

Gone

by

Vixxy Fox



“It’s not that I don’t understand; everything has a life and everything has a life span. There was a time when the entire sky was filled with machines whose sole purpose was the wanton destruction of the foe. Who was the foe depended upon which side you were on don’t cha know?”

I nodded, and made a few marks upon my notepad indicating to the fellow talking that I truly was a journalist and not just some kid who was fascinated with old airplanes and their history. Many people, my parents included, did not so much speak of the war. The stories they told were the funny ones they could remember and laugh about. The ugly ones they tended to block out with alcohol and laughter. My journalism professor told me; this is the nature of survival. You are called upon to put your humanity aside and things such as medals are awarded against the number of the ‘enemy’ you’ve done in.

Motioning to the barkeep I had another round delivered and though he gave me a nasty look he did what I asked. He knew that I wrote and that I had a project working; I’d made that clear when I came in. He’d simply asked me not to make any trouble.

The old Hound sitting before me gave a rheumy look and slipped a little further back into his memories. “The engine noise was tremendous. Mind we didn’t have any fancy hearing protectors and such. It’s a good thing I had sense enough to stuff my floppy things full of cotton batting. Old Tom was a good example of what happened if you didn’t do that... deaf as a rock he was.”

“What happened to him?” I asked, pencil posed over my notebook.

“E’s dead; walked into a prop. Splattered’ im good. Least ‘e didn’t suffer.”

I jotted this down.

“Engine noises,” he muttered, “God bless the heavies you could hear them coming a good thirty minutes out. Thousands of them and we had to recover the lot. How we used to scramble for space just to park’ em. The good ones came in first, mind. If they weren’t shot up they made better time. Then came the bad ones and some of’em really bad, mak’t it all the way back just to crash land on the field. We kept a bulldozer running for those. If they landed in one piece, save them we’d try. If they broke up then we did our best to get the crew out and then shove the whole mess to one corner of the runway.”

“You said try?”

The Hound blinked, his mind going back to a time that was terribly ugly. “Aye... I did.”

“Could you expand on that?”

“No... I’d rather not.”

I nodded and sipped at my beer. As I did this the old boy drained his glass. “Them engines really did roar. You won’t get the same thing from them scream’n jet engines. Those they only ever launched a handful at a time... not like us... not by the thousands. Old George was a character all right... he did a right good impression of them engines, e’ did.”

“What happened to George?” I asked.

“Dead. Kil’t by a gunner trapped on one of the damaged.”

My ears perked up and I paid serious attention at this small statement.

“How?”

“ ‘E was the driver of the bulldozer that night. We traded off ya see and always a prayer that we’d get them all out. We didn’t blame the gunner none. I would’a done the same see’n that big machine com’n ta push...” He blinked. “I said too much. I need another beer.”

Beers were brought and paid for with a sizable tip to the frowning barkeep.

“They’re all gone now,” the fellow muttered after downing half of what was in his glass, “ ‘Cept for the chosen few at the museums. Even if they fly’em it ain’t the same... the noise ain’t the same... what you’ve got left is but a whisper to the hatefully defiant roar that said we was com’n to kill ya and fuck all of ya to the gates of Hell and then we’ll recover what we can, salvage what we can, make whole what we can; and do it all over again the very next night.”

His voice had risen as he spoke this. A few of the other patrons turned to see what was going on.

“I shot ‘im!” the Hound hissed. “I did... I shot’im dead before I pushed. He was trapped in the turret and there wasn’t time to even try to cut him out. He was bleed’n bad and in a lot of pain. When I took my pistol out ‘e just smiled and nodded... ‘e understood. God but I shot’im dead and he was my own son! I had to ya see... I had to... shoot...”

One of the other patrons came and sat down next to the Hound. He put his one arm around the fellow. The other I noted was missing at the shoulder.”

“Easy James old fellow,” he said softly. “We’ve gone over this before. That one wasn’t your son. Shhhh now... hush your voice... listen to the sounds of all the planes coming back. Think of all the crews we saved. Think of that pilot they said wasn’t gonna make it and we got him out just before the push came, eh?”

“We cut ‘is leg off ta free’im up.”

“Aye we did. Saved his life.”

“And the radio operator, holding his guts in.”

“Saved him too. You know he lived.”

“Poor bastard can’t ever have a whiskey after that,” James muttered.

“But he lived.”

“Not much of a life.”

“But he lived.”

Strong paws came down upon my shoulders and a voice whispered in my ear that it was time to be going and perhaps I should consider never coming back. I didn’t see who this was because I was then physically lifted from my chair, manhandled to the door, and thrown bodily out into the night.

I tried not to take this in the wrong way. The other gentlemen in the pub did what they had to do to save their friend. I’m surprised I’d gotten off so lightly’ but then again the war has long since been over. The sound of the engines have long since been gone.

When I finally got my breathing under control I started up my car which for some reason sounded much quieter than it ever had. Then as my headlights swept around the parking lot I noticed the hulk of an old bulldozer rusting away in the weeds nearby. I stopped and backed so the headlights remained upon this visage of something else... a killing machine not meant to be such and now left to perish outside in the raw elements of nature... and with good reason. It was a reminder of a darker time; of deeds better left buried with the unrecorded history of the past. Deeds as painful as a knife thrust to the gut and not as merciful as a pistol shot to the head.

That night... in my dreams... I heard the sound of the engines and understood much more than I had before.