

SALUTING

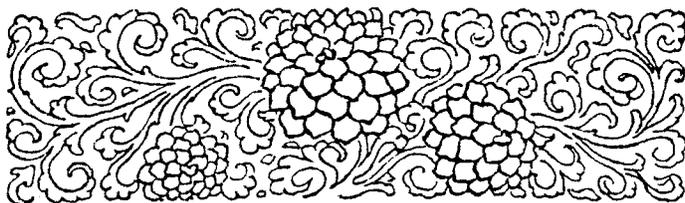
by

SHERWYN WARREN



THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB
22 November 2004

© 2004 BY SHERWYN WARREN
(All rights reserved)



Saluting

The year was 1958. I was living in France, not in a city, but in a rural town I'll call Claremont, nearly 200 miles south of Paris, not far from the Loire valley. For some of the fuzzy memories, I'm spackling in the details. I had never been to France before; I had not planned to be in France at that time but was assigned there as a flight surgeon by the United States Air Force.

Adjusting to air force life was not difficult for those of us taken from our medical training in the 1950s. Most of us appreciated having been given educational deferments during the Korean War and participated in the Berry plan which conscripted doctors into the military long after the general draft was ended.¹ The hierarchical structure of the military was not so different from what we had encountered as medical students, interns and residents. Uniforms in the hospital had designated a certain rank, whether the short, white coats of medical students or the long, white lab coats of residents and attending staff. Although we practiced appropriate deference to authority, we were usually noncha-

SALUTING

lant in our relationships with colleagues. Certainly, we were not used to the military practice of saluting. At the appropriate time, the junior military person brings the extended fingers of his right hand to the outside corner of his eyebrow and is similarly recognized by the senior. We medical officers, somewhat embarrassed by the ritual, usually saluted casually and indifferently.

My prior experience with foreign travel had been limited to occasional trips over the Mexican border. My rudimentary Spanish was of no use in this new environment where the local populace responded with a blank expression or sneer to anything but colloquial French. Newsstands featured papers and magazines in a language I didn't understand so I read the English language *Herald Tribune* or *Stars and Stripes*. Radio broadcasts played familiar music but announcements weren't comprehensible so I listened to the American Armed Forces Network. I also sensed resentment for us rich Americans who were competing for scarce housing and resources with the local population, still recovering from the devastation of World War II. "Americans Go Home" and "Yankee Go Home" were common signs among the ubiquitous political graffiti in almost every town.

Dwight Eisenhower was president, John Foster Dulles was secretary of state, the cold war with Russia was at full freeze and the world's first satellite, the Russian Sputnik, was circling the globe—beeping ominously every few seconds to remind the world of Soviet missile prowess.² The North American Treaty Organization (NATO) was in place as the European bulwark in this hostile standoff. I was an American military medical officer and France was my station, a junior flight surgeon at a sprawling Air Material Command base that supplied American and NATO military forces in

SALUTING

Europe and the Middle East. Most of the aircraft were transport planes, most of the pilots were seasoned and experienced. The other, more senior flight surgeon was Colonel Brown, who was also the hospital commander.

I had read about the glamour of France in the writings of Hemingway and other expatriates, but that seemed far removed from bucolic Claremont. My French and European plans were essentially those of a tourist. I wanted to see the sights and have experiences of the European Grand Tour during my two-year military assignment.

I was struck by how enclosed the French seemed to live. Houses were built behind high walls or around courtyards. Apartment windows often faced away from the streets. At night windows were shuttered so residential areas seemed uninhabited. Even railroad cars were configured to afford intimacy for small groups. Business and other relations appeared to be conducted politely and coolly. Sometimes locals exchanged greetings and embraced, but they seldom appeared to smile at one other. My personal contacts with the French were limited by language and interests—I had a wife and young son and plenty of friends at the base. However, I did enroll in a conversational French class.

Only in retrospect do I appreciate why the French people weren't so concerned about the cold war and Communist threat. By 1954 they had withdrawn from Vietnam after losing 60,000 military and civilians. By 1958 a million European settlers lived in Algeria, an area they regarded as part of the French Republic, but more than 500,000 French soldiers were stationed there trying to put down a bloody native rebellion and protect the Europeans. France's colonial empire was falling apart. Inflation was weakening the economy.³

