

In Flew Enza

By

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"The 1918 has gone: a year momentous as the termination of the most cruel war in the annals of the human race; a year which marked, the end at least for a time, of man's destruction of man; unfortunately a year in which developed a most fatal infectious disease causing the death of hundreds of thousands of human beings. Medical science for four and one-half years devoted itself to putting men on the firing line and keeping them there. Now it must turn with its whole might to combating the greatest enemy of all--infectious disease," (12/28/1918).

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A piercing wail broke the murmur of low painful moans and buzz of quiet voices. Doctor Chambers looked up through thick lenses from the dying infantryman he was trying to comfort. The once quiet ward with empty beds was now a sea of cots cradling soldiers, arranged side-by-side and head-to-toe--barely room between rows for the staff to administer aid. Dim light from bare bulbs strung along the ceiling rafters cast a ghostly haze and the stench was overwhelming--a sickening mix of vomit, feces and ammonia.

Scanning the general direction of the commotion, he noticed one of the patients standing and shaking another bed-ridden soldier. He was sobbing, yelling, "Don't you die, Jonas... Don't you leave me. Oh, Lord, you have too much to live for."

Chambers, fighting sore muscles, pushed himself from a squat and limped toward the distressed man, working his way through the maze of cots, I.V. bottles and drug carts.

"What's going on here?" Chambers asked quietly, while wrapping his arm around the distraught soldier and helping him back to his own cot.

The soldier's stout body shivered, tears streaming down his babyish face as he gulped for air and tried to regain composure.

"It's not fair. It's just not fair!" The soldier's legs collapsed and he sat hard on the rickety cot, almost toppling the canvas covered wood frame--arms flailing, trying to regain balance.

"What's not fair, Corporal..." The doctor glanced up at the clipboard hanging above the cot. "...Sanders. Care to talk about it?"

Sanders sat for a minute, sobbing into his open palms. Tears mixing with sweat from his raging fever--body heaving as he tried to pull himself together. He looked up at the doctor's gaunt face, thin lips forced into a fatherly smile with the dark circles of fatigue accentuated by the black rimmed glasses sitting low on his nose.

"His name is Jonas McDaniels," Sanders said pointing to the cot next to him. "I've knowed him most of my life. We was in school together back home and

signed up for the army together. We strung wire in front of the line for communications. Shit, sir, we did everything together.” He wiped more tears from his eyes and cheeks.

Chambers looked at the lifeless body on the cot that was Jonas McDaniels. Using his palm, he gently closed Jonas’ eyes, then picked up his chart. Turning back to Sanders, he noticed a crinkled page with scrawled words on the cot. “I’m sorry about your friend. What were you writing, son?”

“Jonas had a gal back in Salina, Kansas. Mary Beth. They was gonna get hitched in a month. She’s real pretty, she is. And sweet as honeysuckle. She had her dowry all ready...” His body was wracked again by long uncontrollable sobs. Somewhere in the corner of the hospital the tinny sound of ‘A Good Man Is Hard To Find’ cackled softly from an old gramophone.

Chambers sat on the cot and put his arms around Sanders to console him. *It was impossible to distance yourself from these kids.* While Sanders cried into his shoulder, he looked over at the grossly discolored corpse. Jonas McDaniels had been admitted just three days ago with the dreaded blue flu.

“Jonas asked me to write a letter to Mary Beth,” Sanders said, pushing away. “He loved her so much and he wanted her to know it. I think he knowed he wasn’t gonna make it. I had a hard time hearin’ him. He could hardly talk. I never got finished before he closed his eyes and... and went away.”

Doctor Chambers’ eyes burned from the salt of his gathering tears. Trying to blink them away, he reached for the unfinished letter and laid Sanders down on the bed. “You rest now, son. You need your strength to fight. We’ll take care of Jonas.” He turned and pulled the cover over Jonas McDaniel’s hideous azure face and flaming red hair, crossed himself, and then placed Sanders’ scribbling and the chart on McDaniel’s chest.

