

It was a time when laughter and happiness were on ration as much as meat and butter, yet in a smoke-filled pub in downtown London, both were present in abundance. The cause of the commotion, the reason for the laughter, was a jolly man with a full white beard, a disarming smile and infectious laughter. No, you're thinking of the other guy. Captain Walter Ellis Santana (retired) was doing his bit for the war. Not the "Phony War" of Neville Chamberlain, but a different war, one few knew about, one that many, would later deny.

Santana leaned with his back to the bar, his arms folded carelessly across his chest. He wore a dark leather flight suit and red thermals. He could have worn his civvies, but people expected to see any man with more than three teeth in uniform, and most of the men in the pub had both.

And young they were, with eager faces anxious to see action, hopeful, proud and confident, babes in arms, unschooled in the subtleties of trauma.

The barman took the Captain's mostly full pint of beer, topped it off and replaced it with a flourish. He had done this five times now, such that anyone half watching would assume the flamboyant Yank pilot from Missouri was well into his cups.

"Thank you, my good sir," the Captain said with a bit of Missouri drawl and slid a shilling across the bar. "Keep the change."

The barman rang up the five pence beer and dropped the coin into the till with a satisfied smile.

This action caused a few scowls on the faces of the crowd gathered around the Captain. That he was buying beer with their money didn't bother them, he had won it fair

and square, but to be giving it away, and with Christmas just around the corner, and what with the war on and all, well that was just knackered.

“Gentlemen,” Santana called. “Bets? Two on one. Take a bit home to the Misses.”

Before him on a table lay three items of great interest: a table knife, a folded red-cloth napkin, and an empty wine bottle with the cork pushed down inside.

Each man around the table held money in their fists, shillings mostly, or a few pence. Behind them, the rest of the men in the bar craned their necks and held up bets of their own. One well-fed bloke with a too-tight suit and a tiny moustache held out a fistful of pound notes. “No cheating?”

“The rules are simple,” Santa said. “I get the cork out of the bottle, without damaging either one, in thirty seconds or less or pay double.”

“With just what’s on the table then?”

“Yes.”

“Cant’ be done,” says the fat man.

A thin man, possibly a fellow American, who had the look about him of being in charge, studied his pocket watch. His voice was soft and high pitched. “Bets in,” he said. “Thirty seconds in three, two one.”

“Right,” Santa said. He stepped up to the table and grabbed the napkin in one hand. With a quick flick, he spun it into a tight twist. He folded that in half over the point of the table knife and jammed them both down into the bottle such that about half the napkin was in and the rest protruded from its neck. He withdrew the knife, upended the bottle and gave a little tug on the napkin. With the cork sufficiently lodged in the neck,

he lowered the bottle, got a firm grip on both, and gave a mighty yank on the napkin. Like the opening of champagne, the cork flew out of the bottle and ricocheted off the mirror. The barman yelped and ducked.

The bar erupted into raucous chaos. Some of the men frowned. Most of them laughed. It was a good show, one well worth a few shillings to forget those worried faces back home. Most of them, including the fat man, relinquished their bets onto the table, though a few at the back simply pocketed theirs and slunk away.

One man, a petty officer in the navy by the uniform, slapped his money down with a grin and pointed. "Well done Cap'n. Worth the price of admission, what? Be usin' that trick a time or two m'self. Soon, that is." The man winked and backed away.

Santana knew the type. The man and few of his buddies would be back later to have a "talk" with him. He quickly pocketed the cash on the table. He had no reservations about taking the money from these people. Most of it would be pissed away otherwise, and there was still a payday before Christmas, so there was little harm in it and some good otherwise.

"Right then," called the barman. "Fun's over. Cheers for the good Captain eh?" A few men called out a weak "Huzzah!"

The bartender tried a different tack. "Pints are 3P till closing."

This got the men's attention and spaces at the bar quickly filled.

