

# *Diabolical Daffodils*

*by*

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Marty sipped on his coffee and looked out over the airfield. It was morning and just after the dawn, so the light was just perfect. The sun now reflected off of the thousands and thousands of yellow flowers planted all along the small grass runway. It was his doing, and he'd never told anyone why it was he'd done it. Pretty much everyone concerned hadn't even raised the question since it was such a pretty sight; especially when viewing it on final flyong into the little airport. The sight was so impressive that 'unofficially' the flyers of the five surrounding counties declared the second weekened in March as the weekend to hold their annual 'Dafodil Fly In'.

He was old now. He was so old, in fact, that he'd reached the age of veneration seldom seen in aviation. Once, not but a handful of years ago, some young punk flyer had flown solo into the arifield looking for someone to validate his flight log. He found Marty sitting in his usual seat at the strip's canteen having a coffee. His was the booth with the most perfect view of the small runway.

"Hey Pops, can you sign my flight log?"

"The name's Marty," the old Hound growled at him. "And that's only to the folks I know. Anyone else comes 'round, and they can call me Mr. Daffodil."

"Seriously? Like the flower?"

The Dog scrunched his eyes up like a boxer eyeing up his opponent. "Do I look like I'm making a joke? I saw your landing and it was the worse performace of a student pilot I ever did see."

"I got down didn't I?"

"And so the devil fell from heaven. Even his landing was better than yours."

"Are you going to sign my log or not?"

The old 'Flying Dog' picked up the log, looked at it for a moment, and then tossed it back to the table top. "No."

That was when Smitty the Cat came in, his coveralls stained a respectable amount and his ball cap turned around backwards. He was wiping his paws on a rag. "Who owns the Cesnna out by the gas pump?" he asked loudly, even though Marty and the student pilot were the only ones in the canteen.

“It’s mine,” the kid told him, “Why?”

“I hope you like hitch hiking; your props bent. You must’a struck the nose when you put down. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but that happens and the crankshaft suffers. You’re probably going to have to replace the engine too.”

“Bad landing,” Marty growled.

The kid turned on him, and might have taken a swing except that Smitty reached out and grabbed the back of the ‘nugget’s’ collar. After yanking him backwards, he frog marched the fellow out of the place. From the old Dog’s booth the pair then had coffee together and watched as the fledgling flyer tried to prop his bird. Smitty had called it right though; the engine was completely seized up.

“That was cruel Marty,” the mechanic told him.

“It was the truth. Better for him to stay on the ground until he learns some humility because he’ll die otherwise. He darn near did that right here, too.”

The old Hound now watched out the same window, seeing the wind ruffle the sea of yellow around a strip that was still not much more than a pasture.

“It’s been a long time Marty,” said a voice he recognized, though he hadn’t herd it since that spring day fifteen years earlier.

“I was wondering when you’d get around to coming back here,” he replied without looking. “I’m actually glad you’re not dead.”

The flyer slid into the booth across from the old timer with the sound of leather on vinal. “No, not dead, but almost after my old man was done beating on me for destroying his airplane.”

“Then he is an ignorant pilot. You were alive and breathing, that should have been enough. Every pilot knows; if you can walk away from a landing then it was a good landing.”

“Naw... it wasn’t that; it was my attitude. I sort of mouthed off a bit and got back handed for it. I did have it coming.”

“Yeah... there was that,” the old aviator agreed, still peering out the window.

“Whatcha watching?” the other pilot asked.

“We got a newbie out flying his first solo. By my watch, he should have been back three minutes ago.”

“It’s a fly-in, there’s a lot of aircraft in the pattern.”

“I think I see him,” the old pilot said, pointing to a small speck in the sky. “Yeah, that’s him. The flowers are good for that.”

“I’m sorry?”

“The dafodils. This time of year everything is still suffering from winter. The green stuff is just beginning to come up and fill in, but not this field. We’re solid yellow. Makes us stick out like a sore thumb and real easy to find. I learned that trick back in the first war. Our commanding officer loved the darned things and paid the local French farmers to plant them all over the runway at our field.”

“That’s...”

“Diabolical,” Marty finished for him.

“Not exactly the word I was going to use. Why ‘diabolical’?”

“Because the Germans knew about it too. It made us easy to find, so we brought in extra ground units and moved the airplanes one field over. We pegged a bunch of them when they attacked, before they got wise to what was going on. And then we sent the airplanes after what was left. We spanked ’em good that day.”

“So when you got back you began the planting?”

“Something like that. I just couldn’t get past the war. Call it a poor man’s tombstone; we also lost our commander that day. I look at the flowers now and it helps me remember; but it also brings me peace.”

There was a moment’s silence and then Marty looked at the young fellow sitting across from him. He was dressed in an air force flight suit, over which he wore a bomber jacket.

“That was your Dad’s jacket,” the old Dog said absently.

“You know my Pop?”

The old Hound smiled. “I taught him to fly. I also called him the day you bent his airplane.”

“You called him?”

“Sure.”

“You told him what a bad pilot I was?”

“I told him to get you back in the air as soon as possible.”

“But...”

“Conditions that day were tretchorous at best. Rightfully you shouldn’t have been in the air at all.”

“It wasn’t like that when I took off, sir... the forecast was wrong,” the younger pilot said defensively.

“I know,” the older pilot replied, and then allowed himself a small smile, “I checked that too.”

“Pop did get me back in the air again,” the pilot admitted. “It surprised the heck out of me. Now I fly jets.”

“I flew a Spad,” Marty chuckled.

“So how is it you taught my father to fly? It’s a good hundred miles from where we lived to here. There’s no way he could have made it all the way here on his own.”

The old instructor sighed. “I was saddened when I heard of his passing. He was a good pilot. He paid his dues and then some. Some of it we talk about... a lot of it we don’t, and that’s just the way it is. Among the vets, that’s understood, but we still stand together.”

“And?”

“Your grandfather was my commanding officer. I made a promise to him, and I kept it”