General Brooks stepped out of his command office to a cool rainy day. He found the spattering of the raindrops on the tin awning soothed his nerves, bringing back childhood memories of his home in St. Louis, where he played in a metal-roofed barn on days like today.

“Corporal, I’m going to the hospital to check on things,” he called to his clerk, bringing himself back to the present.

“Yes sir.”

He stepped out into the light rain pulling his collar up and hat down over thin threads of silver hair. As he wound through the base, he spotted a group of young girls skipping rope in the shelter of a base home porch. Heels clapping out a beat on the wood planks. Haunting young voices chanting,

*“I had a little bird,
And his name was Enza.
I opened the window,
And in-flew-Enza.”*

The melodic high tone of the nursery rhyme repeated over and over--seared in his mind.

Brooks, turned the corner and hurried down the row of long drab green-painted barracks as the rain beat down harder. His body shivered. *Was it the cold rain or the icy reality of the rhyme?* As he approached the far end of the base, he spied the line of GIs waiting--unprotected from the elements--for their death sentence. They waited, huddled together wrapped in soggy course blankets for warmth in the discipline of their training.

Doctor Chambers turned from the death certificates on his desk, opened the top drawer and ran a finger on the stack of hand-written letters tucked inside. Unfolding the top one, he began to read.

‘Dear Daddy. When will you come home? I miss you so much it hurts. Mommy says you are doing your duty to our country, but I think you need come back now. I love you daddy. Becky’

Then below,

‘My Dearest James. I hope you are doing well. There are news stories of the terrible plague you are part of. Although I miss you beyond words, I know, deep in

my heart that you are a hero. Becky has been having a hard time. She decided to name her teddy bear Doctor Chambers and she takes him everywhere.

I know you have another year, but when do you think you will be allowed to come home to visit? The house is so empty without you. All my love, Marie.'

Tears flowed freely from his eyes. Something that seemed to be a regular occurrence now. Blurry figures passed by the doorway and the doctor held the letter up to his face to shield his distress from the staff and patients.

After wiping puffy eyes with a handkerchief, the doctor placed the letter back in the drawer and looked up to see General Brooks standing in the doorway of the hospital--proud shoulders slumped, eyes watery and brow furrowed in sadness, anger and disbelief. He jumped out of his seat and strode quickly to the door with a gauze mask dangling from his outstretched hand.

"Put this on, General. You mustn't be in here without a mask."

Grabbing the piece of gauze with his large callused hand, the general slapped it over his nose and mouth. "Lieutenant Chambers, what in God's name is killing these men?" His muffled words carried the authority of his rank through the thin fabric.

"I wish I knew. I've never seen anything like this in all my years. They're dying as fast as they return from France. First it was mustard gas burns, then septicemia from field surgery, now this."

He led the General to one of the beds where an infantryman squirmed in pain and delirium--eyelids fluttering wildly, revealing a hideous shade of pink surrounding brown pupils that rolled back into his head. Dried blood crusted his upper lip and a purple pallor made him look like a poorly drawn cartoon character.

"Men come in feeling nauseated and six hours later they turn this ghastly shade of maroon. Soon, Cyanosis creeps from their ears, across their face. I can barely tell the white men from the colored. A few hours later, a blood-tinged froth starts flowing from their nose and mouth and their eyes go bloodshot like I've never seen. Not long after that, they struggle for air until they suffocate and die."

"Could those German bastards have launched some sort of germ warfare on us?" the General asked, thick fingers fumbling with the strings of his mask.

“I don’t know...I suppose it’s possible. I wouldn’t put anything past them. I’ve heard rumors. Rumors about a strain of anthrax to use as a weapon.” The doctor looked down at the GI. “This isn’t anthrax, but whatever it is, it’s killed thousands, maybe millions overseas and now it’s made its way across the ocean to us.”

“What are you doing for them?”

“There’s nothing I can do except make them as comfortable as possible. Even then, I’m short on all my supplies--the morphine is almost gone and the next shipment’s been delayed again.” Chambers escorted the General to the small office in the front of the ward and closed the door. “Thank God the Medical Association and the government gave me more personnel. I started with twenty-five on my staff and now I have over two hundred. It’s still not enough, but at least it gives the men some hope.”

