

THE FREE AND THE BRAVE

Original screenplay by
Ed Rathje

Based on a True Story Lived by my Uncle,
Second Lieutenant Oscar C. Sampson

ejr@jmisys.com

FADE IN:

EXT. MOUNTAINOUS COUNTRYSIDE - DAY

WHITE!

Clouds stretch to the horizon -- jagged peaks poke through.

A break in the clouds -- a river valley below -- green hillsides with barns and haystacks -- a few villages.

A postcard setting.

EXT. ALPINE VILLAGE - DAY

A long winding street -- couples stroll on the sidewalks.

A beautiful, sunny day.

A sidewalk cafe is busy with customers.

EXT. SIDEWALK CAFE - DAY

Glasses and utensils clink as a waiter moves from table to table.

Four uniformed officers, beer steins in hand, sit at a table.

JOHN STEICHEN (22), a good navigator and even better storyteller, recounts one of his amorous adventures.

STEICHEN

So when I get to Sheila's flat, I ask for Scotch, but all she's got is sherry. I tell her to keep her knickers on.

Steichen pauses to sip his beer.

STEICHEN (CONT'D)

I say "Cheerio", and head back to base. Plenty of Scotch at the Officers' Club.

Steichen slams down his stein, spilling some beer.

Bombardier JOHN GARCIA (23), from Puerto Rico, howls in laughter and wipes beer foam from his mustache.

GARCIA

Johnny, you've got to get your priorities straight!

Copilot OSCAR 'SAMMY' SAMPSON (26), large and muscular, puts his huge left paw on Steichen's shoulder and gives a squeeze.

SAMMY

Hell, I'll drink her damn sherry. What's her phone number?

Pilot WILLIAM 'WOODY' PARRAMORE (24) smiles. Though the smallest of the crew, he is their well-accepted leader.

WOODY

Johnny, slow down a bit. We're on our best behavior here.

STEICHEN

Hell, I've been drinking since I was sixteen.

SAMMY

(jerking his thumb)
Woody! Check the Kraut.

A German officer, wearing a long black leather coat, walks toward the group. His boots make a pronounced clip, clip as he walks precisely on the sidewalk.

SAMMY (CONT'D)

Give me five minutes in an alley.

STEICHEN

I'll show him who's going to win this war!

Steichen jumps up from his seat -- punches the air.

STEICHEN (CONT'D)

One good pop in the nose, you asshole!

Sammy quickly rises from his chair and pushes Steichen down.

SAMMY

Get in line, Johnny.

WOODY

Easy, men. We'll all get our chance.

SAMMY

Can't be soon enough. Sorry I made
us come here.

Sammy remains standing. The German officer walks by their
table, carefully avoiding looking at the Americans.

Sammy stares at the German. If looks could kill.

The German officer continues down the sidewalk until he slows
and enters a modest three story building.

A familiar insignia appears above the front door.

The Nazi EAGLE grasps the SWASTIKA with its claws.

The whole building comes into view.

SUPERIMPOSE:

"GERMAN CONSULATE, DAVOS, SWITZERLAND - JUNE, 1944"

Now up and above the village and green valley -- up, up, up.
Back through the billowing white clouds.

Above the snow-covered mountain tops -- wisps of white.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. GOOSE BAY AIRFIELD - NIGHT

Snow flurries fill the air.

It's dark. A few scattered lights struggle against the
blackness, shining on the snow flakes.

The wind howls. A Quonset hut shivers in the driving snow.

SUPERIMPOSE:

"SIX MONTHS EARLIER - DECEMBER, 1943

GOOSE BAY, LABRADOR, TRANSIENT CREW QUARTERS"

Sammy, Woody, Garcia and Steichen, along with six ENLISTED
CREWMEN, all bundled in heavy clothes, emerge from the hut
and hurry toward two B-17 bombers parked on the ramp.

In bold letters on each plane: "AIR TRANSPORT COMMAND".

SAMMY

I hear ATC stands for ash, trash,
and crash.

GARCIA

Yeah. The guys who couldn't be real pilots.

WOODY

Real enough to make it twenty times so far. Non-stop to Scotland.

SAMMY

Scotland's the easy part. Berlin's just a bit tougher.

STEICHEN

Yeah. Not much flak over Scotland.

Woody grabs a handful of snow from the mounds stacked high.

WOODY

Oh, take me back to sweet Carolina.