"Ah, I'm skint," said some young man in the back. He was sitting with three other lads, no older than 18, possibly younger, dressed in army brown, looking glum.

Santana made his way over to the table where four boys sat with empty glasses and dark faces. He pulled up a chair, sat down with them and waved at a waitress.

“Next one’s on me boys.”

Their mood immediately brightened.

“Where you boys from?”

“Derby,” said the tallest, “I’m Duncan, this here’s Camron,” he indicated his mate on his right. “James, and the ugly one’s Nedward, but we call him Ward, cause he wards off the birds.”

“Ladies,” Nedward piped in, “Is what he means.”

Duncan slapped Ward’s shoulder. “He knew that.”

Five pints of beer showed up. Duncan looked to the waitress as if to ask her something and received a curt “No” from her before he could speak.

The others laughed. Ward pretended to play taps.

“Whatever,” Duncan said. He raised his glass. “Cheers.” He lowered it again after a quick taste, while the other three boys were still gulping theirs down. “Whoa, mate, this ain’t piss. innit? You must be somethin’ special Captain...”

“Santana”

“Santa?” Ward said.

“Santana”

“You aren’t puttin’ us on your naughty list are you?” James said, seemingly alarmed at the idea of it.

“You’re thinking of the other guy,” Santana said. “The one up north.”

“Where you from then?” Ward asked.

“Missouri.”

“No offense Captain Santa, sir,” Duncan asks, “But why’re you chummin’ wit’ us grunts?”

“My thoughts exactly.” The speaker was a short man with thinning hair. He stood behind the Captain, wearing a black leather long-coat, and leaned slightly, as if favoring one leg.

“Sparkhane,” Santana said. “Ignore him, he’s a hemorrhoid.”

Sparkhane looked at the boys like he was going to tell their mum’s what they’ve been up to, or worse, their commanding officers. “Bedtime boys.”

The four looked at each other.

“Oy,” Duncan said. “I just recollected, Billings at Sheepns’ owes me a fiver.” He downed his beer and the others quickly followed suit, then stood up, and with curt nods, left.

Sparkhane pulled back a chair and with a great show of effort, took a seat.

“New leg?” Santana said. “Didn’t hear the usual clanking and hissing.

Sparkhane pulled up his trouser leg to reveal a brass mechanical ankle with quite a few tubes and wires connected around it. “How’s Martha?”

“She’s fine, thank you for asking.”

“In town?”

“Heavens no!” Santana looked shocked. “There’s a war on. She grumbled but knows me too well to put up much of a fuss.”

Sparkhane signaled to the waitress for two more pints. “War? What war? What are you up too, you old fool.”

Santana looked surprised. "The same thing I do every year, Sparky, you know that?"

"Not your stupid play. I mean tonight, these past few months."

"This? Ah, just taking donations."

"Ah yes, the poor widows and orphans."

Two beers came, and the conversation paused.

Santa spoke first. "For passports and travel permits, but you already know that."

"Of course," Sparkhane replied. "And you're ruffling the feathers of some powerful people who would ask you stop. But you already know that."

"They'd have to ask me pretty hard." Santa picked up his beer. "Is that why you're here, to do their asking?"

Sparkhane stared at his old friend.

Slowly, Santana took a sip of beer and set the mug back down. "You enjoyed that."

"I'm still faster than you."

"In your dreams."

"We could sell tickets what? Raise good paper for your war effort."

Santana laughed. "Yeah, what a show that would be. Best not, though."

"So why are we having this conversation?"

Sparkhane took a deep pull on his beer, wiped his mouth and signaled for another. He nudged Santana's glass. "Waste not, it'll be rationed too, soon enough."

Santana shrugged, "We've been there." He took a sip. "If we're being social then. The girls?"

“South,” Sparkhane replied, “with Aunt Margie and Uncle Dick.” His eyes took on a faraway look and moistened a bit.

