. Similar section-labels span the entire book.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 120 (“[The pilots] had not abandoned their mechanics.”) (describing an air field evacuation); *id.* at 217 (“Son, your men are okay, you did your job. What can we do for you?”).

¹⁶ *Id.* at 250 (“Now his mission was to get his boys home.”).

¹⁷ *Id.* at 60.

¹⁸ U.S. DEP’T OF ARMY, REG. 350-1, ARMY TRAINING AND LEADER DEVELOPMENT app. K (18 Dec. 2009) (RAR, 4 Aug. 2011) (Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback).

¹⁹ MULTI-SOURCE ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK, <http://msaf.army.mil/LeadOn.aspx> (last visited Sept. 5, 2014).

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ MAKOS, *supra* note 1, at 63 (“Nowhere has it been demonstrated more plainly that no one person can survive without the other as it has here in the desert.”); *id.* at 221 (“So you and your crew stayed for just one man?”); *id.* at 317 (“We wanted desperately to be free from the Gestapo and the SS and in the hands of men who still honored the brotherhood of fellow aviators.”); *id.* at 329 (“[He] had reported to JV-44 out of duty to his comrades.”).

²² *Id.* at 203.

²³ *Id.* at 309 (“The man might have worn a different uniform but he was still a fellow human-being.”) (quoting German Air Force officer Major Werner Roell).

²⁴ *Id.* at 314 (“[Y]ou must remember that one day that Russian pilot was the baby son of a beautiful Russian girl. He has his right to life and love the same as we do.”) (quoting German Air Force pilot Gerhard Barkhorn).

²⁵ John Blake, *Two Enemies Discover a “Higher Call” in Battle*, CNN LIVING (Mar. 9, 2013), <http://www.cnn.com/2013/03/09/living/higher-call-military-chivalry/> (“In many ways, a soldier feels more of a bond with the enemy they’re fighting than with the countrymen back home. The enemy they’re fighting is equally risking death.”) (quoting Steven Pressfield, author of *The Warrior Ethos*).

enemies can induce a sense of duty to the principles of humanity.²⁶

IV. International Law Topics

In the course of reading the book, several topics in international law emerge through the pages. Discussions between soldiers concerning the appropriateness of shooting at enemies in parachutes and the steadfast resistance to the mere idea are a reflection of how deeply the roots of customary international law run.²⁷ What international law practitioners may refer to as the law of armed conflict is on the battleground merely a soldiers' code. One German soldier states, "You fight by the rules to keep your humanity."²⁸ The treatment of prisoners of war, the Geneva Convention, and the targeting of cities and civilians are topics that appear throughout the book,²⁹ reminding legal practitioners that international law concepts are a very real subject for soldiers during war.

V. War, Humanity, and a Reunion of Enemies

*Their code said to fight with fearlessness
and restraint, to celebrate victories, not
death, and to know when it was time to
answer a higher call.*³⁰

"Dear Jesus."³¹ These are the words of the American B-17F ball turret gunner on 20 December 1943, as he sees Franz Stigler approach in his FW-190 on an attack run. But instead of firing on the American bomber, Franz shows unheard of restraint during a time of war. He sees the badly injured crewmembers, the inability of the bomber to fire weapons, and the severe damage to the structure of the plane, making Franz wonder how it was even still flying. Instead of firing, Franz flies alongside the B-17 named *Ye Olde Pub* and escorts American pilot Charlie Brown and his crew—who were on their first combat mission—over a

German defended flak zone, sparing *The Pub* from the flak gunners who held their fire due to the German plane that was flying at its side. Franz escorts them to the edges of the Atlantic Ocean, salutes Charlie, and flies back to Germany.³²

The heart of *A Higher Call* is not only in the compassion of Franz Stigler's decision to let his enemy go knowing it was considered treason,³³ but also in the events that transpired forty-six years later. With both soldiers having unanswered questions about the event—for Franz, "Was it worth it?" and for Charlie, "Why did he do it?"—they embark on a journey to find one another. In 1990, Franz and Charlie meet for the first time since Franz's salute to Charlie over the Atlantic.³⁴ In the lobby of a hotel in Seattle, Washington, where they had planned to meet, Franz sees Charlie and runs to him, and "[t]he two former enemies hug[] and cr[y]."³⁵ Two months later, Franz meets two of the crewmembers who were aboard *The Pub* on that fateful day in December, one of them being the ball turret gunner who thought he was going to die the moment he first saw Franz approaching on his attack run.³⁶ Sam "Blackie" Blackford shakes Franz's hand and through sobs of gratefulness, thanks Franz for sparing his life, having allowed his children and grandchildren to experience life.³⁷

