

THE GREATER GLORY

by

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Based on a True Story

FADE IN:

EXT. GERMAN ARTILLERY OBSERVATION BALLOON - 2000 FEET - DAY

THROUGH BINOCULARS: Like clouds adrift in hell, patches of sulphur waft across the jagged line of a battered WWI trench in the distance far below.

THROUGH BINOCULARS: American soldiers (Doughboys) peer over the broken lip of the distant trench. Prepare to charge headlong into the forsaken expanse before them.

A GERMAN ARTILLERY OBSERVER lowers the binoculars. Smiles.

Tethered to the belly of a giant sausage-shaped observation balloon (DRACHEN), he peers over the edge of the wicker basket that holds him. Yells into the telephone receiver hanging from his neck.

GERMAN ARTILLERY OBSERVER
(in German)
Fire!

I/E. 76 MM BARREL - BEHIND GERMAN TRENCH - DAY

The surreal sight of the gray sky from inside the long barrel of a German 76 MM heavy artillery gun. A doughboy killer.

Launch forward with the BLAST. A shell propelled into smoke-laden skies. Arcing upward. Like Icarus.

And then down - through billowing clouds of black sulphur.

Down - to a mud-caked terrain of craters. It could be the moon save for the dead boys sprawled in tattered heaps like so many rag dolls.

Down - to the trench, a fissure full of movement. Sludge-covered soldiers scurry for cover. The beleaguered good guys. The heroes. The ones who will die as-

The shell EXPLODES. Obliterates all within thirty feet.

Except one.

EXT. AMERICAN TRENCH - CONTINUOUS

A solitary VETERAN DOUGHBOY. He rises from the mire, still clasping his rifle. Fresh blood on his face.

Dazed, he peers at the battlefield between the trenches: A tangle of barbed-wire, smoke, and bodies.

No Man's Land.

He fingers a whistle dangling from a cord around his neck. Eyes the dead men all around. Defeated.

He notices a small crucifix in the blood-soaked mud. Wipes it clean as another shell explodes beyond the trench behind him.

Then he hears it. A sound above. He turns to the sky behind the trench.

The DRONE like a swarm of bees.

Hope passes over his face. He mouths the word:

VETERAN DOUGHBOY

Luke.

A trench RUNNER scrambles by.

RUNNER

It's Luke! Luke! He's up!

Only 50 feet off the ground, a SPAD XIII biplane fighter ZOOMS overhead. The Number 26 emblazoned on the side.

One by one, doughboys rise to their feet in the trenches. The lone flyer giving them hope. They erupt in CHEERS at the sudden reversal of fortune.

The Veteran Doughboy makes the sign of the cross. Puts the whistle to his mouth. BLOWS.

Soldiers surge over the muddy ridge.

Their eyes follow Luke's Spad as it flies ahead and burrows into the hail of machine gun tracers lighting the ashen haze.

And on the horizon, like floating citadels, hang three DRACHEN bearing the IRON CROSS of Germany.

Machine guns BLAZE, anti-aircraft artillery EXPLODES as Luke flies on, alone.

Into the very gates of Hell.

EXT. PARIS - NIGHT

Paris skyline. The City of Light.

WHOOF. An anti-aircraft EXPLOSION bursts like a flashbulb in the sky. Then another.

Like pieces disappearing from a jigsaw puzzle, entire sections of Paris go dark as she blacks herself out.

An air raid siren BLARES in the distance. Then another. They spring to life all over the city.

SUPER: "PARIS, FRANCE. JULY 1918. TWO WEEKS EARLIER."

EXT. PARIS HOTEL - NIGHT

Through a milky window far above the hotel doors, a beautiful young woman parts the curtains. Gazes, scared, onto the street below.

INT. PARIS HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Draped in only a sheet, the frightened FRENCH BEAUTY (20) stares out the window, onto a darkened Paris.

A bomb EXPLODES atop a nearby building. She cringes.

FRENCH BEAUTY
(broken English)
When will it stop?

Behind her, FRANK LUKE (21) sits up in the disheveled bed. He rolls out and wraps muscular arms around her from behind.

Outside, the explosions fade into the distance.

LUKE
Listen... The Huns are running for home.

FRENCH BEAUTY
They'll be back. My mother, little brother...

Luke pulls her closer.

LUKE
I got a brother out there, too.
They're fine.