SALUTING

The French Fourth Republic was also under assault by right-wing activists. In April 1958 the cabinet of Premier Felix Gaillard fell and it took Pierre Pflimlin more than a month to form a new cabinet. On May 13, in Algeria, right-wing activists went into the streets and took over the city of Algiers. They formed an ad hoc government which they called the Committee of Public Safety. Politicians feared a fascist takeover of the whole nation. Seeking a strong figure to cope with the crisis, they called upon Charles de Gaulle to return to power. Pflimlin resigned, President Rene Coty appointed de Gaulle premier; the National Assembly voted de Gaulle unrestricted power for six months and adjourned. A coup and civil war were thus averted. By December 1958 de Gaulle was elected to a seven-year term as president of the newly created Fifth Republic.⁴

All of this swirled around us at the sprawling Claremont Military Air Transport Command Base and its hospital. Once, when I drove to Paris in the spring of 1958, I noticed black buses filled with armed soldiers parked near the American embassy. On the road I saw national gendarmes in their black helmets and leather uniforms riding motorcycles in groups of two and three. Previously I had seen them only occasionally on the road and singly. Anti-American graffiti seemed much more common.

We Americans, myself included, tended to attribute the ferment to a rickety political system and to regard de Gaulle as an arrogant, anti-American autocrat and cause of the disorder. We were concerned that his anti-Americanism would lead to France leaving NATO and evicting us from the Claremont facility and would cause the French people to ignore the menace of the Soviet Union. Our senior officers and people who had contact with local French advised us

SALUTING

not to appear conspicuous by wearing our uniforms off base, but life on the base and in the hospital—largest U. S. Air Force hospital in France—did not seem ruffled by the political winds. We saw the usual number of personnel and dependants as outpatients and inpatients. In my job as flight surgeon I ran the flight-line dispensary and ENT clinic as before. Colonel Brown rarely visited the airfield. When he did visit it was usually to hitch a ride to an interesting destination.

Colonel Brown had arrived six months before I did and was considered by most of the doctors at the hospital as arrogant and incompetent. He was a full colonel so his dress uniform hat had distinctive ornamental “scrambled eggs” and silver piping on its brim. I sometimes saw him sitting in his office wearing this hat, talking on the telephone, smoking a cigarette and chewing gum. In contrast, his predecessor, also a “bird” colonel and regular air force, had been respected and liked by his subordinates.

In late May 1958, as the political turbulence was heating up, I was summoned to the hospital commander’s office around noon. The door was open and he waved me in. I saluted and sat down in a chair across the desk. He was wearing his hat and chewing gum but not smoking, although tobacco smell hung in the air.

“We have to pick up a body and bring it back here for processing. One of our F-104s from the fighter base at Larville hit a mountain.” I felt a rush of anxiety, sadness and apprehension.

The Lockheed F-104 Starfighter was called “The Missile With A Man In It.” It was developed in response to the Russian MIG-15, which decimated American fighter planes during the Korean War. The plane was a product of the fabled

SALUTING

“Skunk Works” and a team headed by Clarence “Kelly” Johnson. It won the Collier Award from the National Aeronautic Association for its design and innovations. Fifty-five-foot-long, it had a wing span of only twenty-two feet. The wings were not swept back as in most other jet aircraft but were trapezoidal with a leading edge only sixteen-thousandths of an inch in thickness, almost knife-blade thin. Weighing only 13,000 pounds, it was the first production airplane to exceed Mach 2. It attained Mach 2.2, more than 1,500 miles an hour, and cruised at 510 miles an hour, 800 feet per second. The tall vertical tail had high horizontal stabilizers. Pilot ejection seats conventionally thrust pilots upward through the canopy, but Lockheed innovated a downward ejection seat to avoid the tail. It landed at 170 miles an hour and was so aerodynamic that a drag chute was deployed to slow it on the runway. The airplane had a reputation for being dangerous to fly. Among other appellations, it was called the “widow-maker.”⁵

Colonel Brown continued, “A team from his base has already gone down there. They recovered the remains and took care of most of the paperwork but they don’t have facilities to process the body. We have to do that.”

“Where do we have to go?” I asked.

“In the mountains. About five hours east of here.” That would be the Rhone Alps, a sparsely populated, primitive area of loggers, small farmers and trades people. “You’ll have to stay overnight and bring the remains back tomorrow. I’m sending a staff car with a driver and corpsman. They’ll know how to get there. Dumont’ll go with you. He speaks French.”

Marcel Dumont was another of the doctor draftees. He was from northern New Hampshire, where French was his

native language, and had attended medical school in Montreal. He was a general medical officer in the outpatient clinic, unmarried, and led a quiet personal life off base, probably with a series of local girl friends. He spoke fluent English—and I presumed French—with a definite French-Canadian accent. Despite four months in France, my indiscriminate ear and clumsy tongue limited my French conversation.

I asked, "How are we going to transport the remains?"

"There's a body bag."

