

DE JA VUE



A short story by Liam Foxx

The dew was lying on the grass and dawn was waiting to beam its welcoming early morning light onto the land illuminating and chasing away the dark shadows and fears that come with darkness. The night had been quite a cold one for mid summer as Major Kurt von Ruger made his way to the mess tent. His mechanic Willie Shultz was coming towards him so Ruger stopped to wait for him his breath plumed out in front of him as he exhaled. He and Willie had been together since he had first arrived at the Jasta, and that had been two years ago which was a lifetime for a pilot on the Western Front. Now there were only three of them left from the original Jasta himself, Willie and Captain Carl Dietz. This war had taken a large toll of the pilots of the Jasta and Ruger shook his head wondering where it would all end. Then he smiled of course it would end when they were all dead when the men on all sides had been killed when no armies survived. Watching the bow legged Willie come towards him he thought if anyone deserves to survive this horror it is you my old friend and I certainly hope you do. Because in the Germany that comes after all this carnage it is men with sound heads and forgiving hearts that will be needed.

Ruger took a drink of schnapps from the silver hip flask he carried in the inside pocket of the big fur coat he wore. The coat and flask had belonged to the leader of the Jasta and Ruger's best friend Colonel Manfred von Drexel. Ruger shrugged his large shoulders Manfred had gone down in a ball of flames somewhere over the British front line; the British had given him a military funeral with full honours. A Sopwith Camel aircraft with a red streamer attached to its wing strut had flown over the airfield and dropped a canister with a long black streamer attached. When it was opened a photo of Manfred's funeral was in it and a note to say that a hero had been given the mark of respect that was his due and saluting him for his chivalry. Ruger shook his head as he remembered this there was damn little chivalry about at this stage of the war.

He took another swig from the flask and laughed because it didn't matter much to Manfred now after all he was just a charred piece of meat in a cold grave. Then he mused for this was a pilot's worst nightmare after all they were sitting in a wooden plane whose wings and fuselage were covered in strips of canvas, and then daubed with highly flammable resin and varnish. Add to this that the pilot sat on top of a tank full of aviation spirit and you had a very incendiary piece of equipment under your arse. So that when it did catch fire it was an inferno in minutes, that was when a pilot had to answer the big question which was did you burn or just jump from your stricken machine? He knew that lots of pilots had jumped fearing being burnt alive even more than the heart stopping plunge as you fell to the ground so far below. Ruger felt the hardness of the Luger pistol in his coat pocket and took comfort from it he knew what he would do if it ever came to the choice between burning and jumping.

Willie had joined him now and Ruger looked at him with fondness remembering the familiar face. The gravy dipper moustache and the veins running through the broken capillaries in the bulbous nose giving it a blue red

hue, he noticed that a drip had gathered at the tip. This was certainly a drinker's nose he saw the generous mouth and bright blue eyes, and he then looked at the grey hair for Willie had to be in his forties easily. He was married with three children and had been an engineer in Berlin before war broke out Ruger remembered. However when it had come to the time he had been seen off by his wife and children he was one of the first to join up for he knew his duty did Willie Shultz. Ruger offered the flask to him and he put it to his mouth drinking deeply he sighed with pleasure at the taste wiping the to-p carefully he handed the flask back. He then took his old battered cigarette case out took one and offered Ruger the case they both lit up and smoke plumed into the air it tasted good. Willie looked at his friend and Commanding Officer the fact that he was only a Warrant Officer had never come between them or their respect for one another. Nor had the fact that Kurt von Ruger was an aristocrat the son of aristocrats whilst Willie's father had been a lowly train driver. He looked again into the handsome face with the piercing blue eyes and the nose of an eagle the blonde hair swept back a classic look and one that went down well with the ladies. Looking closer he could now see the lines etched and scored deeply in his friends face and his heart went out to him. He knew that Ruger had seen too much for a young man as they all had, too many friends being killed too much living on the nerves and alcohol. All this had took its toll and this now showed on the face of Ruger a weariness that was bone deep and an almost pathological acceptance of what would happen some day. Though he had to admit that since coming back from leave there was a sudden bounce in his friends step again and he seemed happier and more content. All Willie could do was to make sure he kept Ruger's plane in the best condition he could so as to give him a better chance when he was up in the air on patrol.

