

# 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 top 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 friend's 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 friend's 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



plummeting to the ground all that way below. But now an icy sweat broke out and ran down his back and he shivered violently. This near miss had happened to him before there was no doubt of this now no doubt whatever. He thought was it with this stupid little sod and then he thought no it couldn't be for these two were brand new it must have been on some other patrol.

Racking his brains he still couldn't think where this near collision had happened before. He signalled them again to turn and this time they did it straight away following him round in a wide curve. If these two kept this up he would be a nervous wreck before the end of this familiarisation flight. Scanning the sky he could see no Tommy's higher up waiting in ambush for them so he led them on down the German front line. Looking down again he could see the craters that the artillery had left behind some of them huge. The trench lines of both sides snaked across the earth violating it and cutting lines through it. He was glad he was a pilot although he had been in the cavalry at the beginning. Never had he had to serve in these trenches nor did he think he would like to do so. Once his engine had failed and he had to set down in no mans land he had sheltered in one of these waterlogged shell holes. He had seen the rotting corpses in them and smelled the stench of decay at first hand that was enough. Then the infantry had brought him back safely to their lines and he had seen the conditions in which they lived. He had thanked the officers and troops who had rescued him but he was glad to get away from the trenches and back to the airfield.

Looking down again he shook his head no this was not the life for him he preferred it up here where the air was clean. He thought back to his leave in Berlin and the presentation of the Blue Max how proud his parents had been. The Emperor himself had fastened it round his neck and told him how proud everyone in the Fatherland was of him. His parents had come down from their estate and they had lunched with the Emperor who was a distant relation of his fathers. They asked him if he was coming to the estate as all the workers and staff and his brothers and sisters would want to see the famed medal. He told them he would try to get down as soon as he could though there were a lot of things laid on for him in Berlin. For his medal presentation was to be used as a propaganda exercise to keep the peoples spirits up. All the time this was going on all he wanted to do was get back to his two remaining friends at the airfield where he felt relaxed and at home. He felt as though he had nothing in common with any of these people who applauded him in restaurants and on the streets.

It was the second day after the presentation that he was told to report to Imperial Air Force Headquarters not that he wanted to but an order is an order. He turned up and was feted a reception had been laid on for him and a lot of people who he didn't know were there. They applauded him and asked tactless questions all he wanted to do was get out of there and go home for the rest of his leave. Then he was introduced to a strikingly beautiful woman, did he know who she was? No he was sorry he didn't had they perhaps met before, no they couldn't have done he would have remembered such a beautiful lady. The General who had introduced them had said why she is more famous than you she is known to all our troops. He looked again at the

Madonna's face racking his brains to think who she was how could she be known to all the troops he thought? Ruger was baffled and the woman had flushed a very becoming red on her cheeks and down her wonderful chest. The General shook his head saying. "My dear Kurt this is the famous Fräuline Feldgrau the sweetheart of the Fatherlands forces. Of course that was why she looked familiar lots of the boys had her postcard photo why even Carl had one. The General went off to do whatever it is Generals do basically he thought with this one it would be to eat and drink like a pig while the men at the front starved.

He looked at her and apologised to for not having recognised her when they were first introduced. She told him it made a change not to be recognised and they both laughed at this. He got them two more drinks and as he did so he studied the woman in front of him. She was nearly as tall as he was and her strong blonde hair hung onto her shoulders. Her face was truly beautiful the deep blue eyes stared out with frank amusement and the nose was proportioned just right. Her lips had a curve that showed strength but they looked soft and so right for kissing. Her body was everything a man could ever want and even the conservative dress she was wearing couldn't hide the contours. They spent the rest of that day together never far from each others company and it was as if they had known each other their whole lives. She had told him her name was Siegfried von Caustien after he had called her Fräuline Feldgrau which he thought was her name. She thought this was hysterical and they had both laughed at it and it had become a kind of secret thing between them that all lovers have.

