

Focus

by

Vixxy Fox



‘Gunsight... gunsight... can’t see where he went... focus dam it!’

Jolly Fox’s thoughts were shouted commands to his mind and eyes which neither apparently chose to obey. Opening both eyes he looked ahead only to find the other aircraft was in a tight turn and keeping well out of his firing arc. The training sock it was dragging stayed right behind like a good puppy and it too was not wanting to be drilled full of holes. The pilot cursed and banged the combing below the long tube sighting device with his left paw. With a few more heavy curse words to its ineffectiveness, he broke right and waggled his wings indicating he was done for the day.

Upon landing, to make things even worse, his left brake went out which might have caused him to ground loop but for the advice given by his instructor long ago; ‘DON’T STAND ON THE BRAKES CONEHEAD OR SHE’LL FLIP OVER ON HER NOSE!’

As the wheels squeaked on the concrete the pilot lightly flexed his toes and quickly found the one pedal went all the way down and the aircraft began a swerve to the left. He immediately backed off the toe pressure and adjusted with his rudder. In short order he’d slowed enough that the tail came down and he coasted down the full length of the runway. Taxiing into the ramp area he shut the engine down early and rolled the last few feet in. Sergeant Harris, understanding what this meant, ran out with a pair of chucks ready to throw them down if need be.

“The brakes went out!” Jolly yelled from the cockpit as the aircraft stopped.

“Back in the war we didn’t have no brakes... sir,” the old Hound Dog countered from his place on the ground. “It never seemed to bother no one ‘cept Smith.”

“What happened to Smith?” the Fox yelled back as he pulled his flying helmet off and removed the cotton batting from his ears. Such was the noise of open cockpit flying that pilots had to take precautions in order to safeguard their hearing.

“He taxied into a barn.”

“Did he die?”

“Nawwww... the doors was open. He went in one side whole and out the other side missing his wings. They wasn’t build quite as sturdy as the P-26. He did have a shocked look on his puss and not just cuz he was a Cat.”

Jolly was used to the Sergeant’s occasional words of wisdom so he waited for the hammer to drop. “So....”

“So I showed him the magneto switch and the ‘off’ position.”

“And?”

“It was in the ‘on’ position still.”

The pilot unbuckled and stood in the cockpit for a stretch. “Why did it stop then?” he asked.

“The collision tore a hole in the fuel tank and she run outta gas. Engines don’t run without gas. Damned lucky he didn’t catch fire. Now what’s wrong with your ship?”

“Right brake went out.”

“We’ll get it fix’d. It’s probably the master cylinder. We got in a bad batch of’em. Procurement is buy’n’em by the low bid and that way all you get is junk. They ain’t figgered that one out yet; stupid id’jits.” The Dog paused in his rant as if remembering something and then said, “The C.O.’s wait’n on ya in his office; something about your marksmanship.”

“It’s not my fault!”

“Says you. I sighted the guns myself. She’s dead on.”

“I can’t hit anything flying with one eye closed Sarge!”

Harris spat tobacco juice on the ground. “Even Smith did better than that and all he had was an open iron sight. For a Cat he did pretty good.”

“What’s he do now?”

“Nuth’n... he bought the farm over in France.”

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After the ritual of squaring the entrance to the Co's office and asking permission to enter, Jolly was ordered to sit and then surprisingly was offered a cigar.

"Sir?"

"I asked if you wanted a cigar. Your ears still ring'n from your training flight? You're supposed to use the cotton. How'd that go by the way?"

"The cotton or the training?" When he was given 'the look' he hastily added, "Not so good, sir."

"Why not?" The Boxer leaned forward and held out one of his favorite cigars, motioning for the young officer to take it.

Jolly, never having smoked before, was not about to let such a show of favoritism pass. If he'd been offered a whisky he would have accepted that too. Standing, he accepted the smoke and then the light from the lighter that was quickly thumbled up. Managing to hold his coughing to a minimum, he sat back down. "I can't focus looking through the tube sight, sir. What'd they think we were flying; a submarine?"

