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# THE **AMERICAN EAGLES**



BRITISH  
9.<sup>d</sup>  
EDITION

WINTER



**THRILLS  
IN THE  
AIR**  
*By* JACK  
KOFOED

THE GOOSE *Flies* SOUTH  
*A Turk Madden Novelet*  
*By* LOUIS L'AMOUR

**FLIGHT TO FATE**  
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*By* ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN

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# THRILLING AIR STORIES

# AMERICAN

# EAGLES

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Vol. II, No. 11. (British Edition)

Winter 1947

## *A Turk Madden Novelet*

### THE GOOSE FLIES SOUTH

By LOUIS L'AMOUR

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*All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.*

# THE GOOSE FLIES

*When an atomic bomb menace flares up in the Argentine, an intrepid flyer braves powerful enemies and evil treachery as he takes off on a peril-packed mission for Uncle Sam!*

## CHAPTER I.

### HEART OF THE ANDES.

STEADILY the motors were droning away, in the thin upper air. "If I was a betting man," Panola said grimly, "I'd give ten to one we never get out of this alive!"

"You asked for it!" Captain Runnels replied dryly. "This is strictly volunteer stuff. You could have ducked it."

"Sure," Panola shrugged. "But who wants to duck a job like this? I asked for it, but I'm not dumb!"

Turk Madden eased forward on the stick and felt the Goose let her nose down. In the heavy, cottony mass of cloud you could see less than nothing. Letting her down was taking a real chance, but they were almost at their destination, and they would soon be ready to land.

There were a lot of jagged peaks here, many of them running upwards of two thousand feet. He was already below that level and no sign of an opening to the world below.

The Goose dipped out of the clouds suddenly, and with a rush. A huge, craggy and black mountainside towered above them. Turk whipped the Grumman over in a steep bank, and swung away from the cliff, missing it by inches. He glanced at Winkler as the ship flattened out. The Major's face was a sickly yellow.

"Close, that!" he said grimly.

"It was," Turk grinned. "You don't see 'em much closer."

He glanced over his shoulder. Runnels and Panola looked scared, but Shan Bao, his mechanic and right hand man, a tall Manchu, seemed undisturbed. Death itself meant little to the Manchu.

"How much further?" Runnels asked, leaning forward.

"Not far. We just sighted Mount Stokes, so it'll be just a few minutes."

"Let's hope the place is empty," Panola said. "We'd be in a spot if some ship was lying there."

"It's pretty safe," Turk said. "Nothing down here to speak of, and even less back

inland. All this section of the Argentine and Chile is wild and lonely. South, it gets even worse."

It was a cold, bleak, and barren country, sullen and dreary under the heavy gray overcast. Great craggy peaks lifted into the low clouds, and below there were occasional inlets, most of them edged with angry foam. Some of the mountains were covered with trees, and in places the forest came down to the water's edge. In other places there were only bleak plains, wind blown and rain whipped.

Then suddenly he saw the mountain, a huge, black, domelike peak that shouldered into the clouds.

"That's the Dome of St. Paul," he said, looking over at Winkler. "San Esteban Gulf is right close by."

He swung the plane inland, skirting the long sandy beach on which a furious surf was breaking, sighted San Quentin Bay with its thickly wooded shores, and then swung across toward the mouth of the San Tadeo River.

The land about the river mouth was low and marshy and covered with stumps of dead trees, some of them truly gigantic in size. Inside the mouth of the river it widened to considerable breadth, and something like seven miles up, it divided into two rivers. Turk swung the ship up the course of the Black River, flying low. The stream was choked with the trunks of dead trees, and huge roots that thrust themselves out of the water like the legs of gigantic spiders.

A few miles further, and then he swung inland above a barely discernible brook, and then eased forward on the stick and let the amphibian come down on the smooth surface of the small lake. He taxied across toward a cove lined with heavy timber, and then let the ship swing around as he dropped the anchor in comparative shelter.

"Wow!" Panola shook his head, and grinned at Turk as the latter peeled off his flying helmet. "How you ever remembered this place is beyond me! How long since you were here?"

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AN EXCITING TURK MADDEN NOVELET

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# SOUTH

By LOUIS L'AMOUR

"Twelve years," Madden replied. "I was a kid then, just going to sea. Incidentally, from here on we'd better go armed. I'm just giving you a tip, although of course, that's up to Major Winkler."

"We'll go armed," Winkler said. "And as all of you know, we can't take any chances on being found. We've got to get this plane under cover and stay there ourselves as much as possible. If we were caught here, there's not a chance we'd get out of this alive."

Turk watched Shan Bao getting out the rubber boat, and then turned his gaze toward the mainland. The amphibian lay in a small cove, excellently sheltered on all sides. The entrance to the cove from the small lake was an S shaped waterway, ending in a pool. The pool was surrounded on all sides by a heavy growth of timber. It was a mixture of fir, pine, and occasional beech trees. The beach was sandy, and littered with washed up roots and trunks of old trees.

There was no sign of life of any kind. And that was as it should be. Not over two dozen men on earth knew that here, off the coast of Patagonia, was to be another experiment with an atomic bomb. An experiment kept secret from the world, and of which no American from the North, no Englishman, and no Russian was to know. It was an experiment being made by a few desperate and skillful German scientists and military men, working with power mad militarists of the Argentine.

Turk Madden, soldier of fortune, adventurer, and later officer in the Military Intelligence, was flying his own plane, a special built Grumman Goose with a number of improvements, and a greater armament and flying range than the ordinary Goose. The trip was in command of Major Winkler, and with them were Captain Runnels and Lieut. Panola, a recently discharged officer.