Luke slides a warm hand inside the sheet around her. He turns her toward him and kisses her. Her kisses become desperate as the girl lets Luke ease the sheet from her body.

INT. PARIS HOTEL ROOM - DAY

Luke sleeps with the girl in his arms.

Outside, a heavy truck rumbles by. BACKFIRES. Luke bolts upright, disoriented. Then it hits him. He checks his pocket watch.

LUKE

Shit.

He launches out of bed and pulls on his American Army Air Service uniform. Metal PILOT WINGS adorn his jacket.

FRENCH BEAUTY

Don't go. Please.

LUKE

Cheer up. I'll see you when I'm back in town.

Her face says otherwise.

Luke counts out several Francs and leaves them on her pillow. She rolls her back to him.

Grabbing his duffel, he darts out the door.

EXT. PARIS TRAIN STATION - DAY

Barely on time, his duffel in hand, Luke jogs alongside the morning train to Verdun as it pulls from the station.

Choosing the forward passenger car, he hops the rear steps and slips inside.

INT. TRAIN TO VERDUN - DAY

Fresh-faced INFANTRYMEN crowd the back of the car. Standing room only. Many smoke to ease the strain.

In his flyer's uniform, Luke stands out against the sea of doughboys with rifles. He maneuvers through them toward a group of young officers seated in the front.

One COCKY DOUGHBOY 'accidentally' shoves Luke. Looks to the metal wings on Luke's chest.

COCKY DOUGHBOY

Pussy Flyboy.

A grizzled infantryman, Sergeant ROOKER, scoffs at the Air Service officers. His face bears a jagged scar from the wrong end of a bayonet. As he slugs from a flask, he points to a large HUNTING DOG curled at one of the flyboy's feet.

ROOKER

Think they're goddamn royalty.

At the front of the train car, Luke shifts his duffel.

LUKE

Any of you boys on your way to the 27th?

Lieutenant NEVIUS (17), the kid with the dog, speaks up.

NEVIUS

Over here, Lieutenant.

Luke drops his duffel in front of the last empty seat. Addresses the flyer in the next seat over.

LUKE

Mind if I sit?

Lieutenant JOSEPH WERNER (24) shrugs. His watchful eyes don't miss a thing as Luke takes the seat.

NEVIUS

The chatty one's Werner. I'm Nevius.

(indicates the dog)

This here's Glory.

At the sound of her name, the dog wags. Lieutenant BEAUCHAMP (20), puffs on a pipe and leans in.

BEAUCHAMP

Nev got her when a buddy cracked up a landing at Issoudun.

Luke pats the dog. Beauchamp sticks out a hand and shakes with Luke.

BEAUCHAMP (CONT'D)

Oliver Beauchamp. Philly.

LUKE

Frank Luke Junior. Arizona.

Beauchamp points to Lieutenants HEWITT, WHITON and SANDS. New England aristocracy, they look more like they're on their way to a high-dollar fraternity party, rather than to war.

BEAUCHAMP

Looks like we'll be hunting Huns together.

Werner watches quietly from his seat. So does Rooker, who eyes them from the periphery.

Whiton grabs a newspaper from his bag.

WHITON

Look who's flying out of our airfield.

He hands the Paris paper to Luke. Splashed across the front page is a photo of America's latest hero, Hollywood-handsome EDDIE RICKENBACKER. The headline reads...

LT. EDDIE RICKENBACKER - AMERICA'S NEW ACE OF ACES.

Luke looks it over, clearly in awe of the hero Rickenbacker.

Amidst the excitement, Werner sees a THIN MAN in an American officer's uniform enter from the front of the railcar.

Scanning, the Thin Man catches sight of Werner. He pulls his cap low over his forehead and squeezes through the train car, to the back, behind the infantrymen.

BEAUCHAMP

Putnam bought the farm. That makes Rickenbacker king.

Luke sizes up the photo of Rickenbacker.

LUKE

Not for long.

Rooker's disdain spills over.

ROOKER

You ever even been to the Front?

LUKE

Seen it from the air.

A group of surrounding DOUGHBOYS jeer.

ROOKER

You ain't seen shit. Not til you been eye-deep in the stench of it.

COCKY DOUGHBOY

Hot meals, warm beds, safe above the fray. You all got it made.

ROOKER
 (motions the fresh-faced
 doughboys)
 All due respect, them new boys got
 no idea and you got even less.

Luke turns to face Rooker.