"Is there a hearse?"

"We don't have a hearse."

"What about an ambulance?"

"The ambulances on base are in such bad shape they'd probably break down."

"So what do we bring him back in?" I asked.

"The trunk of the staff car," he replied.

I was shocked. The idea of driving a flyer's remains across France in the trunk of a car, even an air force staff car, struck me as crass, undignified and unsympathetic. I protested, "Can't we find one ambulance that can make the trip? Or rent a hearse?"

"He flew into a mountain. He's smashed into little pieces. They'll hardly find anything to put in the body bag." The Colonel paused. "Wear civilian clothes. There's enough going on with the locals without drawing more attention to the American military." That startled me too: traveling incognito in an Allied country to escort a casualty of the cold war. "Go home and change," he said. "We'll send the staff car to your house to pick you up."

I was unhappy with the scenario, but the interview seemed finished. I stood up and turned to go, then caught a look in

SALUTING

the Colonel's face. I turned part way back and in a half stoop gave my salute. He returned it with a gesture that was almost a wave of his hand.

Half an hour later I was picked up by the staff car. My apartment was in a two-hundred-year-old building that was built to be a blanket factory but had been remodeled by a local entrepreneur to take advantage of inflated rents from the rich American military. I wore a dress shirt and tie, gray slacks, and a Harris tweed jacket I had recently purchased at the base exchange. Dumont was already sitting in the back seat dressed similarly. Two airmen sat in front in their work uniforms. The car was a large Ford sedan, distinguishable as a staff car mainly by its American military license plates.

For the first hour, although the roads soon became unfamiliar, they were well maintained. The landscape was like the rolling, intensively farmed region I knew south of the Loire River. Gradually, roads became narrower, houses and villages farther apart. Many tracts of land were not tilled and the countryside appeared increasingly poor. Soon hills became higher and steeper and we were in the Rhone Alps. Most of the countryside was woods or shrubs with only occasional clumps of houses. The road became tortuous and steep.

It was almost dark by the time we arrived at the town in a small valley, which was the prefecture of that mountainous region. We stopped at a gas station and Dumont used the telephone to call the prefect, then came back to the car and directed the driver to the government office three streets away in a modest, two-storied stucco building. The prefect's assistant, a short, stooped, white-haired septuagenarian wearing a rough, brown button-sweater over a coarse blue shirt and baggy corduroy trousers, waited at the front door.

SALUTING

The prefect, a bald, middle-aged energetic appearing man in a navy blue vest, walked up a moment later. He ushered Dumont and me into a spare, ill-lit room with a couple of rough wooden desks in front and a table with four chairs towards the rear. Several old, wooden filing cabinets stood against a wall behind the desks.

The prefect, who spoke only French, conversed with us cordially and sympathetically and seated us at the table. He brought papers from a desk and directed his assistant to bring four glasses and pour from a bottle of local brandy. I understood none of the conversation between the officials and Dumont, signed papers where directed, and took an envelope from the prefect. I thanked him in my best French, to demonstrate that I was not a deaf-mute. We stood up, shook hands, and Dumont and I returned to the car.

"He'll take us to pick up the body in the morning," said Dumont. "There's a hotel with a restaurant just down the street."

Shortly after sunrise the prefect met us in front of the hotel, wearing his vest and a jacket with two official-looking ribboned medals dangling above the breast pocket. He led us in a tan Peugeot station wagon with emblems of the local government painted on its front doors. The central area of town, only three or four blocks in each direction, consisted of two- and three-story, mostly shabby buildings with narrow, broken sidewalks and poorly maintained, narrow paved streets. This gave way to streets with closed, one-story frame and stucco houses, many behind walls or around courtyards. They were set back from the street by paths of dirt and gravel. After a few more blocks the pavement gave way to a narrow, winding gravel roadway and we ascended into the mountains. The peaks were shrouded in mist.

SALUTING

For twenty minutes we saw no sign of habitation until we spotted a small, black Renault sedan parked just off the road. The prefect parked behind the Renault, followed by our own car, and we all climbed out into the chilly, morning mountain air. The mist was clearing and in the morning light I saw a twenty-foot-wide swath of downed trees just off the road going toward the peak. A middle-aged Frenchman was inspecting the damage. Dumont and the prefect spoke with him. I went to inspect the glide path of the doomed fighter plane for any parts or remains. I walked up and back a couple of hundred yards and saw nothing except broken tree trunks and branches.

Dumont was in the car when I returned. "That's the owner of the property," he said. "He's counting the number of trees that were damaged so he can send a bill to the United States government. I'm sure every sapling will be prime timber."

