

ROUND TRIP

written by

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based on real events

five-minute radio play
for Backstage Sound Stories - 'What Really Matters'

STIGLER

It was a foggy day, low cloud over Northern
Germany, December 1943, when I first saw her.
A B-17.

Sound effects: the Daimler-Benz 601
engine of a Messerschmitt Bf 109E-3
sputters and REVS to life. The
sound of an AIR RAID SIREN begins.

The THROATY RUMBLE of Pratt &
Whitney radial engines rises above
the gentle whistle of FALLING BOMBS
which, thousands of feet below,
impact the ground with a percussive
THUD THUD THUD.

Return fire from massive anti-
aircraft guns pump FLAK EXPLOSIONS
into the night sky. Muffled RADIO
VOICES -- confused men, yelling,
screaming -- are accompanied by the
deadly rat-a-tat of MACHINE GUNS,
while the V-12 ROAR of German
fighter aircraft swoop about the
sky.

Over radio-mics, the West Virginia
accent of the pilot, UNITED STATES
ARMY AIR FORCE 2ND LIEUTENANT
CHARLES BROWN talks back to his 9-
man crew.

BROWN
(yelling)

Frenchy! Bandit! 12 o'clock!

More .50 caliber fire, as the last
fighter plane ROARS BY with its
anti-aircraft guns BLAZING. And
then, FRENCHY SCREAMS.

BROWN
Frenchy, talk to me! Frenchy, did you get him?

PEACHY
Frenchy's blown to Hell back here. They ripped
our goddamn roof off.

BROWN
Ecky, sound off.

PEACHY
Ecky bought it over Bremen.
(MORE)

PEACHY (CONT'D)

Had about a dozen of those bastards on us.
Blew his goddamn head off. Yelesanko caught it
in the thigh. Doc got it in the shoulder.
(delirious laugh)
Think I lost an eye.

The ROAR of an approaching
Messerschmitt begins, growing
louder on fast approach.

PINKY

Captain, you're gonna want to see this.
Starboard, three o'clock.

BROWN

Oh, Christ. Jennings, Yelesanko, can you get a
bead on him? Blackie, get out of that damn
belly gun! Going low. Dammit, what is wrong
with this bird?

PINKY

We lost our tail at 2,000 feet!

BROWN

No tail? Peachy, what do you see back there?

PEACHY

They chewed us up, Charlie. It's Swiss Cheese
back here. Rudder's shredded. Port side
elevator is completely gone. Flak knocked out
#2, and we have damage on #4.

The Messerschmitt ROARS close by
again.

PINKY

Bastard's circling us! Call it in!

PEACHY

Radio is out.

BROWN

What in Hell's he doing?

PINKY

He's coming round for the kill. Someone get a
bead on him!

BROWN

(forcefully)

No.

The Messerschmitt SWOOPS parallel
to the ROAR of the B-17.

BROWN

I see him. We are eyeball to eyeball. He owns us.

PINKY

What?!

BROWN

Lieutenant, everybody, stand down!

PEACHY

That bastard is waving!

BROWN

Peachy, that's an order. Nobody shoot.

The DUAL ROAR as the two aircraft power side by side through the air.

Brown lowers his voice, throttling back panic.

BROWN

Doc, I see water. How far to land?

DOC

'Bout 30 minutes to Sweden, Boss.

The Messerschmitt SWOOPS in close, and then away.

PEACHY

Whoa! That crazy Kraut! He's trying to force us down!

BROWN

No. How far to England?

PINKY

(incredulous)

On two engines and no tail?

BROWN

Doc?

DOC

Another 200 mile, boss, give or take.

The B-17 engines REV as it performs a banking maneuver.

The Messerschmitt ROARS close.

PEACHY

Did... did you see that?

BROWN

I see it.

PINKY

What's happening?

PEACHY

Son-of-a-bitch saluted.

The Messerschmitt SWOOPS away.

PEACHY

He's climbing!

The B-17 engines continue their low ROAR, the Messerschmitt now at a distance, as Brown switches to open mic, to address his crew.

BROWN

Listen, anyone wants to bail, speak now. God knows why, but our friend out there is giving us a last chance to make this a round trip. I'm gonna land this bird back in England. Now, let's hear it -- Doc, you with me?

DOC

Aye, sir.

BROWN

Pechout?

PEACHY

Aye.

BROWN

Frenchy, from sounds of it, you ain't got much choice. Jennings, Yelesanko, Blackie, Andy?

A chorus of 'aye's from all. Then, Pinky meekly adds:

PINKY

Aye, sir.

BROWN

God knows what our Luftwaffe pal is doing, but we're heading home.

PINKY

(quietly)

He's shadowing us, Charlie.

BROWN

What?

PINKY

12 o'clock.

The Messerschmitt is a steady BUZZ above them.

All aircraft sounds SLOWY FADE, replaced by GENTLE WIND, as Brown reminisces, in a reflective tone, years later.

BROWN

We could see him up there, like Pinky said, shadowing us. He kept with us all the way to England. Finally high-tailed it before a couple of P-47s come along, got us in over England. Landed us at 448th Bomb Group, RAF Seething.

(beat)

C.O. interrogated us, told us all to can it. Someone decided you can't be human and be flying in a German cockpit. But we all knew we owed our lives to that Kraut.

(beat)

Oberleutnant Franz Stigler. That was his name. Fighter ace. Peachy had been right. Stigler was lining us up to finish us. But he couldn't do it.

STIGLER

For me, it would have been like shooting a parachute. A sitting duck. I could see how injured they all were. I couldn't shoot them down. I kept them on my wing so our anti-aircraft guns would not target them. When they were safe, we parted with a salute. It was an understanding.

(beat)

I said nothing to my commandant. It would have meant court martial. I served till the end of the war. And then, in 1986, through my Air Force records, Charlie found me. Finally, we got drunk together.

BROWN

It was like meeting a family member. A brother I had never seen, at least for 40 years.

STIGLER

I hugged him. It wasn't easy.

(beat)

I love you, Charlie.