The Aftermath of Patriotism

By Wes Willgrubs

“Cavalier Pietro reporting as ordered, Sir,”

“Take a seat, Pietro.”

Pietro Rossier is a cavalier in the French military. There is nothing special about him. Before the Great War he was an equestrian on the outskirts of Riem. Now, instead of enjoying the countryside, he is talking to his commander, 1st Lieutenant Shortt. The two men are sitting inside an office that used to be a storage room. The French military is using a landowner’s stable to house the war horses.

It would be the horses’ last ride to battle in the morning. The heavy machine guns and armored vehicles deployed by the Austro-Hungarians are making cavalry obsolete.

“Pietro, you have understood that our cavalry division is being laid off. We will march to Strasbourg to bring supplies, and in three days we shall be in Paris!”

“Very well, Sir, I, too, daydream of my home, but I understand our country has greater needs than my luxury.”

“Said like a true soldier Pietro. Carry on with your duties; I believe the horses need feeding.”

“Yes, Sir!”

Pietro stands up, salutes smartly, and leaves the room. He smiles as he walks outside towards the stables; he enjoys attending to his horses.

He goes to each stall pouring grain in each horse’s trough. He stops at his own horse, Octavius. Octavius is small for a war horse but his spirit and stamina make him stand out from the rest of the stable. It is his black fur that shines apart from everything else, which today was covered in war dust, like blankets of snow. Pietro strokes Octavius’s white mark. Like an ivory fiddle it sits on Octavius’s forehead contrasting with his deep brown eyes. “Octavius was built for war,” Pietro thought, “It would be a shame to see him as a mere farmhand.”

Pietro and Octavius ride with their regiment, Strasbourg looming in the distance. Strasbourg isn’t a big city but is an important outpost along the German border and the soldiers can hear the rumble of traffic from the city.

Suddenly a flare shoots up, illuminating the night sky. “Scatter!” Pietro hears someone yell, right as a cannon shell explodes on the left side of the regiment. Gun shots fire from the woods to the right. The regiment is forced to gallop onto a plain on their left, firing their carbines into the woods. Pietro turns back to fire his rifle, aiming at a machine gun nest in the woods. An explosion goes off near him, stunning him. He falters, but Octavius keeps steady footing. Still regaining his senses, he raises his rifle; but still stunned from the explosion, he doesn’t hear the lighting rounds of the machine gun buzz through the air.

Pietro Rossier dies instantly on November 23, 1916 as bullets from a Maxim m/08 puncture his heart. Octavius, startled by the sudden limpness of his rider, rides off, galloping for 24 more miles. The horse stops when he comes to a river. The river is fast moving and deep; crossing not an option. Octavius travels downstream of the river and comes to a forest. Octavius sleeps that night in the shelter of the trees at the outskirts of the forest.

That morning Octavius sets off into the forest, Pietro’s dead body, still riding limp on the horse’s back, brushes constantly against branches. The forest seems never to end, for Octavius is now in Germany, and Baron Volger’s land extends many miles in all directions.

The afternoon draws closer as the sun sets. Now, a sharp bark pierces the cool autumn air. Another one, now closer, sounds off. Crashing through the branches are Baron Volger’s hunting hounds! Startled by the baying of the hounds, Octavius gallops, Pietro’s face cut from slashes of the branches. “Whoop whoop,” Volger’s men cry, thinking that the dogs are after a fox or rabbit. Octavius rears back as a hound bounds in front of the horse. Octavius, confident with his military training, sends a hoof crashing down on the dog’s head with a sickening crunch. A kick nails a pouncing dog straight in the ribs making it fly back dead into its companions. The pack falters at their sisters’ deaths and decides not to pursue the powerful war horse as Octavius flies into the distance.

Out of the forest; Octavius walks slowly. Exhausted from the battle against the hounds, hunger kicks in. Octavius, spoiled on his grain diet, is now forced to eat the grass. Octavius eventually comes to a fence, barring his path along the river. Octavius is forced to follow the fence, leaving his water source behind.

The smell is terrible. The rain washes over the pair, easing out the oils from Octavius’s fur. But after the rain, the stench is even worse. Moisture starts to rot Pietro’s body. Octavius spends the night along the fence, hungry, thirsty, and unclean.

Days pass without water, Octavius staggers along. His only hope is his thought of home, and rest, and water. Pietro’s rotting body is starting to infect Octavius. Mirages dance about, pools of water, beds of grain. Octavius, brain diseased, is on the brink of insanity with Pietro’s putrid body still lying limp on his back. The lack of fresh water doesn’t help as he is forced to drink water from the puddles of rain three days gone. If this goes on Octavius will die slowly and painfully. A hope rekindles in the horse’s heart. A gap in the fence! It looks different than his mind tricks.

Octavius finds the gap in the fence. It looks like an explosion blew the fence apart. The horse goes through the damaged fence, entering a German militarized zone. Scanning the horizon, Octavius spots buildings in the distance. The familiar rumbling of trucks and city noise drives the homesick horse toward the German base, Pietro still in his French cavalry uniform, bouncing on his horse’s back.

The German base is in a bustle as they see the dust rise over the horizon. Ropes are set taut across the street; tied to fences and mailboxes. As Octavius rushes through the streets, his hooves get tangled up as the ropes do their job. Octavius tumbles to the ground, pinning the dead soldier against the ground. Shrapnel from a mailbox flies from the post as it is ripped apart from Octavius’s charge into town. A wooden projectile from the broken mailbox flies into the horse’s leg, maiming Octavius. Octavius desperately tries to get up, to rise from the muddy streets and continue the journey. In a vain attempt to rise to his feet, Octavius shakes Pietro’s rotting body off his back and the flies start returning to their feast.

Pietro’s body is recovered and sent to the military hospital. Octavius, with a speared leg, is carted off to an open space behind the stables. The stable master follows the cart with a grave face. Octavius’s leg can’t be healed. Octavius can hear the horses whinny and paw the ground; he wants to be with his own kind again. Like in the old times, before the war, he could gallop across the open fields of his equestrian center in Paris. Everyday Octavius would watch the cars rumble by on their way to work and back again. Then he would be fed his grain and be brushed by the groomers. Then the stables erupted with noise of gunshot.

After the war in 1918, Pietro was sent home to and buried in his equestrian center on the outskirts of Riem. Octavius was buried in Juvigny after being killed on December 12, 1916 from a shot to the head from a Mauser pistol. Baron Volger died in a hunting accident on July 26, 1920. 1st Lieutenant Shortt was killed in the Strasbourg ambush and his body was never found by the French Military. In 1918, Germany fell into economic turmoil, unable to build its army to any strength until the 1930’s when Hitler rose to power and broke the Treaty of Versailles. In 1944, Octavius’s story was released by the Germans to the French Military, and Octavius received the Dicken Medal for his courage and unwillingness to give up the thought of hope and victory.

This is the **aftermath of patriotism**.