They spent the rest of his leave together and were photographed in restaurants and at receptions. But mostly they tried to be alone in each others company where they loved with a passion that took their breaths away. He took Siegfried home to meet his parents and brothers and sisters who all made a fuss of her. His parents knew her family well all though they had not seen one another for a while his mother and hers still wrote to each other. The days were now moving fast and he would have to return to the front. She clung to him with desperation as he did to her a human raft on a sea of uncertainty. Siegfried was adored by his family who knew by now how much these two were in love. So it came as no surprise when they announced their engagement, and the tears and champagne flowed in abundance. Kisses and presents were showered on the happy couple and congratulation telegrams poured in some even from strangers. It was agreed that Siegfried would stay with his parents and that they would be married on his next leave whenever that would be. They had telephoned her parents who were extremely happy about this union and about the husband she had picked and they congratulated them both many times during the call. They would be coming for a visit before the wedding but hoped she might come home for a few days soon so that her mother could talk about her future and family.

Plans were being made and Siegfried's parents had then turned up as a surprise, and this made everything perfect as old friends were reunited. He had never been so happy and neither had his future bride for it shone out of her face as she walked in the gardens or through the rooms of the Schloss.

They stole away to be alone as often as they could and this was when they made slow and passionate love together. But always at the back of his mind was the war he couldn't tell his and Siegfried's parents just how badly things were going for the Fatherland now. Of course the two of them had talked about it and Siegfried was of the same opinion as he was that they could lose in the end. This made the hours they spent alone in each others company all the more special for there was a deep despair now about their love. The rest of the time was taken up in a whirl of family plans for the wedding and of shooting with the family and his future father-in-law. All this took a toll on the time and before either of them knew it the time had come for him to go back to the front.

Siegfried and both families came to see him off as well as a number of staff officers but he and her had eyes only for each other. He said his goodbyes to the families and then they left them alone to say their own farewell. She told him of her love for him and begged him to come back and that she could not wait for them to be married so she could become his wife. On his side Ruger declared his love and told her how proud he would be to have her as a bride, but he was distracted his mind was already getting ready for life as a pilot again. She gave him a photo that she had dedicated and signed to him and a lovely locket with her picture and a lock of hair in it. He had given her a locket as well and they both swore never to take them off. Then it was time to get on the train as other families swirled round them taking leave of their loved ones and the tears and farewells swelled all around them. A band was playing and Siegfried clung to him desperately he thought he would smother in the passion of her kisses. Then he was released and he kissed her tenderly one last time tears were streaming down her beautiful face as they both agreed to write everyday. With this he boarded the train his medals and Blue Max glinting in the light as he was whisked off back to the front.

He came out of his reverie and mentally kicked himself daydreaming like that could get a man killed and Siegfried wouldn't like that and neither would he. He looked across at his two fledglings they were holding some kind of formation on him if only just. He could see anti-aircraft fire over the Tommy's lines and thought Riesel's Jasta must have been strafing troops. Their own line at the present was pretty quite for a change both sides lying back and licking their wounds. Well there wasn't much more he could do fuel would soon be getting low so they would fly another couple of miles and then start back to the airfield. They flew on and although he'd tried to stop it Ruger's mind drifted again.

The first letter was waiting when he had got back to the airfield and he knew that Siegfried must have written it as soon as she had left him. She must have sent it through the general staffs mail bag but then again her father had a lot of influence with the general staff. He read it avidly lingering over the declarations of love and the trivial bits as well. He knew however that these were a distraction he could little afford in his line of work for they could get him killed. However he had to weigh up the comfort that they brought to him as well, he thought about it. Until finally he hit on a solution his mind was like

steel so when he wasn't flying he would dwell on the letters and devour them. But when he was flying he would put them away from his mind and his lovely Siegfried as well for she had no place in this filth and horror.

