

Smells

by

Vixxy Fox



Samuel Adams McFeeney raised his right cheek just enough that he was able to pass gas. He was old, he was obstinate, and he didn't care what people thought. Besides, he was sitting alone in the parlor area of the 'Old Soldiers Home.'

"GAS ATTACK!" came a voice clear out from the area of the kitchen.

"I farted again Kelly!" Sam called back with a grin, "Give your nose a rest this ain't the front lines!"

From elsewhere in the house came a chorus of chuckles and calls that broccoli should be banned from the dinner menu.

Kelly had been a Sergeant during the Great War and being of Blood Hound decent, possessed a killer nose for scenting gas attacks. He was actually kept in the lines longer than his rotation time because of this. Now he was the home's cook taking care of his older comrades of The Great War.

Samuel, on the other paw, though also a Sergeant, had been a tail gunner and flew high above the smell of death created by the ground war. His nose was used to a different batch of odors such as Caster oil fumes, aircraft engine exhaust gasses; and shit. That happened on more than one occasion when they were attacked at altitude by the best the German Wolves had to throw at them. Being he'd flown in an incredibly slow RE8 with the Royal Air Corp's Observation and Photo-reconnaissance squadron, his pilot had crapped himself on more than one occasion. This was understandable and not looked down upon as the venerable aircraft was a sitting duck for the

faster Wolf aircraft. The difference between its actual combat speed and stalling speed was only about 20 mph. Maneuvering, too, had to be made carefully so it would not fall into a deadly spin. Its armament, near useless for either offence or defense, was hardly a help and the old kite fell in great numbers to the German fighters. Manfred von Richthofen personally shot down seven but didn't regard them as much sport.

A different smell crept in upon the old warrior this morning and his nose wiggled. "Kelly... are you burning the toast again?" he yelled out.

"No... why?"

"You don't smell that?"

There was a pause and then the sniffer of sniffs called back, "Smells like gunpowder. Gor don't that take me back to the trenches."

There was a chorus of 'ayes' and 'woofs' from throughout the home as no conversation was not shared among the old fellows living there. Such were their previous lives that quiet was the given state of things and the smell of gunpowder in any form was stirring to their memories.

There was a sputtering fizz sort of noise behind Sam's chair accompanied by a stronger odor of an air battle. Perturbed, the old Bulldog moved himself around to look behind. This was harder than it would be in his younger years as he was now not nearly as flexible as he once was.

His grandson smiled back at him. Holding up a broken penny firecracker he said, "It doesn't go bang, it just flares a bit."

"And damned lucky you didn't catch m' chair on fire," the old gunner grumped. "Why'd you do that Toby?"

"To help you remember, Grandfather."

"I remember just fine," the old fellow retorted.

There was a chorus of hoots and snorts from about the home. "You remember 'bout as good as the rest of us," Kelly called from the kitchen, "And that ain't say'n much. Your stories are about as dry as a popcorn fart."

The Bulldog's temper flared a bit. As he flopped back into his chair he yelled out, "And I suppose I never told you 'bout the Red Baron let'n me get off alive?"

There was a quiet in the house to the point you could have heard a pin rattle if dropped on the wooden floor.

"You never told me that story Grandfather," Toby told him, peeking around the back of the chair.

“Me neither,” sang a voice from somewhere.

“Nor me...” “Not e’ye...” “Nor me...” “Sounds like poppycock...” “B’ash but I bet it’s a truth...” “Tell, tell...”

Slowly the room filled with the old soldiers, some limping, more than one with a cane, and even twitchy old James, who hadn’t been right in the head ever since suffering shell shock from the constant bombardment of the big guns.

Samuel looked at all of them and knew each as a friend. His face turned a bit red from embarrassment as the story flooded his mind and he remembered why it was he’d never shared it.

“Come around here then Toby,” he instructed the pup, “So you can hear the truth of what happened the same as my comrades; cuz I never did ever mention this small thing from the past. It’s not something all that pleasant for me to remember cuz I was scared bad and that’s not sump’n anyone cares to admit among his peers. We’re all supposed to be fearless ya know.”

“Shall I light another cracker?” the child asked.

“Aye... do so please. You were right; the smell does make a body remember.”

His grandson complied and broke open a fresh firecracker which he lit with a lighter ‘borrowed’ from his father’s pocket. Acrid smoke filled the room once again and as a group the old fellows breathed it in like opium fumes.

“My pilot was Crappy Crump Ass Cravet, which was my nic for him for the obvious reasons of his vacating his bowels whenever we were shot at. He was a decent pilot and an alright sort but for that one bad habit. Well... he got us up to a chilly eight thousand feet that day and we’d been fine. The sky was a beautiful blue with but scattered clouds and a pretty good wind blowing in the direction of the Germans. Our mission was simple; fly over the lines and take photographs.”