“How many are sick?”

“We have almost eight thousand crowded in and the ward is only supposed to handle two-thousand. God help us if we have a fire. Soon we’ll have to find more space. As fast as men are dying, new ones are getting sick even faster.” Chambers picked up a chart from the desk. “Yesterday sixty-six men died. So far today, we’ve admitted ninety-seven, and you saw the line outside.”

“Jesus Christ,” General Brooks said in disgust. “Give me a conventional enemy and I can figure out how to crush him--but this...”

“This is my battlefield General. And I’m losing.” Chambers looked to his feet.

Brooks clapped a big hand on the doctor’s back. “Where are you taking the dead?”

“I’ll show you.” He opened the office door and led the General to the back of the hospital. “We’re out of coffins so we consolidated the healthy men in barracks at the far end of the base. ‘C’ Barracks is now a holding area for the dead. It’s the closest to the hospital.”

They exited through the back door leaving one nightmare, only to enter the twisted horror of another. The grisly scene turned the General's stomach. He couldn't control himself, spun away from the doctor and yanked off the gauze mask just in time to vomit against the green painted wood slates of the hospital wall.

"I'm sorry General, I should have warned you."

When the retching stopped, the General wiped his mouth with the mask and reluctantly turned back to the horrendous sight. Dead bodies were stacked on the ground like cordwood. Soldiers wearing masks and gloves stripped hospital gowns from the ghastly pale-blue corpses and doused them with a foul smelling chemical.

"We have to do this outside--our morgue is just too small. It's a shame to disrespect these fine men like this, but we have no choice."

General Brooks raised his hand to cover his mouth and nose and asked, "What are they pouring on the bodies?"

"Formaldehyde--it's a good disinfectant, but we're running low on our supply. There's a citywide shortage of that too. I just located some at Chelsea Naval Hospital." He swung open the door to 'C' Barracks and a somber scene.

As General Brooks entered, he looked down to his feet and crossed himself. It pained him deeply to see so many young men survive the horrific conditions of the Great War only to fall victim on their own soil so close to home and family.

In front of him lay row after row of men in dress uniforms waiting for a chance to return, one last time, to their loved ones. A tear welled in his eye. He saluted the room, turned and left.

I had a little bird...

Doctor Chambers thought about going back to his quarters to rest. By god, it seemed like he hadn't slept in days. At least not more than an hour at a time. *Oh, Lord, when would he be relieved of this hell?*

Instead of going to his quarters, he trudged back to his office to work on the stack of death certificates that had yet to be filed. His body dropped into the shaky wooden chair and heavy eyes drifted across the desk stacked with files, medical journals and clipboards.

Begrudgingly, he reached for a clipboard and flipped through the papers. Private Jonas McDaniels. Time of death, 14:22, 30 September 1918. On top of the clipboard was the rumpled, unfinished letter to Mary Beth O'Malley.

Chambers flattened out the paper on his desk and began writing below Sanders' scribbling of Jonas' last thoughts of his love.

'Dear Miss O'Malley, It is with great sorrow that I must inform you of the death of your fiancé, Jonas McDaniel...'

As Chambers signed his name, a single tear spattered on the page. Without wiping it off, he placed the letter in his outgoing mail, stood and wrapped himself in a jacket and hat and stepped into the cool damp night.

As Chambers passed the sentry at the front gate of Camp Devens, he saluted and said softly, "I'm going out for some air."

He walked quickly down the quiet road toward the row of saloons a few blocks from the base. On the street corner, he spied a faded Model T with a sign in the window that read, 'for hire'. He pulled open the door and sat next to a burly man in a wool overcoat.

"Where to, mister?"

"Home. Take me home please."

A viral executioner caused the deaths of twenty to one-hundred million people, worldwide, in 1918 and 1919. Efficient and deadly, it didn't just attack the old and weak, but it seemed to target young healthy adults. Many more soldiers would fall victim to the virus than to warfare. The killing spree came to be known by many names, La Grippe, The Blue Flu, The Spanish Lady and The Spanish Flu Pandemic of 1918.

The End