The C.O. leaned back in his chair and chuckled. He puffed on his cigar and looked thoughtful. "They might have come up with a solution to your problem. That's why I specifically called you in here. You're a good flier Jolly but you're a rotten shot."

"It's not my fault."

"So I hear you've claimed... and often."

"Sergeant Harris has a big mouth."

"Actually, the good Sergeant had nothing but praise for you. I'll admit he's a hard nose but he truly does love his airplanes; so when someone flying in his wing treats his aircraft with respect he backs them up to the hilt. Let's just say I've read the reports and personally examined the target socks. My kid sister could shoot better than you."

"But can she fly?"

The C.O. chuckled again. "Actually she can and she's damned good at it." He looked at the pilot and winked. "For the record I was also a flight mate of a fellow by the name of Lieutenant Smith. You're familiar with him?"

"Yes sir. According to Sergeant Harris he's the guardian angel of our squadron."

"Also for the record," he paused to knock the ash off of his cigar into an ash tray made out of an old piston, "We were locked in a dogfight and I had one stubborn son of a bitch German on my

tail. Smith got rid of him but came in a little too fast and got tangled up in the wreckage. Contrary to what every non-flying politician might believe, airplanes like automobiles do not have brakes... at least not in the air. If he'd had a better gun sight he might have been able to shoot at a greater distance and lived to have another beer with his mates."

"So you did talk to Harris?"

"No, but I know he loves talking about Smitty and I also know what his favorite story is. For the record again," and he looked right at the flier, "The magneto was faulty. Harris always leaves that part out of the story out. In telling you this I want you to understand that I know it is not always the pilot's fault."

"I understand, sir. You mentioned a new gun sight?"

"It's called a reflector sight. It works on the optical principle that anything at the focus of a lens or curved mirror will look like it is sitting in front of the viewer at infinity. It allows the pilot to see the infinity image and his field of view at the same time." When Jolly looked confused he simplified it for him. "When you turn on your gun sight the cross hairs illuminate right in front of your face so you never have to squint or take your eyes off of the enemy. They are always in focus no matter what range you are firing at. The Brits and the Germans already have them. The people in charge of procurement over here haven't yet found the need to put them in our aircraft. I've been told, 'It's not cost effective.' "

"That all sounds good, sir, but how does this affect me?"

"No club tonight Lieutenant because you'll be flying in the morning. I want you to get up early and do a five mile run. Get some breakfast and then come to the hangar with your flight gear. General Murphy and a gaggle of desk jockeys will be here first thing in the morning. They will review your scores from today's shoot. They will then watch you take off, fly out, and riddle the target sock which they will have examined first to make sure we haven't already added a few extra holes on the ground."

"They're that suspicious?"

"No... they're that stupid. Of course I never said that. After dinner I also want you to report back to Sergeant Harris. He's installing the new gizmo as we speak. I want you to personally borescope your guns. That way you can get a bit of practice with the new sight and set them to a distance you're comfortable with. Try not to burn up too much ammunition doing it. Ammo costs money and I have a budget to hold to."

"Yes, sir."

Seeing the conversation was over, Jolly stood and made to leave but his C.O. held up a finger stopping him.

“Don’t tell Harris I told you about the magneto. He’s an odd duck but Army to the bone. He was Smith’s mechanic and they were good friends. Telling Smith stories is his form of grieving. It gets a laugh and also teaches a lesson. That, according to the Sergeant, gives the dead something to smile about. In a way I think I kinda like that thought.”

The pilot nodded. “Not a word, sir.”

The next day General Murphy and his staff took their notes, kept an eye on things, and marveled at the improvements in accuracy accredited to the new optical sight.

It was another five years, however, before it was made available to the Army Air Corp and then only on the newer birds sparingly handed over for operations.