The Interrogator: The Story of Hanns Scharff, Luftwaffe’s Master Interrogator

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“Come in, please, I am your interrogator.” begins this account of Hanns Scharff, the Luftwaffe’s master interrogator of captured Allied fighter pilots. The formal introduction he used to introduce himself to prisoners belies the civility and humanity with which he treated Allied POWs.

Hanns Scharff takes the author through his thoughts and experiences as he interrogated Allied fighter pilots for Germany during World War II. Renowned as one of the top interrogators in the German intelligence community Hanns Scharff used his intellect, gentle personality, and unorthodox methods to obtain secrets from Allied POWs.

Contrary to the image of sworn enemies expressing hate toward one another, this account tells the story of a more formal time when honor and respect where extended toward one’s enemy. It was through this use of honor and respect that Hanns Scharff found a way to obtain secrets.

Employing an extensive card data base cross indexing information obtained from POWs, careful examination of their personal property, and plane wreckage he convinced prisoner after prisoner he already knew everything they did. Since he was able to tell the prisoners their commanding officer’s wife’s name and what they served for dinner the night before the prisoners believed there was no harm in talking with him since he already knew everything anyway. After he had gained their confidence in his knowledge of the allied forces he would sometimes just go for outings with his charges.

In one instance, while walking in the woods, Hanns offhandedly asked his prisoner why tracer bullets change color wondering if there was a manufacturing change. The prisoner replied, “It means the pilot is out of ammunition.” Later the tale continues with a Luftwaffe ace that knows this tidbit and sees the tracers change color on an Allied fighter.

Knowing the pilot is defenseless the German ace lets him go after flying next to him and waving.

Incredibly, Allied forces allowed several officers with knowledge of the invasion date to fly missions over Europe. In late May, just before the invasion of Normandy, an interrogator took a captured Allied officer with knowledge of the date of the invasion on a walk in the mountains.

The interrogator, amused by the number of vacationing hikers present, commented, “It looked like the invasion has begun.” The stunned officer said, “They started a week early.” Only a prisoner’s walk in the mountains and an admission could have changed the war.

Interesting counterpoints to Scharff’s account of events are those of the Allied POW pilots who met him during interrogation. Many were happy to meet him again after the war and share a reunion, some which included outings.

This book is an interesting period piece of a more formal time where there was a brotherhood between soldiers of opposing forces. It was the shared experience of war, loss, and finding a bit of peace in the turmoil, that brought enemies together to share a moment as humans.

It is interesting to note that interrogators who have had success with obtaining information even today claim most of it was the result of rapport. Hanns Scharff found this secret over seventy years ago. Rapport and a carefully constructed data base to convince the prisoner most of what he knew was already known.