Ruger looked at Willie and knew that the same pride and euphoria would not be present should his friend have to enlist now, after what they had seen happen to friends and comrades there was no glory in war. Willie scratched his head and spoke. "I have checked out the guns on your plane Herr Major, they seem to be alright but I have put a heavier hammer in the cockpit just in case something should happen." This was used to free a stoppage in the guns should a cartridge get jammed, you simply banged the cocking handle with the hammer until you freed it or until you were shot down. Ruger looked at his fitter keenly something at the back of his mind was tugging to be remembered but it passed as he replied. "Have you taken a look at the engine old friend it seemed to be missing a bit on the last patrol?" Willie had discarded the cigarette and lit an old meerschaum pipe he scratched his nose with the stem. "I have checked the engine from top to bottom and it is running alright now, I can find nothing wrong with it though I have had it stripped right down." He shook his head then continued. "I have run it up to full revs and it never missed a beat. Though of course Herr Major the aviation spirit they send nowadays it leaves a lot to be desired as you well know." He puffed on his pipe again. "We filter it again of course but it is in the quality of the stuff that the problem begins it really is the worse shit they can send us I recon."

Ruger looked into the large rheumy sad blue eyes. "If you've checked my plane then I know everything is alright because I know there is no better mechanic in the air service than you." Willie blushed. "Thank you Herr Major I will go across now and give everything one final check before you start your patrol." With this he saluted and started walking towards von Ruger's aircraft a Fokker Albatross D-III that was painted all black. For Major Kurt von Ruger was known to the pilots of the German Imperial Air Force and to his enemies as well as the Black Knight. Ruger was bugged if he could remember when this name had been hung round his neck and he didn't even care. It would have been some stupid journalist waxing lyrical and going on about the knights of the air and their gallantry. How he hated this kind of sentimental crap for he knew more than most that it was kill or be killed when you were up there it was shoot down your opponent before he shot you down. If his machine-guns were jammed or his controls shot up you followed him down and gave him another burst just to make sure one less enemy was one you didn't have to meet again.

He walked into the mess tent and sat down at the head of the table he undid his fur coat and lit another cigarette rolling the smoke round his mouth god it tasted so bloody good. Hans the mess waiter came over and poured steaming black coffee into his cup smiling at the Major and telling him to let him know if he wanted his cup topping up again. At the bottom of the table sat two brand new pilots looking at Ruger in awe the shininess of their faces and uniforms gave them away had Ruger known nothing else about them. He drank his coffee and smoked as he studied the two pilots he began to weigh up in his mind exactly how long they would last out here. He looked again over the rim of his cup then he shook his head they looked like they should still be in school he gave them no more than two days tops before some British pilot did for them. A tall slim pilot with brown hair and brown eyes came in limping he used a cane to help him walk he went up and sat down beside Ruger who offered him a cigarette from the battered case. He sighed and blew smoke into the air in a steady stream as coffee was poured for him.

The new arrival was Captain Carl Dietz the admin officer and he now spoke to Ruger. "Well Kurt dawn begins to break and I can see you have noticed your new chicks sitting down there at the bottom of the table." Ruger snorted. "New chicks be bugged, why do I have to wipe their backsides for them look at them their not just wet behind the ears their fucking dripping." His friend laughed and shrugged. "This is all that we have left Kurt all the old ones are dead apart from us. Von Richthofen, Immelman, the best ones all gone, though Goring's still going in charge of von Richthofen's Circus now." Ruger didn't look amused and his voice rose. "If this is all that's left then I tell you truly the air war is lost mark my words Carl and with this he banged the table with his hand. Hans the waiter came to give him his second cup of black coffee for he never flew without having two cups first a ritual he had always observed. As he unwound the white scarf from round his neck the lights from the storm lamps sparkled and glittered as their rays caught the blue medal at his throat. He could see Carl looking at it and the longing in his eyes to own one. But he knew that Poor Carl had been shot down and landed bad smashing his leg but then he could count himself lucky that he had walked

away with his life from such a bad crash landing. The thing was that he would never fly again and would always walk with a limp another casualty of this god awful stinking war.

The medal at his throat was the coveted Blue Max or Pours Le Merit the highest honour that could be bestowed by the German military. Carl asked. "How was Berlin by the way I heard you were the toast of the town and had admirers hanging on your every utterance keen to hear how we will win the war?" Ruger laughed at him then flicked the medal. "This is what they were toasting Carl a piece of blue enamel on a cross, give it to Manfred von Drexel or the other thirty or forty friends I have lost in this bloodbath.' Carl looked at his friend with compassion in his eyes he wondered how much more of the constant patrolling and fighting or babysitting his friend could take. Instead he smiled. "Rumour has it that you were seen out a lot with a very beautiful woman and that she was quite smitten with you?"

This time Ruger undid his tunic breast pocket and withdrew a wallet from which he took a photo and placed it on the table. Carl picked it up and read out loud. 'To my Darling Kurt come safely back to me your loving fiancé Siegfried.' He looked at Ruger with his mouth wide open then he looked at the picture again shaking his head. It was Ruger's turn to laugh now. "Shut your mouth Carl or you might catch a swarm of flies in it." Carl pulled from his tunic pocket a post card on which was a picture of a beautiful woman dressed in military uniform. He compared this with the picture his friend had given him they were the same woman. Though in Ruger's photo which was a head and shoulder shot the woman looked more beautiful than ever with her hair let down onto her shoulders and the softness of the light catching the beauty of her face.