Werner uses the opportunity to covertly slip a small LEATHER JOURNAL from his duffel.

LUKE
*All due respect, Sergeant, you
 don't know nothin' about me.*
 (taps the newspaper)
 But keep your eye on the papers.

When no one is watching, Werner SLIDES THE JOURNAL INTO LUKE'S DUFFEL.

ROOKER
 I seen a lot of crusaders come out
 here, Lieutenant. They all been one-
 way trips.

EXT. TRAIN TO VERDUN - DAY

The solemn whistle blows as the train chugs toward Verdun.

INT. TRAIN TO VERDUN - DAY

Luke watches through the window. Rain drenches a field of Allied tanks, scattered and broken like fallen monuments.

Green soldiers crowd the windows. Cheer drains from their faces as crumbled husks of buildings pass by.

Verdun. A town all but demolished by war.

The train slows. Pulls into the partially bombed station.

Sergeant Rooker shoulders his duffel and rifle.

ROOKER
 Grab your gear, boys. Gonna be a
 long night.

EXT. VERDUN TRAIN STATION - DAY

Luke and his flight mates step off the train into the downpour. Hordes of doughboys jump down around them. Distant artillery rumbles like unending thunder.

Across the sea of soldiers, Werner watches the Thin Man step from the train.

A caravan of STRETCHER BEARERS shuttle wounded boys out of the station and onto the newly emptied cars.

INT. VERDUN TRAIN STATION - DAY

Luke steps into the shell-damaged station, comes eye-to-eye with a BROKEN YOUNG SOLDIER. The boy's head is wrapped in bloody rags. His right arm gone.

Luke can't help but stare - until the boy limps around him and boards the train.

A well-fed Sergeant REYNOLDS wanders through the crowd, spots the flyers. Hollers over the din.

REYNOLDS

Got a truck here. Bound for the
27th Aero!

EXT. VERDUN TRAIN STATION - DAY

The newbies follow Reynolds through the rain to a waiting transport truck.

REYNOLDS

Load up, gentlemen. It's not far,
but we're running late.

Rooker's doughboys sling rifles and backpacks. Prepare for a long, soggy march. They eye the lucky flyers and the truck.

LUKE

Where we headin'?

REYNOLDS

Too many ears, sir. I'll tell you
when we get there.

As the new flyers climb into the tarp-covered truck, the Thin Man grabs Werner's shoulder.

THIN MAN

Lieutenant Joseph Werner?

Without a word, Werner hands over his duffel. Like he's been through this before.

The Thin Man dumps the contents of Werner's bag into the mud. Rummages through clothes, books and toiletries. Then pats Werner down.

Puzzled, Luke and the others watch. But the mysterious man finds nothing.

THIN MAN (CONT'D)

That'll be all, Lieutenant.

Werner hurries to retrieve his gear.

WERNER

Good to see you boys on the ball as always, sir.

INT. TRANSPORT TRUCK BED - DAY

Jostled by mud-filled potholes, the newbie flyers hunker in the back of the truck. All eyes on Werner.

BEAUCHAMP

What the hell was all that about?

WERNER

No idea.

NEVIUS

Oh c'mon. The Army doesn't rifle gear for nothing.

Outside, they hear the pounding rumble of artillery. The men glance around at each other, pretend it doesn't bother them.

WERNER

Seems it's my Deutsch name. That makes it pretty much for nothing.

EXT. REMBERCOURT AIRFIELD NEAR ST. MIHIEL, FRANCE - NIGHT

The truck winds up a soggy dirt road. Passes an old stone barn. Then a long row of Spad XIII fighter planes parked wing-tip to wing-tip. And rows and rows of tents.

Lights shine from the windows of the stone farmhouse and Sergeant Reynolds grinds to a stop near the door.

REYNOLDS

Welcome to Rembercourt Field.

Luke and the others climb out. Dropping their duffels at the door, the nervous boys enter what is now the officer's mess.

Werner lags behind. When the others disappear inside, he reaches into Luke's duffel. Pulls out the journal and slides it back into his own pack.

INT. OFFICER'S MESS - NIGHT

A wall banner reads 27TH PURSUIT SQUADRON. Sports the group's SCREAMING EAGLE insignia.

The soaked, fledgling pilots snap to attention. Werner is the last to fall in line.

Well on their way to soused, veteran pilots cast contempt-filled eyes at the new arrivals.

