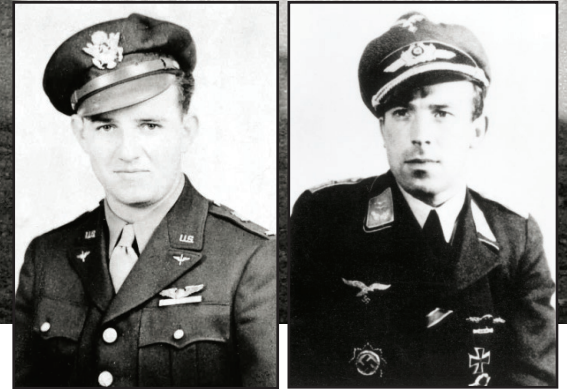
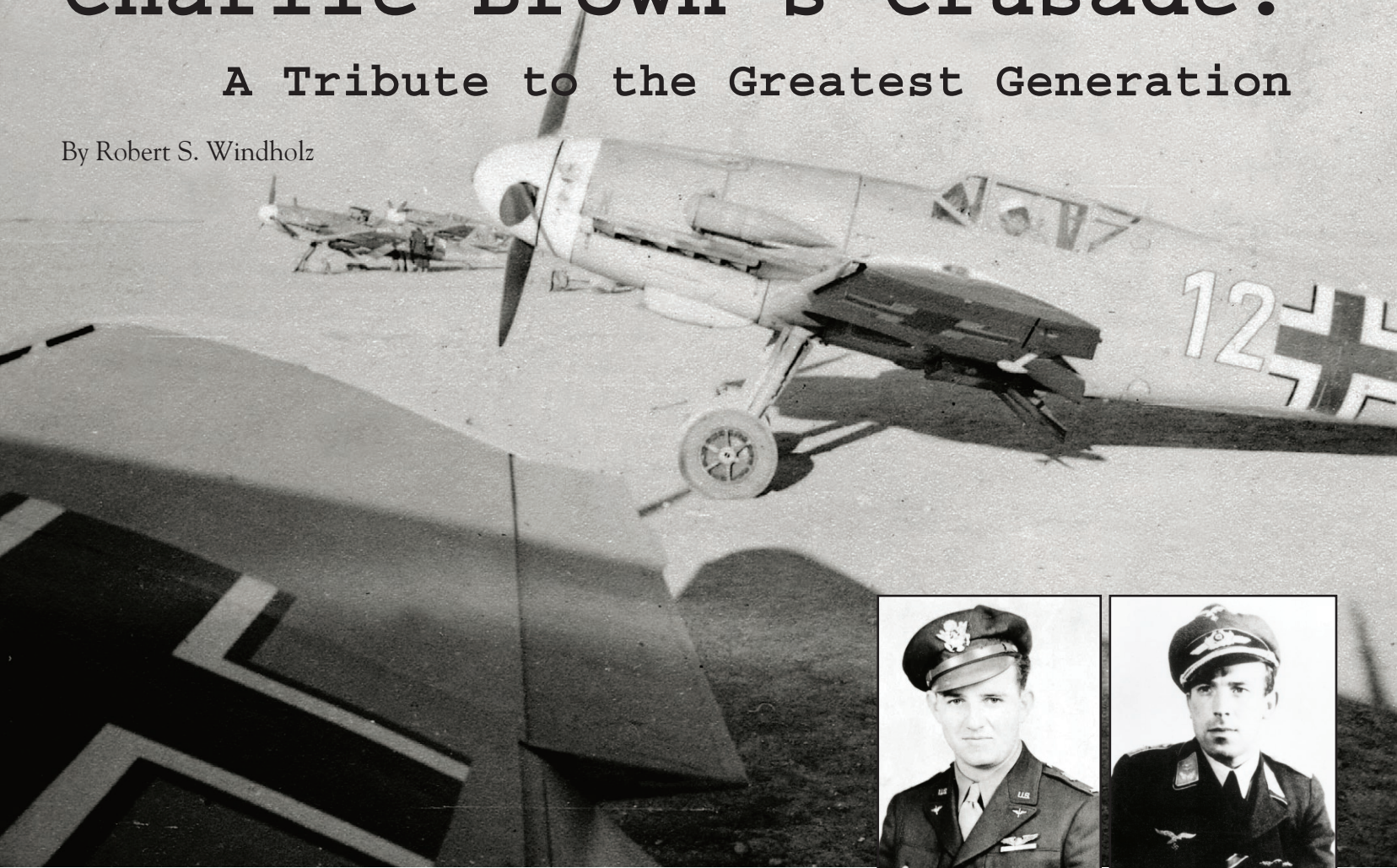


Charlie Brown's Crusade:

A Tribute to the Greatest Generation

By Robert S. Windholz



Charlie Brown

Franz Stigler

Golf is a sport where integrity and character are closely woven into the game. War is an endeavor, where integrity and character don't always play a major role in survival. Charlie Brown has seen more war than golf. He, more than most veterans, truly knows the meaning of survival.

As Brown said, December 20, 1943 was a hard, cold wintry day in Kimbolton, England. Fear was not a word that was often used, but always felt by the crews of the 379th Bomber Group. Lt. Charlie Brown had flown his first mission on December 13th and was now preparing for his first bombing mission as aircraft commander. The target was Bremen, Germany. The Focke-Wulf Fw 190 was widely regarded as one of Germany's best fighters. It was more than a match for the British Spitfires, and it was manufactured on the outskirts of Bremen. It was time to seriously reduce the German capacity to manufacture the 190s.