STEICHEN

See that forecast? Fifty knot winds. They better crab all the way to Prestwick.

GARCIA

Or we crash in the ocean and drown.

STEICHEN

Don't worry. You'll freeze to death before you drown.

SAMMY

Worse, you'll miss the damn war.

STEICHEN

Wouldn't want that to happen.

Woody stops, turns, and holds up his hand.

WOODY

Sammy, you and Steichen go with Roy, Carl, and Bill. See you in Scotland!

The two groups separate and head for their planes.

GARCIA

Steichen! You know, where they make Scotch!

STEICHEN

No shit, genius. Five bucks says we beat you there.

GARCIA
You're on, sucker.

Snowballs fly.

All ten men climb aboard, and the doors are pulled shut.

CUT TO:

INT. ATC B-17 IN FLIGHT, WAIST AREA - NIGHT

Sammy, Steichen and three crewmen sit in their canvas sling seats, some trying to sleep.

The roar of engines and wind fills the plane.

Sammy elbows Steichen.

SAMMY
Sky just cleared. How about a fix
to check that crosswind?

Steichen gets up from his seat and looks out the window.

STEICHEN
Damn, those stars are bright.

Steichen heads up front.

STEICHEN (CONT'D)
No rest for the weary.

Flight Engineer ROY HOMMER (20) stirs from his nap.

ROY
Sure could use a mattress.

SAMMY
Or a couple of beers.

Sammy tilts his head and listens.

SAMMY (CONT'D)
Those engines sound OK to you?

ROY
They're fine. Your mind plays
tricks over water.

SAMMY
Looking forward to a new bird?

ROY
Yeah. Instead of the scrap metal
we've been flying.

Roy moves closer to Sammy.

ROY (CONT'D)
Know anything about our base in
England?

SAMMY
Podington. Little village, middle
of nowhere.

ROY
You worry about combat?

SAMMY
You'll do fine. We all will.

Roy doesn't smile. Sammy keeps it casual.

SAMMY (CONT'D)
Pop made this same crossing. Other
direction, though. Big steamer
from Sweden. When he was just a
kid, thirteen.

ROY
Must be proud of you.

SAMMY
And proud to be American. Pop
never let us speak Swedish.

Sammy makes a face and imitates his father.

SAMMY (CONT'D)
(in a Swedish accent)
You're in America. Speak English!

Roy finally smiles and manages a small laugh.

SAMMY (CONT'D)
He's a little embarrassed, though,
with Sweden sitting out the war.

ROY
They're not alone. What about
Ireland and Switzerland? And
Spain?

SAMMY

Didn't matter to Pop. Made me
promise to fight twice as hard.
For me and for him.

ATC B-17 NAVIGATOR STATION

Steichen crawls into the nose of the plane and finds TIM
MCDANIELS (23), the ATC navigator.

STEICHEN

How about a star fix? I could use
the practice.

MCDANIELS

Careful with my sextant.

Steichen picks up the sextant and aims it up through the
clear Plexiglas astrodome -- toward the stars.

CUT TO:

EXT. B-17 OVER THE ATLANTIC - NIGHT

Above the nose of the B-17, Steichen's dimly-lit face appears
through the astrodome.

The large aircraft shrinks in size as Steichen's face fades
in the distance.

The plane flies east -- toward the pale blue of the new day.

The four-engine bomber becomes a mere toy against the wide
expanse of the ocean below.

The tiny speck of a plane continues to the horizon.

Looking up -- a blaze of stars in the black sky.

CUT TO:

INT. ATC B-17 IN FLIGHT, NAVIGATOR STATION - NIGHT

Steichen turns a few pages in the reference books and does
his calculations at the navigator's table.

STEICHEN

Shit! We're fifty miles off course
already.

MCDANIELS
 (dismissively)
 Star fix is easy to get wrong.

STEICHEN
 Maybe increase that crab angle?

MCDANIELS
 Yeah, I'll check it.

Steichen crawls back out of the navigator station.

ATC B-17 WAIST AREA

Steichen settles back into his seat next to Sammy.

STEICHEN
 Gave the kid a lesson.

SAMMY
 I'll wake you up in Scotland.

STEICHEN
 That'll be happy hour, right?

Radio Operator CARL STETSON (20) and Tail Gunner BILL DORSA (19) wake up when Steichen bumps their feet as he sits down.

CARL
 Johnny sleepwalking again?

SAMMY
 Took a star fix.

