

Christmas 1916

Excerpt from Chapter 14 of *The Aviator*. Jim and his fellow pilots are stationed at Cachy, a muddy, bone-chilling airfield near the Battle of the Somme. The weather seldom allowed flying, and the drafty wooden barracks they were living in didn't provide much comfort. This excerpt begins in late December:

A few days before Christmas Capt. Thénault and a few of the pilots who weren't sick spent an evening cheering their souls at a bar in Amiens. Upon leaving, they found a kilt-clad Scottish soldier passed out under a lamppost in a drizzling rain. Not wanting to let him freeze to death, they loaded him into their car and took him back to the airbase. There was a bit of confusion when he woke up the next day, as he didn't recognize the Americans and feared he'd been captured by Germans, but things eventually got sorted out and they gave him a ride back to his unit. The Scotsman sent them a case of Scotch whiskey as a thank-you. After seeing the results of giving a case of whiskey to a bunch of American pilots, the captain wondered if they might have been better off leaving the Scot to freeze beneath the lamppost.

The American pilots invited some British pilots to join them for Christmas dinner and the case of Scotch. Capt. Thénault spent the evening with Capt. Henri Saint-Saveur, the commander of N.67 which was also stationed at Cachy. Capt. Thénault described the situation he found when he returned.

“That night it was quite late when I returned home, after a bridge game at Saint-Sauveur's quarters. As I was nearing our shack, feeling my way in the darkness through the labyrinth of duckboards, I heard a wild commotion followed by some pistol shots in rapid succession. A bullet whizzed by my ears. Fearing the worst, I hurriedly opened the door. At one end of the room, a man was standing pointing a gun with a none too steady hand; at the other end, the tall McConnell was holding, at arm's length, a wash bowl. This was the target at which each pilot in turn was taking pot shots in rapid fire. Everybody seemed in very good spirits. We happened

to be in the Somme, however, not in the Wild West; and so, to their great disappointment, I stopped this dangerous game by disarming the gunner, and sent them all to bed.”

With so much Scotch involved, it’s not surprising that Jim’s memory of the event was a little different. He wrote Marcelle:

“We had a big Christmas dinner last night and as a result Lufbery and “Skipper” formed a salvation army and tried to save us for God. It ended by Luff holding a wash basin and I shooting holes in it with a revolver. The Captain took the gun from me. Oh well.”

And Jim recalled an additional detail when he wrote Paul Rockwell a few days later:

“Nothing exciting save that Christmas Lufbery and I got lit and pulled off a Wild West show. He held a basin while I shot holes in it. Fortunately the Captain took the revolver from me as I was to essay knocking a shaving brush out of our ‘ace’s’ mouth.”

Regardless of who was doing the shooting or what the targets were, it was a night to remember. One other memorable event happened that night. During the dinner with their Christmas guests, Jim suddenly realized there were thirteen people at the table. He pointed this out to Lt. de Laage, who was sitting next to him. The lieutenant wasn’t familiar with the American superstition concerning the number thirteen, so Jim explained that it was bad luck, and