Carl stammered. "Your engaged to Fräulein Feldgrau the army sweetheart my god a lot of men's and boy's hearts are going to be broken when this gets out", and he looked at both pictures again. Ruger waved his hand. "For Fuck sake that is not her name her real name is Siegfried von Caustien and yes I am honoured to say that she is my fiancée." Carl looked at him now with a new admiration as he stared at the pictures again. "Hellfire the Black Knight and the armies very own dream woman, just how do you do it no never mind just tell me what's she's like?" So Ruger told him how wonderful his new fiancé was and that they would be married soon on his next leave in fact. Carl could not contain himself. "You lucky dog you, but tell me have you been, no don't tell me it isn't any of my business." Ruger could have taken exception but instead he laughed and wagged a finger. "Intimate is that what you mean, well the answer is yes deeply intimate and lots of times, now shut up you miserable sod." Carl's admiration now knew no bounds and he bubbled over with praise for his friend. "Your more of a lucky dog then ever now and it fills me with envy, but you are my friend and comrade so I offer my congratulations", and he shook hands with Kurt.

They stood up from the table and Ruger shouted for the waiter Hans to fetch his flask that had now been replenished with schnapps. Carl put his arm round his friends shoulder and whispered in his ear. "We must go out tonight

and celebrate your forth coming nuptials and make a real night of it, you know not come back till dawn pissed and having been with a good whore. Because don't forget you have no patrols tomorrow so you could have a sleep in as well", he slapped Kurt on the back. He was about to say no but then thought what the hell he could do with getting good and drunk but he didn't need the whores, and beside which as they said in this business tomorrow you could be fucking well dead. He nodded at Carl who then said. "Anyway back to business let me introduce your new fledglings to you." He groaned as they made their way towards the shiny faced schoolboys at the bottom of the table. Ruger could see the hero worship in their eyes from here and he loathed them for it for it was something he didn't want or need from them.

Carl made the introductions. "Major von Ruger may I introduce Lieutenants Braun and Stein", the two young boys clicked their heels together. They held out their hands which Ruger ignored and they dropped them conscientiously by their sides looking quite abashed. He asked "How many hours on Albatrosses have you two wunderkind got between you?" Lieutenant Braun was about to answer when Ruger held up his hand. "No don't bother telling me I don't want to know if you had ten times the hours it wouldn't be enough to keep you alive for longer than a few days." As they were walking out of the mess tent Lieutenant Stein knocked a coffee cup to the floor that came to rest against his flying boot. The officer apologised profusely but something about the incident bothered Ruger something in the back of his mind. He didn't know what it was just that it seemed to have happened before to him or maybe he was just more tired than he thought.

Moving outside dawn had well and truly broken and the sun was rising, it looked like it was going to be a hot day as he could feel the heat already. Ruger walked down towards the planes Carl following behind chatting to the new boys and putting them at their ease. When they got to his black aircraft he turned to face them and the pilots lined up. Ruger looked at them with his bright blue eyes. "Listen to me and remember what I tell you that way you might just last the morning out, this will be an orientation flight a practice to show you the ropes and how to act." His gaze was as hard as flint. "We will be flying over our lines and getting you acquainted with the scenery and landmarks such as they are." He could see the excitement in their eyes and knew what this meant he growled. "Keep formation on my aircraft if you know what that means and follow my every signal." The two pilots nodded their heads as Ruger shouted. "If there are any Tommy's about you will turn and run for home while I cover you. Do not and I repeat do not engage the Tommy's or this will be your first and last day at the front." Carl smiled at him having heard this speech so many times before he just sighed then carried on with his briefing. "If you get lost for any reason hug the ground and follow the river back here. Do you understand what I have just explained to you because I sincerely hope it has sunk in?" The two boys answered yes, and then he wished them a good flight as did Carl and the two boys went off to their aircraft joshing with each other. Carl and Ruger shook hands and then embraced. "Don't forget the booze up tonight, lets really tie one on you and your fiancé deserve it", Carl patted him on the shoulder.

