

A Select Few

by

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“Only a select few will be deemed to have the quality it takes to become a fighter pilot,” the instructor told us. Though only in his early twenties the Wolf was obviously old school Imperial German Army. His demeanor was typical of a recruit training instructor; posture ramrod straight, riding crop tucked under his left arm and uniform creases sharp enough to cut you. All that was missing were the uniform markings, spiked helmet, and sidearm. At his throat was an Iron Cross.

We had lost the war and as such the rules imposed upon our people were a daily reminder of our inferiority.

Die Fliegertruppen des deutschen Kaiserreiches (The Imperial German Army Air Service), founded in 1910, had been disbanded under this new law. There was no choice in this. Our wonderful Fokkers were all taken apart and destroyed. It was over and yet some people refused to accept the fact we’d lost. The Treaty of Versailles forbade Germany to have an air force. And yet a handful of our wonderful aircraft were actually saved and placed in storage despite those overseeing the destruction. Some were rescued through bribery and yet others through stealth.

Though we were treated like the beaten dogs we were, there was still a very strong undercurrent of pride. Those perpetrating the theft of our aircraft understood military flight was the future and it must survive regardless of what other countries might wish. The victors would not tell us what

to do; and so here we were at a secret training facility deep within the timberlands of the new Soviet Union. This was arranged by Ernst-August Köstring with a wink and a nod to his old friends the Russians. There was only so much a pilot could learn in the light trainers and private schools where one supposedly had their eyes set upon a job flying airliners for Deutsche Luft Hansa. That is, of course, if you had the money to do this. Post war Germany was not exactly ripe with jobs as those of us who'd served in The Great War found out upon our arrival home. Opportunity was whispered about in the ale houses around Berlin and so we joined up and left our homes once again.

The instructor's hard eyes fixed upon me and I felt my stomach rise to my throat. "What were you in the last war?" he asked.

"Infantry, Herr Fluglehrer (*Flight Instructor*)," I responded, standing to attention. Old habits die hard and my stance was as perfect as I could make it. It was true I was but a Dog with the strains of Wolf in my blood line; but we were all German.

"You will address me as Herr Locke," he replied calmly. "The object of my lessons are to train pilots to survive combat in the air. Flying is highly mobile and a very different game from that played out on the ground. We have a good opportunity here..." He paused, waiting for me to give my name.

"Gruber, Herr Fluglehrer... Hans Gruber."

"Hans... We do need to maintain the discipline we were born with as Germans but we also need to groom that discipline to something better." He motioned me to sit. "When you respond, you will not rise. This is a waste of time. When I teach, if you have a question you will raise your hand and when acknowledged, ask. The only stupid question is the one you do not ask. Something as silly sounding as, 'How high can I fly?' might contain an answer that could save your life."

I raised my paw.

"Yes *Flugschüler bei* (flight-student) Gruber?"

"How high can you fly?"

There was laughter amongst the other students and Herr Locke smiled allowing for it; but then he gave an explanation that stopped the laughter cold.

"I have known five pilots who died simply because they flew too high." After a pause in a silence you could have cut with a knife he told us, "If you ascend too high you will either freeze to death or you will pass out from lack of oxygen. Ten thousand feet and you are in the yellow zone. Twelve thousand five hundred feet and you are at a precarious limit. If you pass out your aircraft might fall from altitude all by itself, tearing its own wings off when the airspeed climbs too high in the dive – or – it will continue to climb on its own if it is a stable craft and finally come back down after it runs out of fuel." He fixed each of us with his gray eyes and then added,

“Rule number one; take nothing for granted when flying an aircraft. Things in the air are never the same as on the ground. ”

Neither was life at the camp easy. Being that the facility itself had just been established, we lived in tents and trained as we had during The Great War. Being a pilot of fighter aircraft meant you had to be in top physical form. Herr Locke was constantly stressing this fact and unlike other instructors led us in our exercises. One of my favorites was the climbing of trees, of which there were more in this forest than you could ever imagine while living in the city. On one of these exercises I was sitting in the very top of a huge maple enjoying the view when I heard someone else climbing up. I did not bother to look, thinking it was Frederick or Johann, my tag along mates trying to keep up with me. The voice that called to me, however, caused me to sit up straighter than I had been.

“So tell me what you see,” Herr Locke said in a normal voice – that is – not in his instructor’s tones. Seeing my tenseness he followed this with the order ‘Stehen sie bequem’ (stand at ease).

This hardly made me relax but it did indicate he was not acting as my formal instructor. “I feel as though I can see forever from up here,” I replied. “It is very peaceful and I wish I could hold the feeling for the rest of my life.”

“Goot. I feel the same. Now let your senses reach out and tell me of it. Depend only upon what you see with your eyes. In the cockpit you will only hear the roar of the engine and smell the fumes of engine oil and exhaust.”

I pointed to the smoke coming from the camp kitchen. “The wind moves thus, but I see the clouds moving opposite.”

“Goot... what else?”

“The birds are circling over there,” I pointed, “I am not sure what that means but their flight seems easy and relaxed. The clouds, too, are puffy and scattered at medium altitude though high up far beyond our reach they are more lined out like ranks of soldiers.”

“You like it up here?”

“I said so, yes. It is peaceful.”

“You saw actual combat then?”

“Who of us has not?” I asked in return. “You are an ace and killed a handful of other pilots. I was a machine gunner and killed at least a hundred soldiers... perhaps more. I think I have also eaten my share of dirt just trying to get lower than the incoming bullets.” We were both silent for a moment and then I asked him, “Do you really think there will be another war?”

I think I shall always remember his reply.

“As a people our enemies allowed us to live so we could be shamed in our defeat. They have beaten us down but they did not extinguish the fire of our pride. Most assuredly there will be another war.”

We spent half an hour after that just talking. I found we were not so different and only a few years apart in age. Our family stories were different but not so different. At the end of this time he told me, “Hans, you are my best student. I do not tell you this to inflate your head but just to let you know you will have a future in the next war should you stay with your desire to fly.”

“Thank you Herr Locke. I will now have to work even harder to keep your confidence in me.”

He laughed then and told me, “There is a new training machine just come to the camp. It is set up near where the hangar is being built. After the evening meal I would like you to report there to help me learn what it does. This also comes with a small promotion as ‘Class Captain’.”

I think that my smile was as big as the sky we watched. “Thank you again Herr Locke.”

“There is one thing else you must do for me, however.”

“Willingly.”

“There will be a photographer with us. What we do is a guarded secret, but the manufacturer of the machine, a fellow named Messerschmitt, wishes to see his product being used. He also has requested a full report on its effectiveness as a training tool for the obvious marketing reasons. If it works for us it will also work for our friends the Russians and there will be money in that.”

“Do the Russians expect another war too?”

He smiled a strange smile and then replied, “No one will ever admit to such a thing; but they are not stupid.”