

The Private Who Hated His General

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By the time I hired on (said Max), morale was about as low as it could get. There were nearly as many Peloponnes as ever, but all the women had been sent home, and most of the men who hadn't gone over to the other side were pretty badly shot up.

General Bigelow was getting desperate, so he put out the word that he was looking for mercenaries.

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"He must have been desperate if he was willing to hire you!" guffawed Sitting Horse.

"You think I can't kill my share of aliens?" asked Max ominously.

"Oh, we figure you can slaughter non-humans with the best of them," said Crazy Bull. "We just don't see you responding to military discipline."

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I'd have surprised you (continued Max). I stayed sober, didn't sneak no shape-changing alien ladies into the barracks no matter how good they looked, I remembered to salute most of the time, I even made my bunk up every now and then. I hate officers, so I insisted on being a private, even though I was getting paid more than anyone except the General.

Problem was, General Bigelow could have used forty or fifty more like me, or a couple of dozen Hurricane Smiths. Word had gotten out about the war -- first, that it was going badly, and even worse, that he'd sent all the women away -- and even though he was offering top dollar, he couldn't begin to replace the men he was losing every day.

Finally he hit on the notion of flying bombing missions over the Peloponne lines, so that none of us came into direct contact with those alien women. 'Course, their lines were so spread out, and in such a constant state of flux, that we mostly just dropped our payloads and hoped for the best.

It didn't take them long to realize that we weren't going to meet them face-to-face on the battlefield, so they moved up their long-range molecular imploders and started turning our airships into soup. Before long word had even reached New Vegas, and they started offering odds on how many of us would return from each day's mission. The first week, the odds were four-to-one that any of us would survive, but by the second week it was only five-to-two, and the third week it was six-to-five pick 'em.

Now, if you only had to complete one mission before you got mustered out, you could live with those odds -- or at least you could on six days out of eleven. But when that sonuvabitch Bigelow had you flying two missions a day, you had to figure your number was up by the morning of the second day.

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"Shit!" muttered O'Grady. "The best odds I could ever get on you guys were three-to-five against!"

"You bet on us?" asked Max.

"With odds like that?" said O'Grady. "No way. They were blowing you out of the sky like there was no tomorrow. Like any smart gambler, I went with the run."

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Can't say I blame you (said Max). Hell, if I'd been able to put a little money down on the Peloponnes, I'd have done it in a flash. Believe me, none of us looked forward to running -- or flying -- the gauntlet of all those imploders every morning and evening. We begged the general to come up with some other strategy, but he didn't have any ground troops left, and he refused to either surrender or declare a victory and get the hell out, so we kept flying missions.

By the beginning of the fourth week, I was the only pilot still on active duty. All the others were dead or wounded. He'd started with 406 airships and an equal number of pilots, and now all he had left was 42 ships and one pilot (me), the rest having joined the enemy or been melted away, mostly the latter. So I went up to General Bigelow and suggested that maybe it was about time for a different strategy, since this one sure as hell wasn't working.

But he was under pressure to win the war, and no one was sending him any men or supplies, and all he had left was me and a couple of platoons that he was afraid to send against the enemy, since the enemy had this habit of looking awful friendly at close quarters.

Well, I wasn't happy about it, but he offered to double my pay, so I agreed to fly one more mission.

I barely made it back to base, and just as I was having a beer in the officer's club, Bigelow came up to me and told me he wanted me to go right back up.

"Meaning no disrespect, General Bigelow sir," I said, "but you can go fuck yourself."

"You're all I've got!" he snapped. "I will not have it go on my record that I lost my final battle."

"There's the airship," I said, pointing out the window. "Go fight it yourself."

"I'm a general," he said. "I don't sully my hands with the actual fighting. That's what I have you for."

"You ain't got me," I said. "I resign. Use some other poor bastard."

"They've all deserted."

"Every last one of them?" I asked.

He nodded.

"You mean I've been dropping bombs on our own men?" I demanded.

"They're not our own men any more! They've gone over to the enemy."

I couldn't say I blamed them. After all, the enemy probably fed them better, and based on what I'd heard of Hurricane Smith and his lady love, they sure kept 'em warmer at nights.

Well, we haggled back and forth for the better part of the afternoon. I kept saying that I wasn't going to play target for the Peloponnes anymore, and that I also didn't feel right dropping bombs on my friends, and he kept saying that he wasn't about to surrender or sue for peace, and that anyone who was shackled up with a lady insect, no matter what she looked like on the outside, wasn't any friend of mine.

Finally the sun started setting without anything being settled, and it didn't look like anything would get settled, and then the General pulled out his burner and pointed it between my eyes and explained that if I flew one last mission there was a chance, however slight, that I might survive it, whereas if I refused one more time, there was absolutely no chance that I'd survive a laser blast at a distance of six inches, which was a very telling argument.

"All right," I said. "But only if you'll agree that this is the very last one."

"I agree," he said. "And to prove it, we'll load your airship with every explosive that remains on the base."

We spent the next few minutes arguing over how much of a bonus he was going to pay me if I made it back alive, and since I didn't trust him any farther than I can spit with my mouth closed, I made him transfer the funds to my account back on Binder X before I finally got up and walked over to the airfield.

"You mind if I choose my own target?" I asked, as I was climbing into the airship.

"Be my guest," he said. "Just remember to dump your entire payload and let's bring this noble struggle to a satisfying conclusion."

"Roger and out," I said, closing the hatch behind me.

I took off, climbed to about five thousand feet, and looked off toward the enemy lines out on the horizon.

And then I got to doing some serious thinking. I didn't have anything against the Peloponnes, and neither did all the Men who'd gone over to them. Now, maybe if I'd known a Peloponne I might have felt different, but I didn't. On the other hand, I knew General Bigelow.

So I flew back over the base, dropped my payload, and brought the struggle to a satisfying conclusion.

Well, satisfying to everyone except General Bigelow, anyway.

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"That can't be right," said Big Red.

"Why the hell not?" demanded Three-Gun Max. "Every word was God's own truth, except for a couple of poetic flourishes here and there."

"I mean, if you ended the war, what the hell was Gravedigger Gaines doing there?"

"Why don't you ask him?" said Max, who seemed to have lost all interest in the Peloponnesian War now that his story was done.

Big Red turned to the Gravedigger. "Well?"