Bomber crews begin their task early in the morning. The myriad of preparatory details help the crews from dwelling on the dangerous, unfolding bomb attack. Charlie and his crew were assigned to Ye Olde Pub, a B-17F, No. 42-3167. Its base weight was 24 tons. The plane normally carried 3-4 tons of bombs and had .50-caliber machine guns for protection from marauding fighters. The 10-man crew was ready to make war over the European mainland in a daylight attack.

Ye Olde Pub was the last 379th Bomb Group aircraft on the strike. Flak bursts came dangerously close to the bomber, and then hit and almost destroyed the nose section of it. Bombs were released, but two of the four engines were about done. Then No. 2 was shutdown.

Ye Olde Pub fell out of formation.

Stragglers were sure prey for German fighters, and soon, the plane was facing multiple fighters: Fw 190s and Me 109s. The B-17's guns, except for the top turret and one in the nose, were jammed, frozen or malfunctioned and could not fire. "My God, they won't fire," said a voice over the intercom. Brown's B-17 was hit by hundreds of rounds of machine gun bullets and multiple bursts of 20 and 30 millimeter cannon fire. "The incoming machine gun rounds, from the German fighters, sounded like hail hitting a tin roof," just like the sounds he heard as a youngster on the farm in West Virginia, Brown said.

American fighter escorts had long disappeared with the main force, and the wounded stragglers had to fend for themselves. Under interminable attack from German fighters, Brown aggressively angled his bomber head-on into the attacking planes and managed to fend them off for the moment. Ye Olde Pub's oxygen system malfunctioned at 25,000 feet, and all of those aboard lost consciousness. The plane spiraled out of control. Then, for reasons Brown can't explain, he regained consciousness and reacquired control less than 1,000 feet from the ground.

The German fighters left the area, probably thinking Ye Olde Pub had crashed. At this same time, Luftwaffe ace Franz Stigler was on the ground re-arming and refueling his Me 109. Stigler saw Brown's B-17 come over his field and he immediately began to take off to engage the bomber. Moments later, Brown ventured to look out of

his right cockpit window. Three feet from the wingtip of the B-17 was the wing tip of Stigler's Me 109. One of Brown's crew members was dead and six were wounded. The plane looked like a sieve. Death seemed imminent. Parachuting was not realistic because many of the crew members were not physically able to move and had no real chance at survival. The moment of truth had arrived for Ye Olde Pub and her crew.

Fortunately for Brown and crew, the Me 109 was flown by Stigler, and he showed chivalry not normally recorded during WWII. Stigler's fighter had just been refueled and re-armed and was directly behind the American bomber at its 6 o'clock position—close enough to view activities inside Ye Olde Pub. Stigler could hardly believe what he saw. He had approached the B-17 prepared to shoot it down, but what he saw on board touched his heart and his compassion. Stigler saw the men, wounded and alive and he could not bring himself to execute the coup de gras. He thought it would be like shooting down a man in a parachute. Years after the attack, Stigler would describe the Brown aircraft as "the most badly damaged aircraft I ever saw which was still flying." Stigler, unable to force Brown to land his aircraft in Germany or Sweden, saluted Brown's plane, rolled his fighter and departed. His act of compassion risked death for him if his superiors had ever discovered it.


The United States military hushed up the entire incident. Likely, the idea of a heroic, compassionate German Luftwaffe officer was not what anyone in the United States government wanted publicized on the home front during a 'war for survival.'

Lt. Brown finished his service in WWII, completed college and returned to active duty in the Air Force. In 1953, while stationed in England, Brown, then a captain, attended the Ryder Cup Matches. He was almost incredulous at the individuality of golf and the ability of the golf pros to exhibit such grace and athleticism. In golf, there was no team to offset or diffuse individual errors.

Early in his career, Brown played golf in the military with senior officers, but a German .303 caliber machine gun bullet lodged in his shoulder during the December 20, 1943 action, and it was not discovered until several years later, as the sub-zero weather masked his wound. This affected his golf career, but he insists that he would never have been more than a fair player on a putt-putt course, anyway.

Brown had a 22-year career in the Air Force and finished his career as a senior intelligence/briefing officer on the staff of the Joint Chiefs. He retired from the military as a lieutenant colonel after serving his country well and dutifully. He then worked as a foreign service reserve officer with the Agency for International Development for the Department of State.

In the mid 1980s, Brown began an extensive search to locate any surviving German pilot from his encounter on December 20, 1943, and wrote an article for the German Fighter Pilot's Association newsletter. Stigler read the article. During January 1990, it was confirmed that he was the fighter pilot who spared the hapless crew of the B-17. Since then, Brown and Stigler have met on many occasions and attended several WWII bomber group reunions, air-shows, and museum fundraisers together.

In 2007, both Brown and Stigler were honored by the Florida Legislature as representatives of those who served in the war. While they're not golf superstars, these two men certainly have earned the admiration and respect of the American public. 

The story of the December 20, 1943 bombing mission can be read in much greater detail, in *Raiders of the Reich* by Martin W. Bowman and Theo Boiten.

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Special thanks to Bryan Makos of Valor Magazine, for permission to use some of the incredible art work and photos included with this article.



Charlie Brown's Crew



Franz and Charlie today. Photo by Valor Magazine.



Ye Olde Pub Landing. Artwork by Jamie Iverson.