

# STEWART & LOW -- The Buzzin Twins !

## PART 1 – BY ANDY LOW

Somewhere on a bomber base in England, late in the afternoon of an April day in 1944, the Operations Control Room of the 453<sup>rd</sup> Bombardment Group (H) under the direction of the Group Operations Officer, the Major, and his assistant, the Captain (that was me) was slowing its activity. The Major was winding up last-minute operations reports to higher headquarters on the results of the morning mission to Hitler's Fortress. The Captain was anticipating the next day's mission. The call would come for a maximum effort – every available aircrew and every available aircraft. There would be a short interlude in group activity as the staff awaited target intelligence and arming instructions.

With hardly a break in shuffling the mound of paperwork, the Major, in his low key manner, simply said, "Andy, find us a minimum crew and an airplane and we'll go shoot some landings." With a quick "Yes, Sir," I headed for Base Operations. Staff pilots, who generally flew in the co-pilot's position of the lead aircraft during combat missions, getting to "shoot some landings", was a welcome break.

At Base Operations I filed an aircraft clearance form and questioned the regulation which specified a minimum crew for any training operator. It was a poor time of day to locate crewmembers. Both the Major and I were "green card" and instructor pilots on the B-24 Liberator aircraft. Both of us had many flying hours as instructors in both B-17 and B-24 aircraft in the U.S., thus my rationalization on finding additional crew members for a local area training mission was simple – make up some names. I listed the Major as pilot and myself as co-pilot. Using combinations of our names, I filled out the remainder of the crew positions. I signed the authorization. We were cleared! No questions!

I phoned the Major to indicate the parking hardstand where the aircraft was located. The aircraft was coming out of major maintenance and the crew chief had systems that he wanted us to operate and check during our flight. I gave the aircraft a quick inspection, kicked the tires, signed the paperwork, and confirmed the aircraft was ready for flight.

Soon the Major pulled up in his jeep. He first asked about the minimum aircrew requirements. I ran over my rationalization on this subject. The old barracks proverb, "the exigencies of the situation being such as to preclude compliance with appropriate regulations, etc." could apply. The Major was a very silent guy. Without comment we mounted up with him in the pilot's position and myself as co-pilot. We cranked the engines, received our clearance by radio from the control tower, taxied out and were on our way. Exhilarating! Off we went into the "wild blue yonder!!" The B-24 Liberator responded like a homesick angel.

We could not have been up to 1,000 feet on the climb when the Major pulled back on the power. He looked over at me with a wry smile and above the noise of the aircraft engines he shouted, "My former group commander always has his nap about now, Let's go wake him up!"

The Major had just come to our group from a base less than ten miles away. Before I could comprehend his intentions, we were in a gentle dive toward his former base. We swooped below the surrounding treetops, below the ridgelines of the barracks. The Major then deftly pulled up in a beautiful "Chandelle" maneuver to his left.

"Well that will wake him up. Now let's GET him up!" said the Major as he rolled expertly into another dive. Again we dipped below the treetops, the barracks ridgelines, and then up again into another "Chandelle" maneuver, this time to the right. As a normal thing the Major had a very subtle smile, but by this time he was smiling broadly, with a steely glint in his eye. "He's up now and will want our aircraft tail number, so let's go up one more time!"

The control tower operator at the base continually called to inquire why we were flying in his control area without a clearance. And below specified altitude minimums. Handling the radio, I looked to the Major for guidance, "Ignore them, don't answer," the Major instructed.

At each dive, the control tower operator became more adamant. He wanted the name, rank and serial number of the pilot. We were reminded that they had our aircraft serial markings. The bureaucracy would soon know who we were.

After the third swoop, the Major looked over at me with almost a mad twinkle in his eye and with his taciturn drawl calmly said, "I could make those operators get out of that tower!" We rolled into another dive. The control tower was mounted on an elevated platform above the maintenance hangar. Access was by an external ladder for the last twenty feet. Down to the tower level we dove and around the tower we zoomed. Transmissions from the tower became more rapid, almost frenzied and staccato. Would the pilot of the B-24 kindly report his name, rank and serial number! We remained silent. The second diving pass was from the opposite direction, but just as close to the tower. On the third pass, the transmission from the tower ceased. The three occupants could be seen scrambling down the ladder. The Major broke into a broad grin.