Snapping out of it again he could not believe that this had happened for a second time he chastised himself mentally and shook his head violently. He set all the thoughts of home to one side instead he listened to the wind singing in the bracing wire of the wings a song he loved. And to the ripple of it across the canvas these were the sounds of his world what he was used to and what he was good at. The time had come however to turn for home and he signalled to the other two what was happening, they acknowledged and then all three started flying diagonally towards their airfield. Well he thought to himself things could have gone a damned site worst as it was this hadn't been that bad of a flight. Of course that young shithead could have killed them both when he turned into him but it didn't happen and for that he was heartily thankful. But when they got back he would tear a strip off both of them although he knew what happened was only enthusiasm it was discipline that mattered. He looked down and could see the reserve trenches passing below him and some troops that had just reached them. Again Ruger thought of life as an infantryman as he looked down and saw the troops moving into the reserve trenches. Again he shook his head knowing that he would rather be up hear skipping across the sky than be down there like them in the mud, blood and stench.

He pulled his scarf down and pushed his goggles up he took his gauntlet off and the kid glove as well. He wiped his hand over the part of his face that was visible beneath the helmet the wind stung it. God he was so tired maybe it was the work load or perhaps he was just tired of everything the war flying the death and destruction that went on around him. As he rearranged his clothing he thought it would be good to go out and get drunk tonight with Carl for he was right and Ruger was a lucky dog. He pulled on his gauntlet happy now he had dispelled the black mist of despair from his mind he concentrated on his flying. He could see in the distance the rear artillery positions they only had a few miles after these and they would be back at the airfield. Then he could hand these fledglings over to someone else and he and Carl could get ready for their night out. He would write Siegfried when he got back and tell her that he was going out with Carl to celebrate their engagement. He would also tell her that he was going to ask Carl to be his beat man at the forthcoming nuptials if they could both be spared. Also he would ask Willie to come and to fetch his family who he and Carl had never met but who were as much a family as their own.

Once more he scanned the sky all around him there was nothing that he could see at the moment out of place in fact nothing to cause him concern. He went back to what he had been thinking, and that was why he shouldn't have the only two friends that he had left at the happiest day of his life. Indeed it was time to see what kind of influence his Blue Max really had on things. Willie would be able to come as Ruger wouldn't be flying so there would be nothing for him to do at the airfield so to speak. Then Dietz would be able to take over from Carl for a few days so he couldn't see any problems to stop

them. Siegfried would be delighted as well as he had told her all about his friends and she understood what they meant to him. He would confirm things with Carl and Willie within the next few days. Infinitely more happy now he might not give these two as big a rollicking as he had planned but then again he probably would.

His neck was beginning to ache now with all the constant swivelling of his head looking for the enemy. It was getting colder and he pulled the collar of his fur coat up the engine noise thrumming through the canvass and his seat. If a man wasn't careful it could lull him to sleep before he knew it and this could indeed lead to the longest sleep he would ever take. He adjusted the numb cheeks of his ass in the pilot's bucket seat. Shit he could do with a cigarette and schnapps to warm him up but there was no chance of that. For the thousandth time he looked at his charges to make sure everything was alright he urged them to keep in formation with him. They were getting very close to the rear artillery positions now and Ruger noticed a speck over this position. He knew for certain that it would be a Tommy observation plane taking photos of the positions. It would also be a lot lower than they were the pilot and observer too busy with the work in hand to bother about anything else.

He also knew that there could be danger for sometimes with what looked like a lone observation team there would be a pack of enemy aircraft waiting above to pounce on anything that attacked the lone plane. They were getting closer the two new pilots had spotted nothing yet and probably wouldn't until they got even closer. All this was going through his brain as they narrowed the gap on the Tommy aircraft. Then all of a sudden what he feared might happen actually did do the two novice pilots spotted the observation aircraft. Throwing all their training out of the window as well as all caution they opened their aircraft up to full throttle and went diving down towards the Tommy aircraft. He cursed them and pushed his throttle forward there was a loud bang from the engine and the revs started dropping. He watched with horror as Tommy planes that had been in cloud cover higher up in the sky dropped towards his two fledglings.