VI. A Must Read

A Higher Call has rightfully garnered much praise.³⁸ It is a beautifully written account of the many human facets of

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ MAKOS, *supra* note 1, at 54, 301. Customary international law is the law "resulting from the general and consistent practice of States followed from a sense of legal obligation . . ." INT'L & OPERATIONAL LAW DEP'T, THE JUDGE ADVOCATE GEN.'S LEGAL CTR. & SCH., U.S. ARMY, LAW OF ARMED CONFLICT DESKBOOK 4 (2014).

²⁸ MAKOS, *supra* note 1, at 54. While an enlisted soldier in the Jagdgeschwader 27 (JG-27), a lieutenant tells Franz, "Every single time you go up, you'll be outnumbered . . . Those odds may make a man want to fight dirty to survive. . . . But let what I'm about to say to you act as a warning. Honor is everything here." *Id.*

²⁹ *Id.* at 41, 54, 153, 168, 301, 316.

³⁰ *Id.* at 202.

³¹ *Id.* at 200.

³² *Id.* at 164, 199–208.

³³ *Id.* at 218. Franz knew that he could face a firing squad for his actions. The SS were executing soldiers and civilians for making mere statements that were considered contrary to National Party principles, in violation of the Subversion Law. For example, a war widow was executed for telling the joke, "Hitler and Goering are standing atop the Berlin radio tower. Hitler says he wants to do something to put a smile on Berliners' faces. So Goering says: "Why don't you jump?"" *Id.*

³⁴ A video taken during this first meeting can be found at <http://www.valorstudios.com/In-the-presence-of-my-enemy.htm>. A *CBS This Morning* segment filmed in 1990 at the reunion of Charlie Brown's bomb group and a video of Charlie and Franz discussing the 20 December 1943 event can be found at <http://www.valorstudios.com/franz-stigler-photos-and-video.htm>.

³⁵ MAKOS, *supra* note 1, at 363.

³⁶ *Id.* at 367.

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *A Higher Call* spent thirteen weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list. *Best Sellers*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 28, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/best-sellers-books/2013-04-28/hardcover-nonfiction/list.html?pagewanted=print&module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3Aw>. See generally Franz Stigler, *Public Figure*, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Franz-Stigler/178339628938799> (last visited Dec. 8, 2014); John D. Shaw *Historic Aviation Art*, LIBERTY STUDIOS, http://www.libertystudios.us/painting/a_higher_call/ (last visited Dec. 8, 2014) (depicting art inspired by the book that is currently sold out). The storyline is being considered for

war, and underscores the impact that a single act of love can have in an ugly world of war. Though many stories of courage and valor have been written concerning World War II soldiers and events,³⁹ *A Higher Call* gives emphasis to the kinships that develop between human beings within the deep recesses of our soul—a love of fellow man, whether friend or enemy. Through his actions, Franz demonstrated his love

of fellow man on that fateful day in December 1943, five days before Christmas. Forty-six years later, Franz tells Charlie the day they reunite, “I love you.”⁴⁰

a potential play or movie. *A Stricken Allied Bomber, the German Ace Sent to Shoot it Down, and a Truly Awe Inspiring Story of Wartime Chivalry*, MAIL ONLINE (Aug. 11, 2014), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2370933/A-Higher-Call-A-stricken-Allied-bomber-German-ace-sent-shoot-truly-awe-inspiring-story-wartime-chivalry.html>; MOVIE INSIDER, <http://www.movieinsider.com/m11841/a-higher-call/> (last visited Dec. 8, 2014).

³⁹ See, e.g., STEPHEN HARDING, *THE LAST BATTLE: WHEN U.S. AND GERMAN SOLDIERS JOINED FORCES IN THE WANING HOURS OF WORLD WAR II IN EUROPE* (2013); PHIL NORDYKE, *FOUR STARS OF VALOR: THE COMBAT HISTORY OF THE 505TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENT IN WORLD WAR II* (2006); PATRICK K. O'DONNELL, *INTO THE RISING SUN: WORLD WAR II'S PACIFIC VETERANS REVEAL THE HEART OF COMBAT* (2002).

⁴⁰ MAKOS, *supra* note 1, at 364.