

Surviving Among the Troops

by

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From an unopened letter found in a most peculiar antique shop. It was addressed: To my grandchildren.

Ya... Dot's me marching with my troop. Comes the expression, 'trooping along', eh? The Great War it was, and of course, from my enlistment came also the expression, 'Dog Face' when referring to a soldier. Und the Americans thought the term was invented up by their soldiers, ya?

You may wonder how a person with a face like mine was able to survive 'civilization' at all. People are very hurtful when you do not fit the mold of their small minds. In the beginning, it was, indeed, very tough for me. Children are more accepting than their parents und so I could not even play. My mother, or so she told me years later, was almost burned at the stake when I was born. There was no reason for my being... but there I was. Ya... there I was. She told me my father was a normal person, but being of Nobel birth, he never came recognized our existence. Und so, she kept me pretty much out of sight, teaching me on her own and loving me as only a mother could love her child.

Then came the war und still I hide. I was an outcast who would more likely be shot than embraced. Earlier I had considered seeking out a circus or freak show, buuuttttt... the war had put a heavy drain upon the local male population and they were running short of troops at the

front. I saw this as an opportunity at obtaining normalcy through insanity. That is: I volunteered to go off and fight for my country.

Initially I was met with derision within the troop as we received our basic training. This lasted until I proved my metal in a boxing match against the biggest of the lot. I will smile here and say, I did not bite him, though I showed much teeth. With a sudden flurry of back slapping, I found my acceptance, and it felt good. My heart swelled and I found a love for my fellow soldiers. They were not perfect. The cream of the German male hood had already been decimated. Then again neither was I perfect; though we were told the enemy was far less than perfect and we were to kill that enemy dead. I never wanted that. Nor did my comrades want that; but as we marched it became painfully aware that we would not have a choice.

When we were in camp, I first alerted our commander of a coming attack. I smelled horses on the wind. He was able to quietly roust out the rest of our troop and set up a defensive line. We lost but one man and the enemy lost some thirty with their horses. I was truly in shock after this action, which also were many of my comrades. As the commander made his rounds to collect the prisoners and restore order, he stopped to thank me.

‘Your nose is that good?’ he asks, and I told him, ‘Most certainly.’

‘And how is your hearing?’

I tell him I can hear Schultz snoring all night from five hundred meters and many of the men talk in their sleep which makes it hard for me to rest. He slapped me on the shoulder and says we shall speak later but he must continue with his duties. That was when I was promoted to Corporal, and I stood much guard duty. Soon, we heard a rumor that the British had dubbed me ‘Devil Dog’ because they could not surprise our lines as I heard it all unfold and smelled the stink of more living bodies coming forward in preparation to their attack.

Life on the front lines in these times was not good. You lived under a constant bombardment of the enemy guns, and you wondered that your own guns seemed to be very inefficient in stopping this *rain* of death. My ears were deafened, and my nose only smelled death. At one point I found myself huddled in a shell hole barking. I never barked before.

The following day, through the ringing in my ears, I heard a sound in the sky. Looking up I see these pretty things floating above the lines... but not floating; flying. For once, the front was quiet, as if both sides had decided to take the day off in order to bring up more ammunition to replace that which had been expended. I was curious and so asked my commander about it. He told me they were looking for crazy people to fly the machines and asked if I would like to volunteer. He added that the flyers were fed well.

And so I volunteered once again.

“Yes... I am sure you are smiling at the thought of one who would then become known as the ‘Air Wolf’. I found another skill in my life that went beyond hearing and smelling. Again, my surroundings rather prevented this as the engine of the craft I flew was very loud, and it gave off a noxious smell of exhaust fumes and castor oil. Fortunately my eyesight is remarkable. My initial training took little time and I was advanced on to a class that was for students naturally talented in manipulating the air machines. Perhaps too, the sergeant in charge was more than nervous over my presence.

The officer pilot who took over for him was more receptive. “You are a Wolf?” he asked me.

I snapped to attention and yelled out, “I am a German, Mein Heir. I just look this way.”

“I see... but you are not a dog?”

“I am a German, Mein Heir. I just look this way.”

He tapped me on the shoulder with his riding crop and said, “I think you are more than a mere Dog faced Corporal... I think you are a Wolf! Have you ever flown an aircraft before?”

“The trainer, Mein Heir!”

“And how did you do?”

“I crashed, Mein Heir!”

He slapped me on the shoulder and winked. “We all crashed,” he told me, “Now I shall teach you how not to crash.”

For me, this was fun. Yes, it was dangerous, but far better was it to sitting and waiting for an English shell to land on your head. Training was a bit harsh, but times were harsh and being that it took so long to build an aircraft the Fliegertruppen des deutschen Kaiserreiches (Imperial German Flying Corps) was wont to lose a single one if they could avoid it.

Within two weeks I had my first victory. Vee call it a victory because vee shoot at the aircraft and not the pilot. A week after that and I had another and two weeks later two more. Vee heard the British und American flyers were intrigued with the German flyer who flew wearing a Dog mask. I have to give them credit because I later passed one wearing a Gorilla mask. I think he wore it in my honor because he waved as we passed. I missed shooting him down but it is well that I did not; the war ended the next day.

On this day, an American pilot flew to our airfield and landed, looking specifically for me. He was a man from Colorado. Bearing no bad feelings to the defeated, we found he had come just for me. It was rather awkward, as I could not speak English, nor could he speak German. I caught one man pointing a gun at him, for which I stepped between.

“Ja?” I asked, and he passed me a letter.

I sniffed at the letter and it had an intriguing scent to it. Looking at this other pilot, I raised an eyebrow.

“Come with me,” he said in stuttering German, “If you wish to live in peace.”

Und zo, my grandchildren, I came to a place called Colorado where I met your grandmother. She too was as am I... but she taught me how to change to a full human shape when I wished. Through this, I was able to live a peaceful life for which I am grateful, and our children never knew... but now you know.

Should one of you develop the condition whereby you become... shall we say, ‘Wolfish’. I implore you to be careful. But for war time where social rules are put off, it can be not so pleasant. There is much of my life that I have not shared.

I will leave you, then, with a thought for contemplation: If I had joined the navy do you think perhaps I might have become known as the ‘Sea Wolf’?