

When old fighter pilots get together

Looking forward to a fishing trip with a few old fighter pilots. It'll be the first time I've been really fishing for years. I used to work the trout streams fairly regularly, but between acid rain and pesticides flowing into them, they've become almost barren.

My wife was all in favor of the trip at first. You need to get away. Do something different. See some old friends. That sort of thing. I was surprised and delighted.

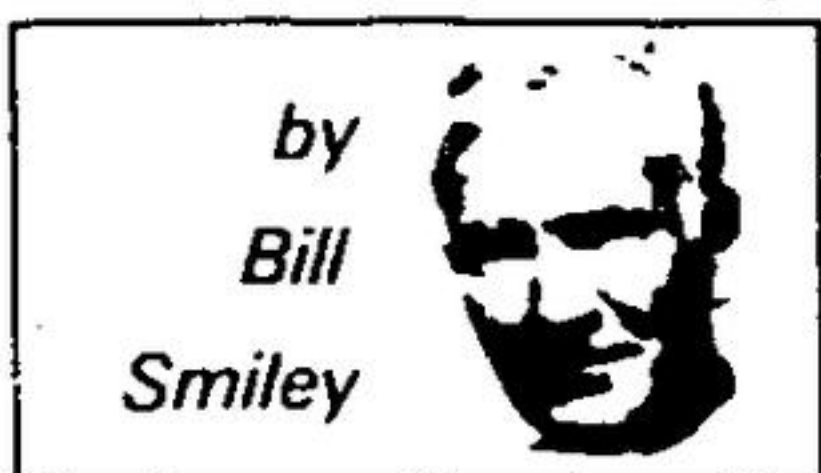
But it didn't take her long to start worrying. "Your fishing tackle is all rusty. What about your arthritis? You haven't anything to wear. I suppose you'll all just sit around and drink and tell stories. What'll I do while you're away?"

I think what really gets her is that I'll be out of touch with the lousy old world for a few days—no telephone, radio, mailman. It's a fly-in lake and she can't get at me to tell me the latest terrible news about the family.

That's the only kind of real holiday that does a man any good. Get good and filthy, don't shave, catch some fish, eat hearty, play some poker, have a little snort without anyone sniffing in disgust, and sleep like a baby.

What she really distrusts are old fighter pilots. Every time I get together with them, I age about 10 years for a few weeks.

But surely she has nothing to worry about this time. The whole trip has been organized by Jack Ryan, lawyer, good



by Bill Smiley

churchman, father of five. Surely old Jack wouldn't get a chap in trouble. And yet... I do have memories.

It's amazing how some friendships are formed in such a short time, and last for decades. Jack and I met for the first time at some god-forsaken little English railway station, miles from nowhere, both headed for operational training on Spitfires. We spent only about three months together, but formed a close friendship that has lasted more than 40 years, although we've seen each other only occasionally since the war.

We became part of a gallant little band that included a Sikh, a Norwegian, a Belgian, a Pole, some Free French, various New Zealanders and Australians, and the usual scattering of Scots, Irish and Brits.

We trained together, hit the pubs together, pursued girls together, sang together, during a bleak English winter, then went our various ways, most to be killed.

Jack Ryan was posted to a Spitfire

squadron. I, to my disgust, was transferred to training for the new Typhoon fighter-bomber.

Singh Thandi, our Sikh friend, was sent out, or back to India and reported killed flying against the Japanese in Burma. The only other one I've seen since, aside from Jack, was Jacques Van der Perren, a Belgian. Our paths crossed for five minutes in Brussels in 1944. I went missing not long after, and he was killed.

Old Ryan was all Irish, genial, witty, out-going, and the second best snooker player in the mess. I was the best.

He was certainly the best pilot in the training unit, as most of us were rookies with a couple of hundred hours, while he'd spent about a year in England as a flying instructor.

We used to go up in pairs, to practise dog-fighting. I dreaded being paired with Jack Ryan. We'd break off, I'd look wildly around the sky, see nothing, and suddenly hear a voice on the R.T., "Brrrup-brrrup! Bail out, Smiler, you've just been shot down."

The one I really enjoyed dog-fighting with was a tiny Hindu called Beri. He was the most terrified fighter pilot I ever met. He should never have been forced (pride? family tradition?) into attempting to be one. He was the only one of the lot of us who was scared out of his wits and had enough sense to admit it.

We'd go up to practise close formation

flying. If you were young and stupid, you did it as tight as possible—your wing tucked right under the other guy's. As soon as I got within 50 yards of Beri, he squealed, "Smiley, you crazy, don't get so close," and would veer off until there was a good 500 yards between us.

We were all going hell-for-leather to become Spit pilots, however, and to this day I don't know why. If you graduated, your chances of survival were very slim. If you didn't you had been killed in a training accident, or were relegated to some flying job where you could do the least harm to the fewest people, including yourself. And

yet we were all dead keen to make the grade.

Don't ask me what it was. Male ego? Wanting to be part of a special group? Trying to prove something to ourselves?

It was something about as bright as a gang of senior citizens, those few left, and we don't seem to have increased in the brains department.

I hope that Ryan remembers enough navigation to get us into the right lake, where the muskies and bass are as numerous as minnows.



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