So intent were Braun and Stein on the nearly helpless observation aircraft that they had not seen the wolves that were coming for them. Ruger tried throttling back and then taking the lever forward but he was getting nothing out of it. Like this he was a sitting duck himself and would last only seconds if the Tommy's saw him. All of a sudden the engine gave three loud bangs and the revs screamed out shooting him across the sky. He throttled back before the engine blew he tried his throttle and all his controls and found them all working. This must all have been in a dream that he had because he could remember all of this now almost as though he had been here before. The three bangs clearing the engine the feeling of hopelessness as he tried to reach the new boys at first and couldn't. The coffee cup and the near miss he must have seen all these in a dream. He felt near his neck and was relieved to feel a locket hanging there for if Siegfried had been a dream he didn't think he could take it.

He watched the two Lieutenants fixated on the target in front of them then he heard them shooting the excitement too much for them. For they weren't nearly close enough to start firing yet the enemy diving on them would know they were novices. The observer had heard as well and was now manning his machine-gun in the rear cockpit. This man was experienced though and waited till they were in range before firing short bursts at them. The pilot meanwhile had started to dive for the deck to shake off the pursuit, so he was experienced as well. If the plane had been a bit faster they might have made it as it was they didn't. Whether it was a lucky shot or a combination of the twin Spandau's on each of the Albatrosses pumping so many bullets in he couldn't guess. But the observer threw his arms in the air and folded over his machine gun just lying there. Then the pilot must have been hit because the aircraft lost control and plummeted down towards the ground far below it.

Braun and Stein must have thought they'd won a prize they were signalling to each other when the Tommy's fell on them. He didn't know what terror must have gone through their minds when they realised what was happening. But it couldn't have lasted long at all because the two fledglings didn't stand a chance in hell. He thought it was Stein who was killed first a Sopwith Camel aircraft latched onto his tail of course the boy had no idea what to do this being his first flight at the front. Ruger could see him looking backwards if the lad could only hang on for a couple of more seconds he was now on the tail of the Camel and would soon deal with it. He pressed the trigger on the joystick at the same time the Tommy pressed his Ruger's twin Spandau's rattled and the plane juddered as his shots ripped through the canvas of the Tommy plane. As he watched though he saw Stein fall forward in the cockpit and knew that he had been too late to save the boy but he also knew the boy had reaped the consequences of his actions. He fired again and watched the wing struts on the Tommy plane disintegrate he followed it down. Then he heard a bang and the wings on the Tommy plane folded like an insects and the heaviness of the engine dragged it earthward.

He looked over and saw Stein's plane spiralling towards the ground the lad was either dead or too badly wounded to do anything about it. So he latched onto another Camel and with concentrated bursts sent this Tommy to his maker. The fight had carried them a fair way towards the airfield and there were hardly any Tommy's left. However there was enough to finish off Braun who had led a charmed existence up to now. How he must have thought he had gotten away with it only to feel the fear of the hunted as the bullets slammed into his plane. Ruger could only watch in frustration as the Tommy latched on to Braun's tail and opened fire. He was too far away to prevent what was happening it would be over with by the time he got there. Still these had been his charges and he would make someone pay for killing them. He shoved the throttle forward and headed for the position where Braun was trying to shake off the Tommy plane. He was closing the gap when the inevitable happened as he knew it must. For all this had been in his dream as well he just didn't want to see what happened next. But there was no alternative for him and he knew it he would have to go through the whole dream. The Tommy's fire poured into Braun's Albatross throwing bits of

canvass and wood into the air. Then a round must have ignited some aviation fuel from the punctured fuel tank under the seat for the plane was now on fire. Ruger could see it clearly then the flames really took hold and the wind fanned them he saw Braun stand up and throw himself from the cockpit.

He watched as the flaming body of Braun left a trail of flame in the sky as it plummeted towards the ground. This was what he hadn't wanted to see but knew was going to happen as it had in the dream. The boy had chosen to jump rather than be cooked alive, not for him the feeling of his flesh peeling back or a pain so intense it didn't bear thinking about. Or having the flesh of his face burnt off the heat popping his eyes like those of a cooked fish and then swallowing the flame so that it shrivelled his lungs into leather bags that couldn't expand. No the boy had done the right thing in jumping and Ruger saluted him for it this was the action of a brave man. He was now on the tail of the Camel that had finished Braun off he fired his first burst. He could see the look of fear in the Tommy pilots face as he looked round and saw him behind and knew that Ruger was no novice. He didn't get a chance for any more thoughts as the black aircrafts guns blazed and Ruger finished him off with a few more well chosen bursts.

