

The Great Steinhäger Mutiny

RAF Sylt, where we used to go for a month's air to air firing from time to time, was not a nice place in winter. Its position at the bottom right hand corner of the North Sea meant that sea fog and low cloud were so common that the taller members of the squadron tended to walk around with wisps of low cloud in their hair. Winter detachments were therefore not popular, as they involved a month of inactivity in a place where the entertainment industry was not particularly well represented at that time of the year. Even the various Night Clubs such as the notorious Malkasten (Paintbox) were closed for winter so that chasing the local totty (both of them) was not possible, and there were very few pubs open, so the officer's mess bar did a roaring trade in Carlsberg and other local brews, as did the other bars on the base.

One detachment that was really memorable for a Guinness Book of Records entry for boredom was when the squadron flew up to Sylt at the beginning of one November, and managed to get in through the murk which was only just penetrated by a weak, watery sun. As soon as the last Venom touched down however, the light vanished, and we were in a thick, wet fog, and that's how it stayed for most of the month. We managed a few – very few – sorties on the flag, so that a few lucky souls managed to fire their guns, but there was no continuity. It was also a dodgy business, given the nature of the North Sea fog. Even on a relatively clear day, a very sharp eye had to be kept on the weather as the fog, instead of rolling in from the sea as nice, cooperative fog is supposed to do, formed instantly all over the landscape as soon as the temperature dropped to the dew point, which it did with monotonous regularity. As soon as it started forming, you had to pour on the coals to get back to the airfield before it clamped in, which usually happened within five to ten minutes once it had started. If you didn't, you had to divert, and there weren't too many convenient diversion airfields in the locality apart from Schleswigland which often had the same weather problems as Sylt.

It was on one such soggy day when our German weather forecaster had joyously proclaimed yet another day of 'fock und low straytus' that frustration set in with a vengeance. We had already had a lecture from practically everyone on the base on every conceivable subject, and the aircraft recognition slides were showing severe signs of wear and tear, when the Boss had a bright idea. The squadron pilots would all go for a nice walk in the country. Most of us vaguely remembered that walking was what you did when you transferred the weight onto one foot while moving the other one forward, and then repeating the process with the other foot alternately for as long as was necessary in order to propel yourself forward, but few of us could see much point in making a meal of it. Our territory was the air, not the ground. The Boss's bright idea was therefore not enthusiastically received. In fact, there was a distinct mutter of mutiny in the ranks, but dissent was crushed with a formidable glare, and a pointed reminder that taking part in the proposed walk was not a basis for discussion, but an order. It was therefore with a very bad grace that the untidy crocodile of dissident fighter pilots wandered off across the peacefully quiet airfield into the surrounding landscape which, as anyone who has ever been to Sylt will remember, was uniformly flat. If you felt like a change of scenery, a step ladder was your only option.

It was after a fair amount of apparently aimless trudging that we came to a fork in the road which, like all forks in the road of life proved to be symbolic as the dissidents took the left hand path and the Boss and his acolytes took the right hand path. "This way!" roared the Boss, "Follow me!", but to no avail. What the Boss didn't know, but the mutineers did, was that the left hand path led to a small German pub, which goes to show that crucial pieces of information are not always possessed only by those in the higher echelons of command structures. As the pub hove into sight, eyes brightened, paces quickened, and thirsts intensified. As the lads entered the bar, the landlord's eyes lit up with anticipatory pleasure as he realised that fame and fortune

were about to be his. “Also” he smiled “*was möchten Sie?*”. Again, this was a determining moment in history. If someone had only said “*Bier, bitte*”, the course of history would have been different, but they didn’t. No one could afterwards quite remember which total twerp had uttered the fatal word, which was – Steinhäger.

This is the moment for a short dissertation on German alcoholic drinks, which could vary from the relatively innocuous to the potentially lethal, particularly as alcohol content could be quite variable in the days before EU diktats, and some of the more formidable potions were made in the area of the Lüneburg Heath where XI Squadron happened to be based at the time. There was Ratzeputz (58% - yes, 58% alcohol) which tastes rather like it sounds, and is a well-known North German knockout mixture based on ginger. Then there was Heidelikör which checks in at a modest 52% alcohol. Steinhäger, which is a species of gin, is relatively innocuous at 38% which puts it somewhere in the middle of this diabolical Richter scale of Teutonic hooch, but it still packs a powerful punch, and is not to be recommended to the unwary, which some of the mutineers clearly were on that grey November afternoon as they unthinkingly started to pour it into themselves. What really clinched the mass descent into oblivion though, was that they mixed the Steinhäger with copious drafts of German beer – definitely not a good move.

The lethal combination of Steinhäger, beer and a glorious sense of release from boredom did not take long to exert its alchemical influence on the roisterers, who were rapidly becoming totally garrulous and increasingly legless as a result. Lines were shot, eternal brotherhood was pledged and the inscrutable was thoroughly unscrewed. After a time, conversation faded to a dull roar, and apprehensive thoughts of the return to base began to dominate the collective psyche of the mutineers, or what was left of it, who eventually gathered themselves together and plodded erratically across the forlorn, wet landscape towards the eventual and inevitable nemesis of the Boss’s rage at what was to him, highly disloyal and disobedient conduct. Luckily, one of the more kind-hearted Flight Commanders had moved him away from his initial impulse to have them all shot at dawn (or even sooner) so the Squadron was still intact when it eventually made its way back to Fassberg, home and beauty. But Steinhäger? Never again!

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