

Six A.M.

by

Vixxy Fox



“WHAT DID YOU SAY AIRMAN?!”

Sergeant Brown was right in my face when he screamed this at me. His breath smelled like bad coffee and cigarettes and I swear even in the darkness I could see the yellow of his teeth.

“I said it’s only six a.m. sir! A.M. is from the Latin ante meridiem, meaning "before midday".

“WHAT WERE YOU A FUK’N ALTER BOY?”

“Sir, No sir!” I yelled back.

“WHO IN THE FUK USES LATIN BUT AN ALTER BOY?”

“The priest does, sir! I was in training!”

The old soldier was at a loss for words at that response. I saw a ghost of a smile on his face though he didn’t say anything. Backing off, he went to the head of our assembled company and like everyone else, faced east and stood at attention. As the sun came up the apparition on the other side of the chain link fence took shape, forming itself into a solid machine as if coming to us by the magic of the rising sun. It began as a blob in the lightening darkness and slowly took the shape of a huge aircraft. The aircraft further defined itself and became the gun studded flying fortress we’d heard so much about.

This early morning revelation was breath taking.

When the time was right and what we'd come to see was totally revealed, the Sergeant turned to regard his students.

“COMPANYYYYY PARADEEEEEEE REST!”

With the sound of feet in unison we went from full attention to a more comfortable position.

“AT EAZEEEEEE.”

We were a bit at a loss as Sergeant Brown had never placed us at ease in his presence before. All during our training he was on us like stink on manure; never letting up. In the class room it was sit at attention. If he walked into the room you were to snap to attention and God help you if you didn't. Push-ups were the least of your worries.

Everything about the little monster was 'at attention'. Within the company we joked a feigned sorrow for Mrs. Brown, if there was one, because we were sure the Sergeant must surely have a constant erection.

In one regard, no matter what our background was, we learned to respect the drill instructor's place among us. He was the Number One Dog and no bones about it. You did what he commanded with a 'Sir, yes sir!' and never looked back.

“If I could have your attention please,” he called to us in a voice unlike any he had used before. A few of the company 'snapped too' at the use of the word and the rest of us, including the Sergeant, laughed.

“I have some good news and some bad news for you, gentlemen,” Brown began, and we gave him our full attention just as he asked. “The bad news is that you've all been designated to be air gunners and you will be shipping out for England next week. The push is on to get you to the front as fast as possible.”

He sighed and then took off his Drill Instructor's hat. “Some of you will not be coming back... that is to say; some of you are going to die. I want you to keep that in mind as you further train in your duties as gunners. The better trained you are the more likely it is you might live through the coming missions.”

“What the fuck is the good news?” One of the wisenheimers of the company yelled out. I don't remember his name now but we all laughed. You have to understand... we were all not much more than children really. Some of us had joined up. Others had been drafted. All the same, we were doing our duty as was expected and the best we could do was try hard not to soil ourselves when the shit hit the fan.

Sergeant Brown, God bless him, did not disappoint.

“YOU’LL BE FLYING THE BEST DAMNED AIRPLANE EVER BUILT BAR NONE... THE B-17 BOMBER!”

We cheered then looking at the B-17 sitting on the other side of the fence from us. She was rounded and ugly to your first glance but as pretty as the baker’s daughter holding up a delicious cake as an incentive to take her to the Spring Dance on the second.

After a moment given to ponder this, we were brought back to attention and twelve smaller groups of men came forward. Each group consisted of a pilot, a co-pilot, a navigator, a radio operator, and a flight engineer.

We were then split up much as sides are chosen up during a neighborhood baseball game and in the short week given us for training we competed as such in everything from gunnery and bomb drills to baseball; a game the Brits never could quite get a handle on.

My bomber was shot down on its tenth mission. Flak took off the entire right wing and we were all forced to hit the silk.

God, I found out, has a reason for everything. I spent four years in a POW camp tending to others who suffered far more than I did.

After the war I made it a point to seek out Sergeant Brown who’d gone back to being a farmer.

“Ante meridiem,” he said in greeting when he answered the door. “It’s good to see you’re still alive.”

“And you,” I replied. “I wanted to thank you for preparing us.”

“I did what I could.” He nodded to my white collar. “I see you finally became a priest.”

“I think that was inevitable, sir.”

He opened the door wider so I could come inside. “Would you like a cup of coffee?”

“That would please me greatly,” I told him truthfully. “Do you yell at your chickens the way you used to yell at us?”

I don’t know why I asked this but it seemed I was supposed to. It was meant as a joke, but Sergeant brown turned and regarded me with a serious look of old that gave me an ice in the belly feeling just like when I was in training. “I can’t,” the old boy told me softly with a wink, “I tried it once and they stopped laying eggs.”

We were up late into that night reminising. We laughed and we cried. We remembered those who made it back and those who didn’t. We also found it in our hearts to forgive an enemy whom we pounded into the ground.

He had me hear his confession and for a penance I had him fix us breakfast.

God and the B-17 saw us through.

Both of them are tough old birds that carry a heck of a punch. The one will bomb you out of existence and the other will forgive you after it happens.

Life sometimes makes no sense at all; but even when it doesn't you still have to stand up for what you believe in.

God is good and I heard him speak from within the roar of four 1,200-horsepower Wright Cyclone engines.

Dominus Vobiscum.