

The third annual short story competition -
in association with Oxford Gastronomica

The Mogford Prize for Food & Drink Writing 2015

‘Bully Beef and Biscuits’

*(For my father, who never touched them
again after the Second World War)*

by Guy Carter

...a huge success! Over 450 entries
were received for the 2015 prize...



Bully Beef and Biscuits

*(For my father, who never touched them
again after the Second World War)*

The old man stood stiffly to attention near the town square memorial. He had a military-style moustache and there was a small metal poppy pinned to his coat lapel like an entry wound over the heart.

A dispiriting drizzle had threatened the Armistice parade early on, but held off at the last moment, as if out of respect. Veterans from more recent conflicts marched by. The mayor gave a brief to-the-point address about the importance of remembering past sacrifices. The clock tower tolled eleven. The Two Minute Silence was observed. Then a bugler from the Scouting Association blew the Last Post: his nerves, briefly, got the better of him - he pitched the first note too high - but he recovered almost at once and the lament reverberated movingly throughout the crowd.

Later, when evening fell, La Croix de Lorraine opened its doors at the far side of the square.

The Maitre D' greeted each customer in turn. He smiled at the well-worn pleasantries and chuckled at jokes heard

repeatedly over the years with a practiced stoicism. He'd joined the place some years back and had fully absorbed its culture of quiet service and understated courtesy. The Garçon, though, was new to the job. He overdid the Gallic accent and settled the ladies into their chairs with a gallantry aimed at being remembered in gratuities.

The restaurant slowly filled.

The Maitre D' knew most of the customers by name. One young couple, though, were clearly new to and in awe of their surroundings. The boy looked as if he was funding the date with a streamlined wallet and an unscheduled overdraft. The Maitre D' resolved to keep a paternal eye on the pair and guide them through the mysteries of French cuisine to an affordable repast. He might even clip an inexpensive item off the bill and offer them free liqueurs: this was the next generation of diners and in need of nurturing.

An outburst of raucous laughter made him wince. A pack of office workers, all male, had turned up with a smartly dressed woman in her middle years. A late booking. She was clearly in charge and had an icy smile that waited to be thawed by demonstrations of masculine sycophancy. There was the whiff of suspect financial products about the group and he eyed them with patrician distaste. He liked to arrange diners the way Chef prepared a bouillabaisse, blending the social ingredients into a mixture of murmured conversation, appreciative asides and subdued laughter, one table subtly transmitting its contentment to the next. Each evening, he found, had its own distinctive flavour: some strong and celebratory; others mild and reflective. These late bookers, though, were brash, boorish and boastful. They left an unpleasant aftertaste.

The old man from the morning parade entered the restaurant. The Maitre D' recognized him at once.

"Bonjour, monsieur!" he said, helping him out of his coat.

"We have your usual table waiting for you."

"Splendid! I've never missed an Armistice supper yet, have I?"

"That you have not, monsieur!" he said. "Garçon!"

The Garçon appeared.

"Kindly see monsieur to his table."

The Garçon led him to a table with four place settings.

"You're expecting friends, monsieur?"

"I am. This is one evening they never miss."

He ordered a gin and lime while he waited.

It wasn't long before his friends were with him. Patterson arrived first, Haynes and Watson shortly afterwards. They were in uniform but no-one noticed them. "How do you three keep in such good nick?" he marvelled.

Virtuous living, chuckled Patterson. You, on the other hand, seem to have sprouted a spare tyre round your waist since we last saw you. We could have used that in the-desert, Haynes said, on our last mission. Watson grinned. The old man signalled to the Garçon.

Now my friends are here I think we'll have the Chateau Neuf du Pape."

The Garçon looked bemused.

The Maitre D' approached the table.

"I'll deal with this," he said quietly.

He turned to the old man.

-An excellent choice, monsieur! We have two bottles of the '94 left."

He nodded to the Garçon who fetched a bottle and opened it,

pouring out half an inch for the old man to taste. He savoured it slowly and sighed.

-Men," he said. "This is a beauty!"

The Garçon filled his glass, then paused.

"All of them," murmured the Maitre D'.

The Garçon circled the table, topping up each glass until the bottle was empty.

"We'll keep the second one in reserve," said the Maitre D'.

"Are your friends ready to order yet?"

The Garçon stood by looking mystified.

