

“STEBBY”

Once upon a time, there was a young Stealth Bomber called Stebby. He lived on an airfield in the desert in a big country in the West. Of course, he had to go to school, like all other young people, but when he reached 12 years old he became a cadet in the military. Although he was good at reading and writing, he seemed at first to have a problem with bombing. That's to say, with accurate bombing. On his first practice run in the desert, his bomb missed the target by a long way and went straight into the General's swimming pool, next to the General's house. It didn't have any explosives in it, fortunately. But Stealth bombs are big and this one landed with such a splash that the swimming pool water swished all over the place and drenched the General and his guests who were sitting on the terrace enjoying drinks and the nice weather. It was a difficult day for Stebby and he got a good telling off from everybody, and especially the General.

From that day on, Stebby practiced very hard at accurate bombing, even going out at night on his own. Of course, he got better and better at it. Practice always does that. Eventually, he could land his bomb on a single cactus plant. When the day came for the final accuracy examinations, Stebby was so good at putting his bombs on difficult targets, that he won first prize, and was given a medal by a surprised General.

The President of the country was not very friendly with all of the other countries of the world, and some of them, in turn, were quite unfriendly to him. It was the Stealth Bombers' job - on the orders of the President - to bomb the unfriendly cities. The people were warned when the Stealth Bombers were coming and told to leave their cities so they wouldn't get hurt. As there was no way of stopping a Stealth Bomber, they usually did. Then they had to rebuild their cities. The President thought that this would teach the unfriendly countries a lesson.

Stebby liked to read a lot about foreign places and he wasn't quite sure whether he really wanted the job of destroying cities. And then, one day, a really bad thing happened. The General told Stebby that his orders were to bomb London. Now, of all the cities Stebby liked reading about, London was his favourite. He was fascinated by descriptions of London, such as “The flower of Cities all”. (Stebby had never seen a flower. There weren't any in his part of the desert). And “Earth has not anything more fair to show” which was written by someone standing on a bridge over the river at London. (Stebby had never seen a river. There wasn't one in his part of the desert). Stebby had a sort of affection for London, even though it was a long way away and he had never seen it. So when the General gave him his orders, Stebby said, ‘I can't do that, Sir.’

‘What!’, said the General. ‘An order's an order, flyer.’

‘Yes, I know, sir,’ said Stebby. ‘I'm very sorry.’

‘Are you disobeying an order, son?’

‘I'm really very, very sorry, General,’ said Stebby. ‘I can't do it’. And he told the General about how he liked to read about London and had grown fond of it. Now the General was a intelligent man, and fair to his flyers, and he could see that Stebby was really troubled by his orders.

‘O.K. I’ll talk to the President about it.’ he said.

‘Thank you, sir,’ said Stebby, relieved.

While the General was in the Capital, Stebby went to see his friend, Old Jeb. Old Jeb was a retired aircraft carrier and was like a sort of grandad to Stebby. He listened attentively while Stebby told him about the London problem.

‘Do you think I did the right thing?’ Stebby asked.

‘Well,’ said Old Jebb, ‘It’s not good, of course, to disobey an order.’

‘But do you think it’s right to bomb cities all the time? Any city, I mean. Not just London,’ interrupted Stebby. ‘What did you do when you were serving the country. Did you bomb cities?’

‘No,’ said Old Jeb. ‘We sailed around letting unfriendly countries know we were there. And that we could bomb them if necessary.’

‘Was that all?’ asked Stebby.

‘Well, at the same time, diplomats were talking to the unfriendly countries and trying to get everybody to be friends.’ answered Old Jeb.

‘Well!’ said Stebby, ‘That was a much better way of doing things!’

‘Seemed so at the time,’ said Old Jeb. ‘But human beings are difficult....’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Stebby.

‘Well, humans are, at base, very aggressive.’ explained Old Jeb.

‘I’m human and I’m not really aggressive,’ said Stebby.

‘Um, yes, er....’ said Old Jeb, with a troubled look.

‘Anyway,’ said Stebby, ‘You don’t think it’s very bad of me to say I can’t bomb London?’

‘Nope, Stebby. On reflection, I don’t. It’s a question of principle. Let’s hope the President sees it that way.’

‘It’s really nice to have an understanding friend like you, Jeb,’ said Stebby.

‘Stebby,’ said Old Jeb, ‘There’s something you need to know....’

‘Can’t stop now, Jeb,’ said Stebby, ‘I’ve got to see the General. ‘Bye.’

When the General got back from the Capital, he told Stebby that the President was not pleased at all.