Santana looked away while Sparkhane pretended to wipe his glasses. “They’ll be safe. Margie will look after them proper,”

“It’s for the best, she’ll keep them sorted out. Sometimes…” he said wistfully.

“Sometimes Mary seems so much her mother sometimes I can’t bear to look at her.”

Santana nodded and raised his pint in a silent toast. They clinked glasses and drank.

“Right,” Santana said. “Are we done then?”

“Most certainly, and thank you for asking.”

“So why are you here? I don’t need a—” He stopped himself just short of saying “mother.”

“You’re here, risking your life when you could be back in Missouri growing potatoes.”

“The potatoes don’t need rescued.”

“My point. I can’t let you have all the fun.”

“Piss off.”

“I can get you the Sleigh back.”

“As if.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Is that an offer?”

“Affirmative.”

“No,” Santana said flatly. “Keep it and sell it for scrap for all I care.”

“Mmm, Pretty much.”

In spite of his bravado, Santana looked hurt.

“Twin bag dirigible... new engines.” Sparkhane offered.

“Bags?”

“Let’s walk. Too many ears here.”

The two men stood and headed for the exit. Sparkhane picked up his black Fedora near the entrance. “Hmm, surprised that’s still here.”

Outside, a light drizzle discouraged loitering, even so, there were still late night revelers staggering about. The two picked the most private direction.

“Twin bags,” Sparkhane said when they were alone.

“Sounds like a giant floating whale with a bright red ‘Come shoot me down’ target on it.”

“Could be,” Sparkhane agreed, “or it could have sub-plasma helium with emergency steam back up, and be about half the size of the original. Want to know the best part?”

“Wait.” Santana turned. Three men had followed them into the gloom.

“That’s them.”

Santana identified the speaker as the sailor that had harassed him earlier. The other men he didn’t know, but he knew their type. They were the kind of men you carried a little present up your sleeve for.

The sailor held back, the other two men approached. Santana and Sparkhane stood passively.

“See, feathers,” Sparkhane said.

“Scram, you,” said one of the toughs.

Sparkhane stood his ground. “Unlikely.”

“Your funeral.”

The man approaching Santana pulled a knife; a long wicked switchblade. He held it low and then lunged.

The man who had spoken grabbed Sparkhane’s coat and tried to lift him. “You don’t want—“

Sparkhane pistoned his mechanical knee upward into his attacker’s groin with enough force crack his pelvis.

Santana took a short metal rod known as a kubaton and broke his assailant’s wrist, then punched it into the man’s shoulder and then neck. Both attackers fell to the ground in unison. The sailor stood for a moment in shock and then fled.

Sparkhane and Santana turned away and resumed their walk.

“Anyway, the best part is...hell, never-mind. You’ll be saving lives, at full salary.”

“Double.”

“Done.”

“Blast,” Santa muttered something vaguely obscene under his breath. “Crew?”

“Your mechanic is Benjamin Fuller, a well-qualified gentleman, you’ll like him, but otherwise, your pick.”

“And you?”

“I’m your navigator.”

“How is that my pick?.” Santana stopped. “Wait, This Fuller guy? Don’t I know him?”

“You know him as ‘Spanner’”

Santana slapped his forehead, striking himself with his own weapon. “Christ on toast. And the rest of the crew. Are they ‘Donner, Blitzen and Cupid?’”

“Don’t be daft, you can pick the pilots yourself.”

“Pilots? I thought I was the pilot.”

Sparkhane waved vaguely. “It’s a mini aircraft carrier, You’ll like it..”

Santana sighed. “I hate you.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Does it matter?”

“Glad to hear it, I’m looking forward to working with you again, ‘Captain Santa.’”

“Oh, no, not that nonsense again.”

Sparkhane shrugged. “Randolph suggested it, the other pilots all thought it was brilliant.”

“Fine. But if I’m Captain Santa, then you... have to call me, sir.”

Sparkhane patted his old friend on the back and guided him along into the night.

“Ah, well, that’s not happening.”