The old man consulted the group. We'll trust your judgement, said Patterson. You've never let us down so far, said Haynes. Watson nodded.

"In that case my friends will have the Canard a l'orange et pommes duchesse." "Excellent choice, monsieur. And for yourself?"

"I'll have what I always have."

"As I thought. Chef has it specially prepared."

He beckoned to the Garçon and the two retired.

The old man raised his glass.

"Your very good healths, gentlemen!"

The men acknowledged the toast.

"To Monty and the Desert Rats!"

To Monty and the Desert Rats!

"To the Long Range Desert Group!"

To the Long Range Desert Group!

The smartly dressed woman flashed their table an arctic glance.

The old man ignored her. Brings it all back, doesn't it? Patterson said. The four of us pitching in to help Monty hit

Rommel for six out of Africa. Then again, said Haynes, there were moments I thought we were a goner. That last mission for instance... Watson nodded.

"It was tough and go at times," the old man admitted, "but here we all are."

Sounds daft, said Patterson, but I count those days the happiest of my life. True, said Haynes, we had a sense of purpose then; did vital work. Watson nodded. The desert war was quite clean too, said Patterson. No civilians involved. The enemy shot at you; you shot back, said Haynes. Nothing personal. Watson nodded.

"I think you chaps are forgetting the true horror of that campaign." What's that, old man?

There was a groan round the table. The bully beef! How could we forget it! The bully beef and biscuits!

"Frightful stuff! All we ever got to eat. Day after day. Tasted like damp cardboard. The biscuits weren't any better, either, just harder to chew! I swore, when the war was over, I'd never touch it for the rest of my life!"

Mind you, said Patterson, the flies loved it. Lapped it up and laid their eggs in it. You couldn't open a can without attracting a swarm of the blighters! And the sand, said Haynes, the sand stuck to it like iron filings to a magnet. You took in half of the Sahara with every mouthful. Watson grinned. The talk of the abhorred foodstuff brought the war memories flooding back. They'd all been Stirling's men, recruited from the regiments to wreak havoc behind enemy lines. Fuel dumps and airfields had been their targets. Their final mission had found them with a group of heavily armed jeeps demolishing German transport planes west of Tobruk. The group had separated during a sand

storm on the way back. Then disaster had struck. A tyre blew on their own jeep. Soon afterwards the spare was shredded by rocks hidden in the sand. They'd paused for a brew and a bite, miles from anywhere, trying to work out what to do next, when a patrolling Messerschmitt came across them. It had circled them lazily while they'd attempted to shoo it away with their Vickers machine-guns. Then it had levelled out at a hundred feet and poured a volley of high velocity bullets into the jeep. They'd scattered before the vehicle exploded.

The Garçon and the Maitre D' arrived with a laden trolley. The three Canards were distributed round the table by a thoughtful-looking Garçon whilst the Maitre ID' placed the old man's speciality in front of him.

"Bon appétit, messieurs!" he said.

Mercy Buckets! said Patterson cheerily. Sombre lot, the other half of the Entente Cordiale, said Haynes as the pair withdrew. Mind you, said Patterson, you can't fault them on the cuisine! Watson nodded. Do you know, said Patterson, I keep thinking Rommel missed a trick in the desert. How's that? Said Haynes. Well, instead of sending out his Panzers and Stukas to ruin our weekends, he'd have been far better off pounding us with tins of Fray Bentos. We'd have jacked it in within a fortnight! Within a week! Said Haynes.

"We'd have run up the white flag the same day!" said the old man, bursting out laughing.

The smart woman glared at him.

"Weren't we lurching on the stuff when Jerry jumped us?"

Quite right! Said Patterson. Watson actually had a tin in his hand and chucked it at the blighter as he flew over. The nearest we came to hitting him!

"If I remember correctly it was Watson who pulled the bike off of the back of the jeep before it blew up," the old man said. "I'd have never been able to ride for help, if it weren't for that."

Good for Watson! said Patterson. Well done, old chap! Said Haynes. Watson flushed, every inch the taciturn hero.

I remember now, Patterson said, turning to the old man, while we were tucking in to that awful muck, you kept our spirits up by promising you'd take us all to the exclusive restaurant in your home town, after the war. Set up by French refugees, you said. Had sauces that could turn the drabdest of rations into culinary masterpieces. Made our mouths water. And now, here we all are, in the very place itself! Haynes chuckled. Do you remember what you said before you rode off to get help? He added. You said if you failed to get us rescued you'd eat nothing but bully beef and biscuits forever. That's when I knew we'd make it!