We returned to our home base. The Major practiced some takeoffs and landings. We ran through the system checks requested by the crew chief. We changed seats and I then had an opportunity to check my proficiency. Our mission was over. We came to a stop on landing, taxied in, and parked the aircraft. We made the necessary entries in the flight logs, reported to the crew chief, and returned to our office. It had been a most satisfying and relaxing training mission.

An hour later, we went to the officer's mess for our evening meal. Suddenly the group commander strode into the room and came directly to where we were seated. We jumped smartly to our feet and the commander began to regale the two of us; pity the poor example set by his operations officers, those charged with developing and enforcing safe air operations.

Here in the story I have difficulty recalling the exact details of what happened next, So, I defer to the Major – Major James M Stewart, Group Operations Officer. Major Stewart was known to us principally as a talented pilot and inspirational combat leader. To the rest of the world he was Jimmy Stewart, already an acknowledged movie star.

## **PART 2 – BY JIMMY STEWART**

Well, it's been forty years.

I recall the incident. In fact, I recall when I wished I could have forgotten it. It happened much as Andy has written. In his telling, perhaps the airspeed seems a little faster, the altitude a little lower and the Chandelles more perfect, given the passage of so much time. So, there may be some embellishment.

It fairly relates what happened on a late afternoon in April 1944. He's right, Colonel strode into the mess. Normally he was a most mild-mannered man. Highly decorated, he had already been through much of the air war. Though much younger than I, his combat experiences had induced a maturity far beyond his years. Obviously he had recently been severely chastised and I guessed immediately that he had been called by the Brig. General commanding our combat wing. The word of our training mission – escapade – had been reported to higher headquarters. Well, I tried the explanation that we were highly qualified instructor pilots who had been cooped up too long in a stuffy headquarters. Suddenly we had a chance to fly, and were momentarily carried away with the exhilaration of being free. We did nothing dangerous, only getting a feel of the airplane. So we tried to explain. The more I struggled for words (the Colonel did not give me much opportunity to speak), the more I realized that what we had thought was a grand idea some three hours earlier now seemed pretty dumb. So we switched rational. I say "we" Andy just stood there. He did try to remind the Colonel that we were very experienced pilots and did nothing dangerous.

Then I remembered the old barracks proverb, "when you are at the bottom of a hole, don't dig." I assured the Colonel that there had been only a momentary lapse in good judgement. This we regretted and such a lapse would not happen again.

Flushed and upset, the Colonel strode out of the mess without stopping for his evening meal. After that, our evening meal didn't taste very good either. We returned to the office. Shortly after arriving, a telephone call came from Wing Headquarters for me. It was the Commanding General. As a Major I was pleased to be called by the General, but it soon turned out to be a continuation of our encounter with the Colonel. How could we do such a dumb thing? Weren't we supposed to be setting a proper example for the younger crews? Suppose they were tempted to repeat our mission and kill themselves in a high-speed stall.

I had learned from our session with the Colonel to limit explanations, Now they did not make too much sense. I assured the General that a lapse of good discipline and training would not occur again. At least, not with us. Finally he hung up.

It wasn't over yet. The phone rang again. It was my former Colonel, and he was most upset, particularly about his control tower operators. I was most humble and contrite of heart. I assured him we regretted the stir we had caused. We were convinced it was unprofessional. Reluctantly we listened and hung up.

I was glad the operations instructions for the mission the following day began to come in. At least it changed the subject.

As I now recall the incident, and the furor we provoked, I recall I was fortunate to have had so much theatrical training behind me. I was called on to play many different roles in a very short time. But the air war went on.

A month later, in May 1944, I was promoted to Lt. Colonel and Andy was promoted to Major. Obviously, the bureaucracy had not taken a vengeful stance. I was moved up to Combat Wing Headquarters and assigned as Executive Officer to the Commanding General. Andy moved up in the bomb group to replace me as Operations Officer. Somehow, I guess the bureaucracy has forgiven our iniquity.

As a postscript to our war story, I can report that one of my early tasks was to publish, in the General's name, a memorandum calling attention to the regulations requiring a minimum aircrew, which forbids flying without proper clearance in a control zone and descending below safe operating altitudes for any reason.

In reflection, over the past forty years I have done a lot of flying in many kinds of aircraft, and for many diverse reasons. As I look back on that training mission, I remember it as a really fun flight.

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