After driving another five minutes we arrived at a small plateau where I could see about twenty simple, unpainted wooden dwellings scattered along dirt streets. The prefect led us down the gravel road to an unpainted, rough-hewn, wooden building about twenty feet square with a small porch. It was the village hall. Two gendarmes in blue dress uniforms and pillbox hats with brims stood on the shallow porch. The prefect walked up to them and Dumont and I followed. They seemed to recognize the prefect, saluted him and stood at attention when they spoke to him. When introduced to us, they seemed unsure how to react to two military officers in civilian clothes and nodded towards us with bewildered expressions. They shook the hands we extended to them. I looked down at the porch; it was covered with dozens of bunches of flowers, most freshly gathered, a

SALUTING

few wrapped in cellophane. The prefect and Dumont spoke with the gendarmes, who unlocked and opened the unpainted wooden door.

A simple wood table that served as a desk was pushed against the far wall. In the middle of the room, facing the entry, were two straight-back wooden chairs with cane seats set side by side. A body bag lay across the chairs. It had a full contour. A large scented wax candle in a tall wrought-iron candelabra provided the only light except that which came through the open door. Shutters were closed. The room was devoid of decoration except for a carpet of flowers that covered the floor from the entrance to and around the chairs. Two white lilies lay on the zippered, black, rubberized canvas body bag. Strong floral fragrance mixed with the candle's scent.

I felt deeply touched. Each of these hundreds of flowers was a gift of sympathy and love for a stranger who literally fell onto them from the sky. Except for the gendarmes, none of the local people were around, but the community had left a poignant and clear message.

Our airmen, in their work uniforms, came into the tiny village hall to help and exchanged salutes with the gendarmes. We each took a corner of the body bag and lifted. I was amazed at how heavy it was. I looked at the others to see if they were lifting their share, but they also were straining under the weight.

As we passed through the doorway, the gendarmes snapped to attention with an audible click of their heels, stood ramrod straight and brought their right hands palm forward to the right side of their faces. The prefect also formally saluted as we brought the body past him. Their quizzical expressions betrayed their questions and misgivings

SALUTING

about this strange procession of two officers in mufti and two airmen carrying a fallen comrade into the trunk of an automobile and closing the lid. Not until the trunk lid slammed shut did the gendarmes relax their salute, but they maintained their bewildered expressions until we drove away.

We were silent for a long time, until we were almost back in the town. At last Dumont turned to me, shook his head and sighed. He said, "You know, up there I felt embarrassed. I just didn't feel . . ." His voice trailed off.

I needed to show him I shared his feelings. "I feel embarrassed and angry." Dumont nodded. I continued, "I asked the Colonel for a hearse or an ambulance. He said there wouldn't be enough of him left even for the trunk of the car. Not enough. It was so heavy the four of us could barely carry it out." Dumont nodded again. "I think we shouldn't be in civilian clothes. We should have worn our dress uniforms, but the Colonel said we'd run into anti-American feeling."

Dumont said, "Not even de Gaulle would have objected to our coming in uniform to retrieve the body of one of our soldiers who was defending his country."

When we stopped for lunch we all sat where we could keep watch on the car.

We reached Clermont in mid-afternoon and by the time I changed into my uniform and drove to the hospital it was after four o'clock. Colonel Brown's office was closed and dark. The office of the head of the medical service corps, a lieutenant colonel, was open next door. I knocked and entered. "Where's Colonel Brown?" I asked.

"He left for Rome today. His wife wants to see her dentist there and there are only two scheduled flights a week."

"His wife?" I said.

"Space available."

"I wanted to tell him about the body I picked up this morning."

He said, "The pathology department takes care of that."

"Where's the body now?"

"In the morgue."

"Where's the morgue?"

"At the end of P-corridor. Room six."

"Thanks," I said. He turned his attention back to the papers he was reading. I didn't salute.

I wanted to see what was in that body bag. Why was it so heavy? The bottom was hard, but wasn't flat like a board or stretcher. I wanted to see it although I wasn't certain how I'd react to the sight of a mangled and dismembered body. Everything had been so different from what Colonel Brown had assured me. I was bothered and curious.

P-corridor was unfamiliar. Walls were painted the same pale blue with dark blue door frames as all the others in the hospital and clinic, but there were no benches or waiting areas for patients. No one was visible; the doors were closed. Neatly lettered signs adjacent to the doors identified the pathologist's domain: microbiology, chemistry, histology, etc. Only a number painted on the door identified room six.

