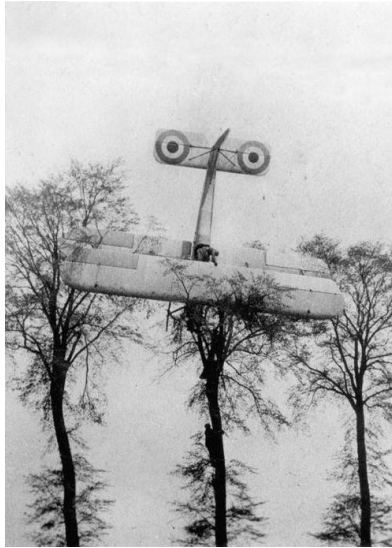


Silence

by

Vixxy Fox



“In an aeroplane silence is not something you want to have happen; unless you’re in a glider.”

Group Captain Anthony Stewart VC, DSO, retired

I distinctly remember my first day of aeroplane training. I was enjoying the quiet of gentle living, or so I thought, having been a week away from the front lines by then. One could still hear the distant thunder of the big guns as each side took its turn at battering the other’s lines; but I wasn’t there huddled in some God forsaken dig that you could never make deep enough to keep out the noise.

I suppose that’s why I volunteered for the Royal Flying Corp. Though it was well known those who went seldom came back, the thought of such luxuries as a shower and clean sheets were too much to pass up; even if I was to die for it. As we were asked to volunteer, the thought actually came to me of some poor private standing with his arms out. In one was plopped a pile of trench dung and in the other clean sheets and a blanket. Those were heavier and the poor bugger said so to me with a wink and a nod; whereupon I stood and shouted out that I would go.

“What is the meaning of silence?” Our instructor asked from the front of our group. We were all sitting comfortably in actual chairs inside a large tent. Every one of us was scrubbed clean, wore a new uniform and had dined upon a succulent breakfast of poached eggs with bacon and bread.

“It means no bloody talking,” offered a Sergeant sitting in the front row. He said this while turning to look at the rest of us as he was the highest ranker among the group and apparently felt in charge.

We pegged him as a suck up from the beginning and nicknamed him Sergeant Stinky for the odor coming from the end of his nose. Not wanting him to get away with this, I stood and offered, “It means cease firing, sir.”

“Very good, Private, but not quite what I was looking for,” the instructor told me with a wink. This led me to believe he had Sergeant Stinky pegged as well.

There were a few more definitions offered, all of them good, but none of them accurate to the point our instructor was trying to make. He was a Lieutenant, by the way. Did I mention that? Never mind if I did; he was also a veteran of six months of flying with three kills. He’d gotten two observation aeroplanes and a balloon.

When we’d exhausted our thoughts and all was relatively ‘silent’ within the tent, the sound of an close by engine coming to life caused the Lieutenant to raise a finger. When the engine died off again the finger was lowered. The engine again roared to life – finger up – died/ down – life/up – died/down.

I should explain something here, a note if you will on things common back then. Engines in these kites had no throttle. They were called rotary because the entire engine spun around and the propeller was fastened to it. When run, it was always at a clip that the metal monster was pleased with. So... the pilot, to govern his speed, would turn the right magneto off and then use a four position switch on the left for four different speeds the thing would then run at. The only other way was to use what was called a ‘blip switch’ which was straight on and off. The blipper made flying less complicated as you needn’t pay attention to throttle adjustments, but landings rather more difficult as you never knew for sure if the bloody thing would come back on when you again ungrounded the spark.

And so the engine roared: ahhhhhhhh-----ahhhhhhhhh-----ahhhhhhh-----ahhhhhhh....

A few minutes later when the mechanics decided they’d had enough fun at our expense, this brought about by the Lieutenant sending Sergeant Stinky out to yell at them, all was again quiet and our lesson resumed.

“Silence,” he told us, “Is not something you wish to hear when the magneto is switched back on.”

There was a ‘silent’ moment as he let this sink into our shell shocked minds. I use this as an expression now, but then it was a simple truth. One or two of us would take a moment or three to digest mental thoughts which had been brought on by the constant pounding of the guns. One or three of us were also stone deaf in at least one ear, while probably a full half us were twitchy to the point of throwing ourselves to the ground at any external provocation.

“When you are in the cockpit and suddenly there is only the noise of the wind in your ear,” the Lieutenant furthered, “Your engine is obviously no longer working.”

He began to pace a bit and his face grew taut for a moment as his mind went back to something clearly torturing his soul.

“When you no longer hear your engine you will remember the training you’ve had at doing a proper ‘dead stick’ landing,” he told us, “The kites glide well and all should be fine so long as you haven’t been shot up and you’re going down in flames... or something of that nature.”

He stopped pacing as Sergeant Stinky came back in and retook his seat. He looked truly satisfied that he’s been allowed to bully someone, and then, seeing the Lieutenant standing shock still at the front of the class, whispered, “What? What did I miss?”

When none of us would answer him, he came to attention in his seat. “Begg’n the Lieutenant’s pardon and all, sir,” he stutters, “But I done as you ordered and all again is quiet.”

The officer, ignoring this, slapped at his body a few times like a spastic marionette before the reality of where he was caught up to his mind, and he cleared his throat as if asking pardon for his actions. We, who were no more a week from the trenches, fully understood reliving something dreadful. Perhaps this was even the reason he’d been sent to instruct us. Perhaps, and this is not much of a stretch to understand, he was not yet ready to take back to the air.

“I had an occasion,” he finally tells us, turning fully to face the class, “Where a Hun managed to get the jump on me. This happened some three months ago. I wish to share it with you as there is some humor to the situation; though I wish for you to remember the story so you won’t repeat it.”

We weren’t quite sure if he meant repeat the story, or repeat his mistake; but not a one of us said a word.

“My aircraft was hit. The engine took the brunt of the damage and caught fire. Fortunately I was only at about one thousand feet and so was able to get down quickly. The farmer’s field below me was fairly clear, having but a few trees... of which I managed to find one.”

We were truly stunned by this admission. Quite frankly, the pilots sent to brace us up during the one week’s rest we were given prior to our training, such as it was, all talked only of the good things of being with the Royal Flying Corp. All had claimed to have shot down a score of the enemy who flew inferior aeroplanes and were not apparently very good pilots. None of them had ever mentioned accidents or dying let alone the thought of actually being burned alive before you could land.

“In the true silence that followed my rather abrupt stoppage in the limbs of that tree,” the Lieutenant continued, “I thanked God several times over for the miracle of life and actually laughed at the ‘good news bad news’ of my situation. The good news, you see, was that the fire departed with the engine which continued on and through the tree limbs, landing in the field below. The bad news was that I’d found a tree in a field large enough to land a dirigible and was securely stuck there.”

We honestly didn’t know how to react to this as tears began streaming down the fellow’s face.

“Then,” he tells us in a very choked up voice, “The Hun who shot me down, actually landed to assist.”

When he could speak again, we were dismissed to have a cup of tea. It was like leaving church after hearing a most powerful sermon.

As I stood outside the tent sipping at my tin cup, I looked up to the sky. It appeared so very bright and happy looking, which led me to marvel at what a strange mess of a world we’d been born into.