The old fellow pressed into the back in his chair letting his mind run back in time as the cobwebs moved aside and he was once again standing at his gunner’s position.

“Our boys... our fighter cover... was not there as they were supposed to be. There was a cockup I got told later. I didn’t buy that story and flattened the nose of the officer who told me such. That’s a shooting offense, but to the fellow’s credit, he ever only admitted to walking into a door.”

The Bulldog took a second to look at his listeners and never a more polite bunch could a story teller have had as an audience.

“We were jumped by none other than the Red Barron himself,” he told them in the most serious expression Toby had ever seen. “That famous Wolf was apparently flying with two new pilots

and since we were considered easy pick'ns the new fellows were signaled in first. Gor I remember it now like it was yesterday; his was a totally red tri-plane while theirs were blue and white striped and yellow with a red tail. Obviously they had no clue as to what a bullet does after leaving its weapon while you're in flight. It's a bit different when you're flying versus on the ground. Unless you're shooting straight on into the tail or head on straight into the engine, the wind and gravity sweeps them away and you have to adjust for this or miss."

He paused to use his paws to demonstrate the bend of a deflective shot. "As a gunner, I knew that if they came in from my right I had to fire more to the left, and if from the left then to the right. If they come at you from above and behind then you fire a tad higher because gravity will make your bullets sag downwards. In reality your bullets travel any distance in an arc."

"Well sir, the first fellow came in from the right and the second from the left causing me to swing wildly from one to the other as best I could. I remembered my training and fired in no more than five round burst because the gun's recoil will throw you all off too. It's a tricky business to conduct and you're danc'n better than any ballerina you might see on the stage."

"By then old Crappy Pants at least had the sense to get us headed back towards our lines. He then dove and attempted some maneuvering which didn't help my aim a whole lot but presently the blue and white stripped plane began smoking. He had no choice but to turn back towards the German side. The prevailing winds being what they were, he at least would be able to shut the engine off and glide. Fire on an airplane back then was nothing to ignore; they were not much more than paper kites and when they burned they burned fast and furious."

"Couldn't you bail out?" One of the old fellows asked.

"We didn't use parachutes back then Charlie, it was considered cowardly. I say that was a pretty stupid a notion; then again perhaps command's reasoning was the crews would all figure out, 'Why try to fight your way back if you could just jump out whenever you felt like it and live?' "

He leaned forward in his chair.

"So there we were high over the lines. Blue and white was down while yellow and red was now on his way in and a lot more cautious than he had been. In between all of this I had to reload the damned Vickers several times too. That being what it was and Crappy Pants turning us every which way to Sunday, I also lost one pan of bullets overboard when I had to hang on for dear life. That was it but for the last pan which I managed to get loaded up. That magazine I kept as special cuz it had nothing but tracers in it for balloon busting. That gave me a bit more of an advantage since I could easily see where my fire was going."

Toby lit off another of the penny firecrackers and Sam breathed in the smoke as if it were a memory drug.

"Bullets were flying all around me," he told in a quiet voice, "But I held steady and followed the tracers right into the Hun. He dove away and I know he was dead because his aeroplane rolled over exposing his belly as he passed under us."

The Dog looked left and right and then upwards and not more than a few of his fellows looked to the ceiling as well.

“That left Baron Von Richthofen who had positioned himself above and behind,” he said, pointing upwards, “And I had just shot the last of my ammunition.”

There was a gasp among his listeners.

“What happened next?” Toby asked in a small voice.

“The Red Baron dove on us. I crapped my pants. And he never fired a shot.”

Sam sighed deeply.

“I don’t know if his guns jammed or if he was just being noble because we’d put up such a good fight. In either case the following week he was killed so there’s no real knowing for sure.”

The old gunner smiled and eked out another small fart to which there was a fair amount of good natured banter. The band of listeners disbursed while holding their collective noses, leaving Samuel to his grandson.

Looking down at his grandson the old Bulldog smiled and winked. “Thank you for the memory assistance Toby. I darned near forgot that story.”

“Could you tell me more?”

Sitting back to his chair he patted the armrest. “Sit yourself right here and I’ll tell you about the time I met the King.”

And so a quiet afternoon was spent in a sharing that bridged three generations with grandfather running interference later over a ‘borrowed’ lighter, claiming with a wink to having pinched it himself.

Author’s note:

Soon will occur the hundredth anniversary of The War To End All Wars.

Such a pity that it didn’t.