I pressed down on the handle. The door was unlocked. I pushed it open slightly and listened; only the sound of a far-off refrigerator. A draft of cool air faintly tinged with the smell of formaldehyde hit my face. I walked into the morgue, a brightly illuminated, large, airy room with light, cream-colored walls. I was the only living soul there. Between the door and the autopsy table stood an olive drab, four-foot-square metal table. Lying upon it was an un-

SALUTING

opened folder of a type familiar to me, an airman's medical record. Next to it was a clipboard with a paper entitled "Casualty Data Worksheet." I picked it up and read:

"Name: Rizzo, Anthony James, Captain."

"Age: 29."

A year older than I, the same rank. He wasn't a green fighter jock.

"Next of kin: Audrey Elizabeth, 29. James, 6. Judy, 4. Kyle, 6 months."

An image composed itself in my mind: the photograph of a smiling, slim, dark-haired young woman holding an infant in her lap while two moppets stand next to her mugging for the camera. I wondered what they were doing at this moment. Had they already been notified? How will they react to the pain, the lightning crunch that threatens every combat flyer's family? Who will help them stay intact? Despite what Colonel Brown had implied, I now didn't feel I had been sent to retrieve tatters and bits; I had been sent to pick up the shattered body of a young husband and father.

I laid the clipboard back and turned towards the stainless-steel autopsy table in the middle of the room. Folded at the base was the empty black body bag. On the table was the explanation for the unbelievable weight of its contents, the ejection seat of an F-104 jet fighter plane. Still strapped in was a torso clad in a tattered flight suit, gloved hands and boot-clad feet unnaturally and grotesquely akimbo. The bright yellow flight helmet sat straight on the shoulders, remarkably unscathed except for a deep scratch across the crown. **RIZZO** was in bold, black capital letters above the intact tinted visor.

I constructed another vision: a handsome young aviator in this flight suit carrying this helmet in the crook of his el-

SALUTING

bow across the tarmac and climbing a pipe ladder into a stub-winged, needle-nosed F-104 fighter, the fastest, most lethal and unforgiving jet in the world. He put on the helmet, closed the canopy and roared down the runway and almost vertically into the misty morning air.

As I looked at the remains I tried to reconstruct the story. There was no indication of fire, no disintegration. Had he swerved to avoid the tiny village? Had he not seen the mountain top sheathed in mist? Had he become careless, distracted, momentarily lost consciousness? The deep scratch on the helmet was the clue. Rizzo wasn't in the cockpit when the F-104 hit the mountain. He had ejected. The scratch was from the helmet striking the airframe during ejection. The downward ejection seat had driven him into the ground. He had not even separated from his seat, much less deployed his parachute. He hadn't had time to roll his airplane and eject upwards before the panicked realization that he was going to crash.

Colonel Brown was wrong. The beautiful young woman I pictured and her three beautiful young children wouldn't be receiving an empty casket or one with mere scraps as remains. Rizzo would be returning mangled but mostly intact. I felt relieved and ashamed. Relieved that Rizzo was mostly intact. Ashamed that he had suffered the indignity of being stuffed into the trunk of a staff car for part of his journey by two commissioned officers wearing civilian clothes, this observed by comrades-in-arms.

A door at the far end of the room opened. The airman who had accompanied us to pick up the body entered, pushing a gurney on top of which lay a varnished wooden casket with a folded, gold-fringed flag. He looked at me and said quietly, "We're preparing him for the return home."

SALUTING

I became depleted of pain and anger. I looked at the shattered body of Rizzo, strapped into his ejection seat, and visualized a flower-strewn simple wooden porch with two gendarmes and a civilian prefect honoring our colleague by saluting as the body passed. I took a step towards the autopsy table, snapped my heels together, stood erectly at attention, brought my right hand up in stiff salute, smartly made an about face, and marched into the sky blue corridor with its dark blue door frames.

Notes

1. Howard A. Rusk, "The Draft and Doctors," *New York Times*, 30 June 1957.
2. *The New Encyclopedia Britannica Micropedia*, 15th ed., s.v. "Sputnik."
3. *Ibid.*, s.v. "France, The History of."
4. *Ibid.*
5. See Steve Pace, *Warbird History. Lockheed F-104 Starfighter, Design, Development and Worldwide Operations of the First Operational Mach 2 Fighter* (Osceola, WI: Motorbooks International, 1992); Bert Kinzey, *F-104 Starfighter* (London: Airlife Publishing, 1991); and Michael O'Leary, "Starfighter," *Air Combat*, May-June 1996.

This paper was written for The Chicago
Literary Club and read before the Club on Monday
evening, the Twenty-second of November,
Two Thousand and Four.

This edition of three hundred copies
was printed for the Club in the month of
October, Two Thousand and Six.