

*The Adventures of Captain Carl, Air Force Hamster*

*Episode I: Rodent Stratus*

*By MacManus*

High above the Afghan landscape, Captain Carl, Air Force Hamster, that flying and fighting rodent of the skies, is on the hunt.

Captain Carl peers through the window above his instrument panel, down onto the bleak and unending mountain panorama. Fifteen days. No sign of the evil ones.

Captain Carl sighs, his heavy hamster shoulders sink with the weight of the free world.

Next to Carl, Lieutenant Jared dozes in the co-pilot's seat. The fool. Captain Carl has half a mind to roll the airplane and give Jared a very rude awakening. But what's the use. Humans never learn.

It wasn't always like this.

Before the great attacks on the homeland, before the alliance of humans and rodents—their common interests binding them into a union of power and influence unmatched in the history of the world—Carl too had been bored with life. He had lived as the hamsters lived, since time immemorial: an endless routine of pellets, up-ended water bottles, and jogging wheels. For hamsters, this was a noble and proud history. But for Carl, there had to be more.

Carl dreamed of the skies, and the purpose of war. And when the call came, and hamsters were enlisted in the human air force, Carl was ready.

And he excelled. Carl's human colleagues were always distracted, always with their minds on other things. But for Carl there was only the mission. And at every stage of his training it was the same. The human student pilots were only ever interested in the next phase of

training. They viewed the current activities as a chore to be endured in order to progress to the next level. As if the Promised Land were only a graduation away. And when they did progress, they again set their sights on the next phase while lamenting the current one.

Humans had no appreciation for the time at hand.

But Cadet Carl was different. He reveled in every moment. He focused on each task with a laser-like zeal, and won praise from his superiors. It wasn't long before Carl had been promoted to the coveted rank of Captain, and given command of his own jet in the vaunted hunter-killer squadron—the first integrated hamster/human squadron in the Air Force.

And then it was time for battle.

For Carl, the rush of combat was exhilarating, and he couldn't get enough. He ran his crew through endless drills. And though they hated him for it, they were soon the finest crew in the squadron. Carl was determined to win honor and glory for himself and his people. No longer would hamsters be scoffed at by the humans as timid and repetitious. The Hamsters would be respected, and Carl would be their hero.

And for the first few months of the war, things went well for Carl. For only he had the patience and the fortitude to track down the evil doers in their most rugged hiding places. The human pilots would only attack the obvious targets. So after the first few days, when the evil ones had retreated to their mountain lairs, the humans became bored of the search. But not Carl

Every day it was the same. In the Captains' Tent, the other crew commanders would complain of how they couldn't wait to get back into the air, for the excitement of combat. But once in the air, they remembered how tedious it all was and pined to return to the comfort of their tent, with its soft pornography and electronic distractions.

God, how Carl hated them.

Were it not for the humans' superior technology, the rodents would have no use for them. That would someday change. And Carl would be there, to lead his people in the great struggle that he knew they were destined to win.

But for now, there was the task at hand. And Carl was determined to hunt down and destroy every last evil doer hiding in these ancient and cursed mountains. No matter the cost.

\*\*\*\*\*

The days stretched on with no sign of the evil ones. Captain Carl's crew had grown complacent, and Carl took to pacing the length of the aircraft during missions, compelling his crew to focus on their consoles. One day, as Captain Carl was in the galley chewing on his pellets, he looked over and noticed his Number One signals officer at his console, folding his mission task sheet into a paper airplane. Carl was incensed.

He scampered up the console and jumped onto the officer's keyboard, pointing his little hamster index finger at him. "Binks! Just what do you think you're doing, mister?" Captain Carl demanded in his squeaky hamster voice.

"Nothing, Captain Carl."

"That's your mission sheet, isn't it?"

"No, Captain Carl."

"How many times do I have to tell you, I don't want no horsin' around on the airplane? We've got evil doers to catch," chirped Captain Carl.

"But Captain," whined Binks. "I'm sooo bored. We haven't seen any sign of the bad guys for weeks. Can't we just go home?"

"No way, Binks," sneered Carl. "And you mind your console, mister. It's attitudes like yours that got us into this mess in the first place. So you *will* do your job, or so help me I'll—"

The airplane shuddered with a violent shake. Carl was flung into the air and caught hold of a bundle of wires on the ceiling with all fours. He scurried down and darted to the cockpit.

“What’s going on?” squawked Carl as he climbed into his little hamster pilot seat. The missile warning indicator was beeping and flashing. Lt Jared’s eyes were wide with confusion, cold sweat pouring down his face.

“I think it was a missile. At first I thought I was still dreaming,” sputtered Jared.

The first shot was a lucky miss. But their luck couldn’t last.

Captain Carl strapped himself in, grabbed ahold of his miniature control column, and toggled off the autopilot. The missile indicator was still blaring, telling of another missile to their rear. Carl banked the airplane into a hard right turn, and pulled back for a steep climb. He knew they were too close to the mountains for a dive.

The G meter climbed past six. The friendly computer voice warned them: “Too many Gs. Too many Gs.” But Carl knew the limits of his airplane. The missile streaked past them.

Carl saw the source of the missiles out of the corner of his eye. It was a tall man in a white turban standing on the peak of a nearby mountain. He had a portable missile launcher on his shoulder. A shorter man in a grey turban stooped behind him, preparing another missile to load into the launcher.

“Crew,” Captain Carl announced on the interphone. “MANPAD at Nine O’Clock. Get me a solution.”

In an instant, the crew’s reflexes took over, the long hours of drills overcoming their fear. Binks slewed his laser targeting sight in the direction of the man in the white turban. At once the computer identified the man as the leader of the evil doers. This was the very evil one for which they had been searching.

Binks' expert fingers transferred the targeting information into the fire control computer. "You're clear on number one, Captain," announced Binks on the intercom.

By this time Captain Carl had brought the jet around, with its nose pointed straight at the target—right where he wanted them. The green Target Lock light illuminated on Carl's instrument panel.

A slight smile crept across Captain Carl's little hamster lips. His eyes narrowed, and he squeezed the tiny trigger on the control column. The missile launched from under the left wing of the airplane and streaked toward the target.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Attention to orders," the General announced.

The entire auditorium of humans and rodents, all in their finest dress uniforms, snapped to attention. Above the stage, the TV lights glared down on them. Sporadic newspaper camera flashes punctuated the air.

"Let it be known, by all who hear these words, that in recognition for bravery and dedication above and beyond the call of duty, Captain Carl is hereby promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, with all the rights, privileges, duties and responsibilities thereof. Congratulations, Colonel."

The General pinned the cute little silver oak leaves to Carl's diminutive shoulders while Carl stood at attention, the very model of military discipline.

The crowd erupted in applause. They cheered and shouted. It went on and on.

\*\*\*\*\*

And that, my friends, is the story of how Captain Carl, Air Force Hamster, in the face of insurmountable odds, became the rodent hero of America. Colonel Carl would go on to command his own squadron, fighting great battles and defeating evil in every corner of the globe.

But that is another story...