**TWILIGHT OF THE GIANTS**

Erik stepped out onto the street. The sun blazed down, and the raging fires a few blocks away did little

to help dispel he heat. The weary German pilot adjusted his heavy flight jacket and started towards the

other side of the street where his friend Gunther was rotating the propellers of Erik’s fighter. The

fighters, G6 models of the Bf-109, were once plentiful in the squadron, back in better times over the

skies of Belgium and the Russian Steppe. Now, there were only six of them, no tools to maintenance

them properly, no spare parts to replace the damaged ones, and not even a runway to fly the fighters

from. Instead, the pilots flew from the streets. Even then they’d often return (usually short another pilot

or so) just to find the last street they used bombed and ruined. Now, with the Soviets pushing through

the city, intact city streets were getting harder and harder to find.

“Gunther.”

The mechanic wiped his brow and turned around smiling. Gunther himself had been a fighter pilot. A

good one too. However, two months ago a Russian Yak-3 had put three bullets through his right leg and

that was it. Now, the boy of just 22 would never even kick a football again. Nonetheless, he looked quite

cheerful as he spoke to Erik.

“I found what was making that noise in your engine.”

Gunther held up what looked like a piece of steel refuse.

“6 cm round hit your engine in the bottom. Passed straight through the cooling tank and flattened

against the cockpit armour. You’re lucky you were flying so high. A few hundred metres lower, you

wouldn’t be half the man you used to be.”

Gunther seemed quite pleased with himself after his little joke, but Erik just stared glumly at the piece of

steel. Lots of pilots in the squadron had taken shots, Gunther included. Few were lucky enough to keep

their possessions intact, much like a particular former member of the squadron, Hans. Hans Arbach was

17 when he lost both legs to a flak shell over Stalingrad, trying to cover the transports bringing food to

the starving 6th Army in the Korsun Pocket. He managed to fly the plane all the way back to the base and

land it in the midst of a snowstorm, but he froze to death on the runway. The kid was tough as nails, but

nobody could stand up against the Russian winter. As Erik stared at the shell that had nearly killed him,

he felt the chill of that white death once again, deep in his bones, where he suspected it would always

remain. Gunther didn’t seem to remember.

“I patched up your cooling tank with some steel off an old Panzer IV. I also had to bleed the cooling a bit,

just to make sure it didn’t expand too much up where the air gets colder. You don’t want that rough

patch popping off and spewing cooling fluid in the middle of the fight, do ya.”

Erik nodded and mumbled his thanks. He usually would have been joking around with Gunther on a

morning like this, but a particularly close bombing raid had kept Erik up all night. It had also killed the

Squadron mascot, a goofy old German Shepard who had been with them from Poland to Berlin. All it

took was one bomb for him and his unfathomable reserves of energy to be gone.

Erik tucked these thoughts deeper into his mind, and stepped towards his fighter. The wing shuttered

under Erik’s weight as he stepped into the cockpit, the cramped space seeming even smaller and stuffier

than usual. Gunther had already been running the engine to get it hot, and the humidity inside the

cockpit was choking. Erik flipped a few controls, just to make sure they were working properly, a

surprisingly rare occurrence these days. The left rudder was a bit sluggish as always. Back near Warsaw,

a rifle bullet had taken out one of the rudder wires in the tail, and with all the retreating this had never

been replaced. It had caused a lot of difficulty in the last few months.

The squadron leader was getting into his own fighter up ahead, and turned to give the “Take off when

ready” signal to the rest of the squadron. Gunther turned to Erik, suddenly grave-faced, and spoke

quietly to him.

“Erik, you and I both know this war is done for us. We need men like you after the war too. Don’t get

into any danger, and come right on back.”

Erik nodded and Gunther walked back towards the houses on the left side of the road where the

maintenance staff were set up. Behind him, Erik took a deep breath and reached over to the canopy,

swinging it over his head and locking it into place. Gunther reached the house and sat down to watch as

the Bf-109s, engines humming and steel wings flashing, one by one sped off down the street and clawed

their way into the skies, skimming the tree tops at the intersection up ahead. Like grey angels, they

gracefully turned, entered formation, and then sped off towards the smoke rising from the outskirts of

Berlin. The sky was a glowing orange from the flames, and the horizon was black with smoke. The great

city was letting out its final sigh as it keeled over and died. These were the last days of the Third Reich.

The death of Germany. In the skies to witness it were the Luftwaffe pilots who survived to this point.

Like the knights of a medieval Germany long past, they rode their steel mounts into battle, in defense of

a great beast which had already keeled over and died. It was the twilight of the giants.

Up in the dogfight, there’s no time for weakness. It’s a mix of mid-air jousts and tight turning fights, fast

paced, breakneck, bone rattling action, where to slow down means to die. Up at 7000 feet, where steel

falls like rain, there’s no hope of survival. It’s a realm of death. When the shot up bird dives from 7000

feet to 0, there’s no way the pilot is getting out. Not with the fire roaring and the plane diving at 300

knots. The second you feel the fear, the second you freeze up, the wolves will rip you to pieces.

The squadron obviously never came back. Bravery has no place on the modern battlefield. Not that they

would have been able to return, even if their bravery did win them their lives. That afternoon, Il-2

Sturmoviks, the Soviet Union’s Black Deaths themselves, flew in and ripped up the street. It wasn’t their

actual target, but they decided that in hindsight, it was better to destroy it than leave it be. The Russians

had other targets, the Reichstag, the Flak towers, Panzer columns, places to buzz off to, places that

made a difference, places more worthy of their ammunition. In the end, it was their newest squadron

member who was told to blow it up; least experienced and least likely to make a difference at the real

target. A few bombs, and boom. No more street, no more airfield, no more houses, no more mechanics,

no more Gunther, just a nice fire and some smoke.

WORDS: 1228