Ruger climbed up and slid himself into the cockpit of the Albatross he had fastened his fur coat but it was still a tight squeeze. The smell of castor oil leather sweat and cordite came up into his nose it was the smell of home. Pulling the cocking handles back on guns he made them ready for firing. Then he used the pump to prime the engine with fuel, finally he took a last drink from his hip flask before putting it back in his pocket. He pulled on and fastened his leather flying helmet then he wrapped his white scarf round his face finally Willie strapped him in to his seat. Then he handed Ruger a pair of thin chamois leather gloves which he pulled on then he handed him a thick pair of gauntlets which he donned over the top. Willie jumped down and went round to the propeller he shouted to him. "Switches off." Ruger repeated the sequence as he had a thousand times before replying. "Switches off." Willie swung the propeller to prime the engine whilst Ruger pumped the primer. Willie then shouted. "Switches on." Ruger replied. "Switches on." Willie then swung down hard on the propeller shouting contact and the engine roared into life there were three loud bangs from the engine. Willie turned back towards the plane but the engine had settled down again and was now idling contentedly.

The three bangs had disconcerted Ruger not the engine itself but the bangs he was sure that this had happened to him before just like the incident with the coffee cup. He put this from his mind as he waved at Carl and Willie and then taxied down to the beginning of the field. He made sure that the two new human offerings were on station and in the right order behind him then he revved the throttle released the brakes and started moving down the field. Faster and faster his speed built up until he pulled back on the joystick and the Albatross gave up its earthly existence and became airborne. As he climbed he watched to make sure that his fledglings had made it safely into the air before he climbed higher. He then held his station whilst they caught and formed up on his plane hellfire he shook his head this is worse than I thought. He was sure it was Braun he had seen with half the airfields bottom hedge row hanging from his undercarriage. However Ruger pushed on continuously moving his head round from side to side and looking up and down for enemy aircraft this constant vigil was the difference between life and death up here. Not only this but he had to keep chivvying these new idiots along and wiping their arses for them, but as usual he didn't know why he bothered.

He looked to each aircraft in turn as they were flying in formation just beyond each of his wings he pointed to his guns and then to them. He fired a short burst and he could smell the cordite from it then he heard the other two test their guns. He led back in the seat and tried to get comfortable the air up here was rare and so it was very cold. He stamped his flying boots on the cockpit floor but not too hard or he might go through the bottom. The morning was certainly beautiful the sky was azure blue and you could see the French countryside laid out below you. They flew on and all the time his head was like it was on a spring constantly searching the sky for the first smudge on the horizon that might be enemy planes. He took his hands off the joystick and banged them together to get a bit of heat into them.

He decided to give these new puppies a bit of low flying practice it would also get them used to the countryside. He signalled them and dove down then levelled off at a hundred feet from the ground looking round he could see them following him. That's it he thought just think of this as a game of follow my leader and he pushed on towards the front line. He could now see ground troops on the march below him moving forward to reinforce the front line. Sometimes the troops waved at them but mostly they struggled forward under the weight of their equipment not bothering to look up. Also they were now coming up on the rear artillery positions and he could see the big guns pointing skyward. They were now passing over strong points that had been constructed in the rear in case the enemy broke through.

As they got close to the front he signalled them to make height for it was folly to be down this low where one could get pounced on by enemy planes. Climbing higher Ruger kept an eye on his charges making sure they were following his lead and obeying the things he had told them to do. One of them he didn't know which kept yawing across the sky if he did that in a dog-fight he wouldn't last twenty seconds. He shook his head it wasn't his business it was hard enough keeping himself alive without worrying about people who were already dead. As they made the right height his goggles were steaming up he took them off and cleaned them but now he had tears in his eyes that he blinked away. You could not afford to be without your sight for even the slightest time when you were in the air. He checked the sky once again and then adjusted his throttle a few seconds later the engine seemed to die. It came back to life and ran alright but he had a feeling that this exact same moment had happened to him before but he could not remember when?

They were now approaching the German front line and he could see the artillery shells being fired at the Tommy's positions. They ran parallel to it as he didn't want these virgins straying over the Tommy's lines or they would quickly be deflowered. Up ahead he could see that a dog fight was taking place and that his companions were getting excited by the thought of the fight. No way in hell was he letting these two inexperienced bastards get anywhere near a dog fight they had now pulled slightly ahead of him. He adjusted his throttle and pulled level he then gave them the signal to turn round. They looked at him as though they couldn't understand and pointed to the fight that was taking place. He watched the Ariel ballet that was being acted out in front of him one of their planes was going down wings folding back on themselves the pilot must have been dead. Then a little closer a Tommy was on fire and heading for the ground the pilot must have decided that he didn't want to burn and a speck fell away from the burning aircraft.

Ruger waved at his charges and pointed at the falling Tommy and thought look you shit heads that's what awaits you in a dog-fight and he was probably experienced. They didn't seem to understand this nor did they understand the danger that might be above them if the Tommy's had other planes up there waiting. To get their undivided attention he fired his guns this seemed to alert them to the danger of what was happening. But it must have also startled the wingman on his right who swung into Ruger's path. It was only his lightning reactions that saved the two of them colliding and

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