Well he guessed that was it as he looked down to where the Tommy's plane had just hit the ground and smoke and flames were now climbing into the sky. Soldiers were running like ants towards the Tommie's and Braun's plane probably looking for what was left of their bodies. All of a sudden his plane shuddered and bucked he wondered what the hell was happening. He looked round and saw a damn Camel on his tail as he watched bullets stitched a path of neat round holes down his fuselage. He had glimpsed on the enemy aircrafts wing strut a red streamer this donated one of the Tommy's leaders. So the pilot after him was like himself one of the best that was left and who would definitely be an old hand at this game this was going to be tricky to say the least. He could remember this from his dream also, only this part was a bit hazy to say the least and he dismissed the idea from his mind.

He threw his aircraft across the sky so as to throw the Tommy off his aim but it didn't work bullets thudded into his plane and he knew he was in trouble. He headed back towards the airfield hoping that this would throw off his pursuer as it usually did but something niggled at the corner of his mind. He thought surely this Tommy wouldn't want to go any further into enemy territory than he had too and certainly not as far as the airfield when he was by himself. He decided enough was enough he would perform an Immelman turn which was a loop in the sky this would then put him on the Tommy's tail. Let's see how he would like the odds when Ruger's twin Spandau's were ripping into his canvass fuselage and stitching death along it. He pulled the joystick right into his stomach as he pushed the throttle forward. But it was no good the Tommy followed what he was doing as though he knew in advance. He started weaving again hoping to spoil the others aim this didn't work either as holes appeared in his wing strut. By this time Ruger was running out of options for this Tommy pilot was good who ever he was damn good he had never met better. The odd thing was there didn't seem to be any markings on

the plane apart from the red streamer not any squadron markings or personal ones which just didn't make sense.

It was funny but Ruger had the distinct impression that he had met this pilot before somewhere but he just couldn't for the life of him remember where. Was it in his dream or had he seen him in the air before from a distance yes that must have been it from a distance. He was dipping and running now but the Tommy just stayed with him and kept firing just taking his time as cool as ice. There was another thing as well he thought I should have been down near the ground by now but I don't seem to have lost any height this shocked him more than he would admit. Was he in a dream or a nightmare that was the question because everything about today seemed to have happened before, ever since the moment he first arose? His plane by now was being chewed to bits by the Tommy pilot's bullets and he didn't think it would last much longer if he couldn't escape the incessant chatter of the guns. He looked round again the Tommy was closer but even so he couldn't see the pilots face he just couldn't make it out all he saw was a black silhouette under the helmet. He watched in fascination as bullet holes came towards him down the back of the fuselage he turned back ready to pull on the stick for another Immelman turn. But he never got the chance bullets burnt into his back and waves of agony overtook him god so this was what it felt like. Blood ran from his mouth through his white scarf he thought of Siegfried and how sorry he was that he couldn't marry her he should have been able to spend the rest of his life with her raising a family. Oh well that was not going to happen now then he remembered where he had seen the red streamer that the Tommy had flying from his strut. It was the plane that had dropped the canister with the photo of Manfred von Drexel's funeral on the airfield there was no shame in being beaten by such an opponent. He hoped Willie would be alright and that he would have a good life with his family after this was over. Then he thought goodbye Carl old friend sorry but there will be no getting drunk tonight or any other night, he smiled and blood gushed out of his mouth. Then there was nothing just the darkness.....

The dew was lying on the grass and dawn was waiting to rear its welcoming early morning light onto things. 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.....

Is death just a reliving of the last day of your life or is it just a dream within a dream that you are caught in..... You choose!!!