CARL
 Little scary out here with no radio
 beacons. Just the damn stars.

BILL
 Just like Columbus. Except we know
 where we're going, right?

CARL
 Lindbergh made this same trip.
 Just... sixteen years ago?

ROY
 No radio. One engine. Talk about
 scary!

CUT TO:

INT. ATC B-17 IN FLIGHT, WAIST AREA - DAY

Sammy wakes from a nap and elbows Steichen.

SAMMY

Hey, sleepy. Let's take a walk.

Steichen rubs his eyes and follows Sammy toward the flight deck.

ATC B-17 FLIGHT DECK

Sammy crawls up behind the ATC pilot, CHRIS WILSON (28).

Steichen continues on to the navigator station.

SAMMY

How's the weather look?

WILSON

Just some high cirrus. Little chilly, though. Forty below.

Sammy looks out the side window, down at the cold Atlantic.

SAMMY

Ocean doesn't look any warmer.

Steichen barges back into the flight deck.

STEICHEN

Sammy, he screwed up! Crabbed two degrees instead of twenty! We're not going to make Scotland!

SAMMY

Chris, can you do anything?

WILSON

Let me check. Take the yoke.

Wilson climbs down into the navigator station, and Sammy takes his seat. Steichen and Sammy exchange glances and stare out at the cold ocean below.

Wilson climbs back into the flight deck.

WILSON (CONT'D)

Tim screwed up. I'll get us back on course, but we're short on fuel.

STEICHEN

What a bonehead! Jeezus!

WILSON
That's enough! Should have checked
myself. Sit down. I'll get us
there.

STEICHEN
(following Sammy)
Bonehead! Hope he can swim better
than he navigates.

ATC B-17 WAIST AREA

Roy, Carl, and Bill are awake. Their eyes widen as they
await the news.

ROY
Engine problems?

SAMMY
Nothing that simple. We're in a
real fix.

CARL
What is it?

SAMMY
Navigation error. And low on fuel.

STEICHEN
Can you all swim? In freezing
water? For more than two minutes?

ROY
Shit! Ash, trash, and --

CARL AND BILL
Crash!

CUT TO:

INT. ATC B-17 IN FLIGHT, WAIST AREA - NIGHT

Wilson enters the waist area with a grim face.

WILSON
Bad news. We got fifteen, maybe
twenty minutes of fuel. All we see
is a bunch of rocks. Chutes on. Be
ready to bail out.

Wilson goes back to the flight deck -- Sammy follows.

Steichen, Roy, Carl, and Bill stand up and buckle on their parachutes. They line up at the side hatch.

Roy looks queasy, about to throw up.

CARL
We'll be fine, Roy. I'll go first.
Just follow me.

Roy strains to see out the side window. Nothing but blackness. His white hands grip his parachute harness.

ATC B-17 FLIGHT DECK

Sammy leans over Wilson's shoulder.

SAMMY
What about the radio? Any reply?

WILSON
Nothing. We've been calling Mayday
for an hour.

SAMMY
(pointing)
Look! See that?

WILSON
A flare! Buckle up. We're
landing.

ATC B-17 WAIST AREA

Sammy rushes in.

SAMMY
Sit down and buckle up. We may get
to the war after all.

STEICHEN
(shaking his head)
Make up your mind, for chrissakes!

CUT TO:

EXT. RAF, ST. ANGELO AIRFIELD - NIGHT

The B-17 makes a steep approach -- flares for a landing, then bounces hard on the runway.

One propeller is feathered. A second engine starts to cough.

The plane slows. A third engine sputters and dies.

SUPERIMPOSE:

"ROYAL AIR FORCE BASE, ST. ANGELO"

EXT. RAF, ST. ANGELO AIRFIELD, APRON - NIGHT

The plane sits on the apron parking area, engines all stopped. The side hatch opens.

Sammy leads his crew off the plane. Steichen scrambles down, kneels on the ground, plants his mouth on the pavement.

STEICHEN
(rising slowly)
Hell, we had it made all the way!

A BRITISH SERGEANT (31) rushes up.

BRITISH SERGEANT
Good show, Yanks! We heard your
calls!

SAMMY
Where are we, pal?

BRITISH SERGEANT
Enniskillen. Northern Ireland.
You didn't know?

STEICHEN
Oh, we knew exactly where we were.

BRITISH SERGEANT
Well then, welcome to the war!