They all laughed, the old man included. The smart woman summoned the Maitre D' to her table. He listened in silence while she listed her complaints.

"The gentleman you allude to has been coming here every Armistice Day since the war," he said. "It is clear he had a difficult war. The least we can do, out of respect to his sacrifice, is to let him commemorate the occasion in his own way..." he paused briefly "... with his friends."

He cleared his throat.

"Perhaps, in future, madam and her colleagues would find a more congenial atmosphere at Pizza Express round the corner."

He cast a cool look over the group. "Or Nandos."

The woman coloured as he bowed solemnly and withdrew. "Excuse me!"

The Maitre D' glanced round. It was the young couple. He smiled indulgently. When they'd struggled with the menu he'd hinted that the Boeuf Bourignon was the last word in haute cuisine and that the house Merlot was to die for. They'd ordered both and had been clearly won over.

"We couldn't help overhearing," said the girl. "Is that poor old man all right?"

"He comes here every year, mademoiselle. And likes to relive a particular episode of his military service..." again he paused "...with his friends."

"We'd like to help out, if that's possible," said the boy. He brought out a wallet that was, as the Maitre D' had suspected, a little on the trim side.

"That won't be necessary," he assured them, graciously. "But I thank you for your concern."

He stiffened as the smart woman snapped her fingers and summoned him over again. His face softened, though, when he heard what she had to say.

The former Desert Rats, meanwhile, had finished for the evening and were getting ready to depart. Patterson led the vote of thanks. Haynes hear-heard vigorously. Scrumptious meal, as ever, old man! said Patterson. See you next year, said Haynes, but lose some weight, will you? You need to look after yourself, a man of your age! Watson smiled.

"Men," the old man said. "Before you go, there's one thing I've been wanting to tell you... For some time now..."

Really? They looked at him expectantly. His face clouded over.

"I'm truly, truly sorry about what happened out there, in the desert..." His voice was barely audible. "I did my best, you know, but the petrol..."

Did your best? Patterson exploded. No-one could have done more! You did your utmost, said Haynes, above and beyond. Even the voiceless Watson seemed desperate to weigh in. Anyway, said Patterson, look on the bright side!

"The bright side?"

Yes, said Patterson. He looked at his old comrade with immense gentleness. Age shall not wither us, he said. Nor the years condemn, completed Haynes. Watson, the memory of his voice now far beyond recall, had nothing to say but drew himself up to his full height and delivered a slow, perfectly-executed salute. Then, one after the other, the late members of the Long Range Desert Group faded like sepia photographs in sunlight and the old man was left staring disconsolately at three empty chairs.

"Was everything to your satisfaction, monsieur?"

The Maitre D' was standing nearby. The Garçon was next to him, holding his coat. The old man blinked away his tears.

"Excellent, as always," he said.

He reached inside his jacket.

"That won't be necessary, monsieur," said the Maitre D'. "I beg your pardon?"

"The lady over there. She had earlier expressed an interest in your military exploits and was most insistent on settling the bill herself."

"I'm deeply touched," he said. "Please thank her..."

"A lady of quality," the Maitre D' said dryly. "Very rare in this day and age."

Later, when everyone had gone, the Garçon approached the old man's table to clear it. The Maitre D' was already there.

"Chief," said the Garçon. "What really happened out there in the desert?"

A sad, faraway look came to the Maitre D's eyes. He's got the story from the last owner of La Croix de Lorraine, he said, who'd got it in turn from the original proprietor. It was just before Tobruk was retaken, the story went. The man had been found by the Bedouin in the desert near his motor bike. The fuel tank was empty. He'd collapsed from sunstroke and dehydration. He'd been raving incoherently. When he finally recovered he'd lost all memory of where he'd left his men. A Lysander was sent out to look for them but nothing was ever found. The unforgiving maw of the Sahara had simply swallowed them up.

Together they stared at the three plates. Each portion of duck lay cold and untouched like an exquisitely glazed ceramic. The wine was turning sour.

The old man's plate was pristine.

"What did he have?" said the Garçon.

"What he has every year. Chef gets it in specially for him."

"And what's that?"

"Corned beef," said the Maitre D'. "Corned beef and biscuits."