‘The President said that he can’t have a military that does not want to obey orders. I told him you were still quite young and that you were one of our best flyers, and he said O.K. he’d think about it. You’re lucky, son. He could have ordered your arrest.’

‘Oh!’ said Stebby.

‘So, stand down, until we hear from the Capital,’ ordered the General.

In the Capital, it was dinner-time in the President’s house. The President was very quiet. His wife and their young daughter looked up at him from time to time as they ate. The President would stop eating every now and then and stare at the ceiling.

‘Something bothering you, hon?’ asked his wife.

‘Yep.’ said the President.

‘Do you want to talk about it?’ she asked.

‘It’s kinda weird.’ he said.

‘Well, tell us, Dad,’ entreated his daughter, all interested.

‘Well. I gave an order for London to be bombed - they’ve been downright unpleasant lately - and the Stealth Bomber concerned said he wouldn’t do it,’ said the President, looking a little perplexed.

‘Why on earth not?’ asked his wife.

‘I didn’t talk to him yet, but the General says it has something to do with the flyer reading poetry about London,’ explained the President.

‘Oh, wow!’ said his wife.

‘Oh, wow!’ said their daughter.

There was a silence while they ate and thought about this strange situation. Then eventually, their daughter looked up and asked:

‘Dad? Why do we bomb cities?’

‘Well, Joanna, it’s part of our Defense Strategy,’ said the President.

‘Oh,’ said Joanna.

‘Perhaps you’d better explain what a Defense Strategy is, hon,’ said his wife. So the President did. Joanna tried to look wise.

‘I still don’t understand why we bomb other people’s cities,’ she said. ‘It doesn’t seem right. We wouldn’t like it, if they did that to us.’

‘It’s because we do it first, that they don’t do it to us,’ said the President.

‘Are they more friendly after we’ve bombed them?’ asked Joanna.

‘Well. I guess not,’ admitted the President.

‘Seems a very silly Defense Strategy to me,’ said Joanna. ‘You’re always telling me to be friendly to people and to try and understand them. Especially if they’re different from us.’

‘I think,’ said the President. ‘I think we’ll take a little trip see the General and this young Stealth Bomber. What d’you say?’

Although Stebby had been told to 'stand down' that didn't mean that he had to stop practicing accuracy bombing. He would slowly fly along, well above the clouds, carry out some very complicated operations on his computer, and hit the target with his practice bomb, from several miles away. Or he would get up to maximum speed, swing around the skies, tip up one side, zoom down to one foot above the ground, whoosh up through the clouds, suddenly appear above a target, drop the practice bomb right on it and veer off at top speed. It was just as he was finishing one of these fancy practice runs that he noticed a cavalcade of limousines on the airfield. The President and his entourage were watching.

'Oh, wow!' said the President's wife.

'Oh, wow,' said their daughter.

'Impressive, isn't he?' said the General.

'Hmm,' said the President. At that moment, one of the President's aides walked up, looking worried, and handed a mobile phone to the President.

'Control Center, Mr. President,' he said. 'They said urgent, sir.' The President looked surprised and took the phone.

'Yep,' he said. 'Uh huh. Uh huh. Oh, boy. As bad as that? That the only way? You sure? Lemme think about it. How long have we got before decision time? O.K. Thanks.' He turned to the General.

'General,' he said. 'We have a real problem coming our way. Who's your best flyer? And bravest?'

'You were just watching him, Mr. President,' replied the General. Joanna's eyes widened.

'You mean the flyer who is disobeying orders?' asked the President.

'The very one, sir,' said the General. 'What do you need, Mr. President?'

'O.K. Here's the situation.,' said the President. 'Met Office report a huge cyclone building in the Atlantic Ocean. Biggest thing they've ever seen - already. And it's heading our way. Estimated time of arrival over the Capital is two hours from now. They say it's gonna destroy everything in its path. How d'ya like that?'

'Not a lot, sir,' said the General. 'What can be done about it?'

'The only way apparently,' said the President, 'is to drop the biggest bomb we have right on it. Precisely in the middle. For that we need the best flyer. And you tell me it's a guy who disobeys orders.'

'With respect, Mr. President,' said the General, 'he only disobeyed orders once. And for a very specific reason. Why don't we get him over here and have him meet you?'

'Sure. Do that, General. Let's get moving on this.' Stebby was called up on the intercom and told to present himself to meet the President. He called up Old Jeb and asked him how to address a President.

‘You call him “Mr. President”, Stebby. And you snap up a salute. And you call his wife “Ma’am”. And his daughter “Miss”.’

‘Are they there, too,’ asked Stebby.

‘Sure are,’ said Old Jeb. ‘I’ve been watching through my infras.’