Leaning on a bar made from old doors laid across wooden barrels, Lieutenants Ivan ROBERTS and Charles McELVAIN wear the arrogance of old money as they down shots and size up the replacements.

Lieutenant Kelly John CLOY (mid 20's) throws back a whiskey. A Southern good 'ol boy, the liquor flaps his jaw.

CLOY

Well now, would you lookee what the rain floated in!

Captain Al GRANT (30) steps forward. More by-the-book than the book itself, his voice and attitude are all Texas.

GRANT

Gentlemen, I'm Captain Grant, A-Flight Commander. This is B-Flight leader, Lieutenant Vasconcells.

Grant motions to hard-drinking Lieutenant Jerry VASCONCELLS, who raises a bottle to the newbies.

VASCONCELLS

Welcome to death's door. Now it's just a question whether you're goin' up or comin' down.

Uncomfortable, the new men shift, not quite sure what to say.

NEVIUS

I plan on going up, sir.

Veterans laugh, and Nevius is confused.

MCELVAIN
Means you're dead, kid.

Grant steps in to keep some control.

GRANT
Which one a you's Werner?

WERNER
Me, sir.

Grant gets in his face.

GRANT
You got yourself some reputation.

The veterans seem to know what Grant is talking about.

CLOY
I sure as hell ain't flyin' with
him.

While Grant inspects the other new flyers, Luke inspects the LEADER BOARD -- a chalkboard listing all pilots of the 27th.

Some pilots have IRON CROSSES by their names. Someone named Hartney has five, Grant has three, two for Vasconcells. One apiece for Roberts and McElvain. Most, like Cloy, have none.

LUKE
No offense, sir, but what's all the
fuss?

ROBERTS
(indicates Werner)
Better ask your boyfriend.

CLOY
Wouldn't want you counted as a kill
for the wrong side.

LUKE
From the looks of it, you boys need
all the kills you can get.

CLOY
What the hell...?!

LUKE
You got the 94th Aero right here on
the same field, and not a one of
you's giving Rickenbacker a run for
his money?

Every veteran in the room starts to boil.

LUKE (CONT'D)
What the hell do you do all day?

Cloy lunges for Luke, upending a table. Luke sidesteps but not quick enough. Cloy grabs him by the scruff of his jacket. SHOVES him to the floor.

Roberts restrains Cloy before he can take a swing.

Luke rises, fists clenched. But Grant gets in his way.

LUKE (CONT'D)
Back off, sir.

CLOY
Permission to take this chawbacon
down a notch, sir.

Luke postures to take all comers.

Grant circles around him. Slow and confident.

GRANT
You gonna take the whole damn
squadron, Lieutenant? Your life's
gonna depend on these men.

A hand clamps Luke's shoulder... Luke pivots and swings for the fence.

Werner dodges the punch. Grabs Luke's arm and pins it.

Breathing hard, Cloy and Luke stare each other down.

GRANT (CONT'D)
Enough of this bullshit. We lost
five men this week while you were
trackin' ass in Paris. Good men.

Grant turns to the leader board. Several names have recently been erased.

GRANT (CONT'D)
There's some things more important
than glory.

Luke eases off.

GRANT (CONT'D)
(to Luke and Werner)
Grab your gear.
(MORE)

GRANT (CONT'D)
Lieutenant McElvain's gonna show
you to your bunks.

Luke and Werner give Grant the obligatory salute, and
McElvain escorts them from the mess.

As the door closes behind them, Roberts questions Cloy.

ROBERTS
What the hell's a chawbacon?

EXT. OFFICER'S MESS - NIGHT

Outside, Luke and Werner shoulder their duffels. Walk several
steps behind McElvain.

WERNER
I appreciate you taking the heat
off me.

LUKE
It wasn't intentional.

WERNER
Then what was eating you that you
couldn't shut up?

LUKE
That I'm not in Rickenbacker's
outfit.

McElvain escorts the outcast pair to an old barn converted
into officer's quarters.

MCELVAIN
Grant wants your butts on the
flight line at 0500. After tonight,
I suggest you show early.

INT. LUKE AND WERNER'S ROOM - NIGHT

The bunk room is little more than a section of barn loft
partitioned by tarps strung from the ceiling.

Alone, Luke and Werner unpack duffels.

LUKE
Don't get me wrong, but why'd you
stick up for me back there?

WERNER

Because now you're the one guy they
despise more than me.