‘Do you think it’s about me not wanting to bomb London?’ asked Stebby.

‘Could be. Just have to face up to it, Stebby. You’d better get going. Good Luck. I’ll be thinking of you.’

‘Thanks, Jeb’

Stebby drew up in front of the President’s cavalcade, snapped up a smart salute and said, ‘Mr. President. General. Ma’am. Miss. Flyer Stebworth reporting.’

‘This is the flyer we spoke of, Mr. President,’ said the General.

‘Stebworth,’ said the President, looking fierce, ‘You do realise that a Stealth Bomber that disobeys an order is a very big problem for me, as President of our country and Commander in Chief of the Defense Strategy.’ Stebby’s heart sank. He was in real trouble. And he felt very bad about disobeying the order. But he knew he could not bomb London after all he had read about it. He wished he could hide under a rock.

‘Yes sir, Mr. President,’ said Stebby.

‘So what have you got to say for yourself?’ demanded the President. Stebby felt terrible. How could he explain it? But the President was not waiting for a reply. He carried on speaking.

‘What if I - and the General here - ordered you to do something dangerous. Something extremely dangerous. But that did not involve bombing cities. What would you do?’ asked the President.

‘Well, sir...’ said Stebby, swallowing. The President and the General watched him with stern expressions on their faces.

‘Well, Mr. President. I would do it immediately,’ said Stebby, ‘Just try me, sir. Mr. President. Just give me the order. With the General’s permission. Sir.’ The President and the General relaxed. The President’s wife smiled. Joanna’s eyes sparkled.

‘Stebworth,’ said the President. ‘What we’re asking you to do is of the most crucial importance to our country.’ And he explained the situation.

Within one hour Stebby had told Old Jeb all about his interview with the President, had refuelled, and had been loaded with the biggest bomb in the country. He was ready to fly to the Atlantic Ocean and the nastiest cyclone ever seen. Which was getting bigger and closer all the time.

‘Good luck, Stebworth,’ said the President.

‘Good luck, son,’ said the General.

‘Proud of you, Stebby,’ said Old Jeb, over the intercom. They all waved as Stebby

whooshed up into the sky and above the clouds. Stebby could see Joanna waving a stick with the country's flag on it.

Stebby's speed was phenomenal and in no time at all he had located the cyclone. He looked down on it. It was huge, swirling about, all cloud and rain and howling winds, stretching from the waves of the sea right up to the clouds, and very wide.

'Target located,' reported Stebby to the Control Tower on the airfield. Then he slowly began his descent into the middle - the epicentre - of the cyclone. Visibility was zero and Stebby had to rely upon his computer controls. He wanted to make sure that he dropped the bomb right in the middle, and that it would fall straight to the centre of the cyclone. The walls of the cyclone surrounded him and he could see nothing above him except greyness. He prepared to release the bomb. He knew that as soon as it left the bomb-bay, he would have to go straight into maximum lift and maximum speed to escape. He pressed the trigger and the bomb dropped away. He operated the maximum lift and maximum speed levers. He went straight up out of the cyclone with a terrific roar. Below, the bomb exploded in the very centre of the cyclone. The cyclone became a furious maelstrom of water and noise. Stebby didn't look back - he had to get away fast.

The cyclone expanded, the waves of the ocean broiled around and then the cyclone leapt up in a crashing and smashing of water, higher and higher, until it seemed to be trying to catch Stebby as he flew upwards at terrific speed. Stebby turned on one wing and veered out of the way, still at maximum speed, just as the cyclone soared within a few feet of him. And then it collapsed. It fell back into the ocean, the waves subsided, the wind subsided, the cyclone was gone. Stebby flew home, feeling hungry.

While Stebby was flying back, the President suddenly noticed Old Jeb at the edge of the airfield.

'Hey!' he exclaimed. 'I know that craft.' And he drove himself over to Old Jeb.

'Hi, old-timer,' he said.

'Hello, Mr. President,' said Old Jeb. 'It's been a long time.'

'Yeah, too long,' said the President.

'But you have the most demanding job of all, sir,' said Old Jeb.

'You're right there, Jeb,' agreed the President. 'Different from the old days, huh?'

And they settled down and had a good talk about the time when the President, then a young naval officer, served with Old Jeb on the oceans of the world. Later, they talked a lot about Defense matters and such.

When Stebby arrived home, he was given a hero's welcome and the highest medal his country could award for bravery. The President took him on one side and said, 'Son, I thought you'd like to know that Jeb and I have been talking about how we did things in the old days. And I'm going to change our Defense Strategy. In a way I think would have your approval.'