Runnels and Winkler were both skilled atomic specialists. Panola was the record man whose task it would be to compile and keep the records of the trip and of the secret experiments, if they were able to observe them. Shan Bao, the Manchu, was Madden's own Man Friday, a hard-bitten North China fighter whom Turk had met in Siberia.

Turk, Winkler and Runnels went ashore first.

"We've got to set up a shelter," Winkler suggested. "And the sooner the better, as it may rain. What would you

suggest, Madden? You've had more of this sort of experience than I."

"Back in the woods," he said instantly. "Find four living trees for the corner posts. Clear out under them and build walls of some of these dead logs we see around. If we cut trees, the white blaze of the cut will be visible from the air. You can spot 'em for miles in the right light. But there's enough brush here, and we shouldn't have to cut anything except under the four trees."

The place he selected was four huge trees with wide spreading branches near a huge, rocky outcropping. There was nothing but brush between the trees, and it was a matter of minutes for the five men to clear it away. Then they began hauling up logs from the beach. Several of them were large enough to split into four timbers. By nightfall they had the walls erected and a peaked roof of interwoven boughs with fir limbs covering it. All was safely under the spreading branches of the trees.

Turk paced the beach restlessly, and his eyes studied the low hanging clouds. The whole thing had been too easy, and he was worried. The ship that had brought them south had heaved to on a leaden sea and the amphibian had been put into the water. Then, with their equipment and supplies aboard, they had taken off. The whole process, planned and carefully rehearsed, had taken them no more than minutes.

On the flight to the mainland they had seen no one, no ship, no boat, nothing remotely human. Yet even on this lonely shore, it seemed too easy.

It was miles to the nearest port. The country inland was wild and broken, no country for a man to live in. Yet here and there were Patagonian savages, he knew. And there might be others. Knowing the cold-blooded ruthless tactics of his enemy, and their thoroughness, he could not but doubt.

When the logs had been moved from the beach, he carefully picked up any chips and covered the places where they had laid with as much skill as possible.

A spring flowed from the rock outcropping near the house they had built. They could reach it without going into the open. They had food enough, although he knew there had once been a few deer in the vicinity. Otherwise, there would be nothing except occasional sea birds, and perhaps a hair seal or two.

Runnels, a heavy-set, brown-faced man who had been working with atomic scientists for ten years, walked toward him.

"Beastly lonely place, isn't it? Reminds me of the Arctic. I hunted in Dawson once."

Madden nodded. "Seems too good to be true," he said thoughtfully, "I smell trouble!"

"You're pessimistic!" Runnels said. His face grew serious. "Well, if it comes we can't do a thing but take it. We're on our own. They told us if we got caught, we couldn't expect any help from home."

"What's the dope on this experiment?" Turk asked. "I don't know much about it."

"They've got two old German war-ships. Ships that got away before the rest were surrendered. They are in bad shape, but good enough for the experiment. They are going to try sinking them with an atomic bomb about two hundred miles off shore. Then, they are going to try an experiment inland, back in the waste of the plains.

"Our job is not to interfere, only to get information on the results so we can try a comparison with our own."

Turk Madden nodded. He had his own orders. He had been told to obey orders from Winkler up to a point, beyond that his own judgment counted most as he was the most experienced at this sort of thing. Also, if it were possible, he was to try to destroy whatever equipment or bombs they had. But that was his own job, and was to be done with utmost skill, and entirely without giving away his presence or that of his party.

A difficult, almost impossible mission, but one that could be done. After all, he had blown bridges right under the noses of the Japs. This could scarcely be more difficult.

He walked toward the ridge, and keeping under the trees, climbed slowly toward the top. Now was the time to get acquainted with the country. There was one infallible rule for warfare or struggle of any kind—know your terrain—and he intended to know this.

There were no paths, but he found a way toward the top along a broken ledge, a route that he noticed was not visible from below, if the traveler would but move with reasonable care to avoid being seen. There were broken slabs of rock, and much undergrowth.

He was half way up before the path became difficult, and then he used his hands to pull himself from hand hold to

hand hold. Yet, before he had reached the top, he slipped suddenly, and began to slide downward with rapidly increasing momentum.

Below him was a cliff which he had skirted. Wildly, his hand shot out to stay his fall. It closed upon a bush, and—held.

Slowly, carefully, fearful at each instant that the bush would come loose at the roots, he pulled himself up until he had a foothold. Then a spot of blackness arrested his eye. It was a hole.

Moving carefully, to get a better view, he found it was a small hole in the rock, a spot scarcely large enough to admit a man's body. Taking out his flashlight, he thrust his arm inside, and gasped with surprise.

Instead of a small hole, it was a large cavern, a room of rock bigger than the shelter below, and with a black hole leading off into dimness beyond the reach of his light.

Thoughtfully, he withdrew his arm. Turning his head, he looked below. He could see the pool where the plane was, and he could see the lake. But he was not visible from the shelter. Nor, if he remained still, could be seen from below.

He pulled himself higher and began once more to climb. Why, he did not know, but suddenly he decided he would say nothing of the cave. Later, perhaps. But not now.

## CHAPTER II.

### HIDDEN ENEMY.

WHEN Madden reached the crest of the hill he did not stand up. He had pulled himself over the rim and was lying face down. Carefully, he inched along the ground until he was behind a large bush. He rose to his knees and carefully brushed off his clothes. Then he looked.

He was gazing over a wide, inland valley. About two miles away was another chain of hills still higher. The valley itself led away inland, a wide sweep with a small stream flowing through it. A stream that was obviously a tributary leading to the Rio Negro.

North along the coast were great, massive headlands, brutal shoulders of rock of a gloomy grandeur but rarely seen elsewhere. The hills where there was soil were covered with evergreens and with antarctic beeches in thick growth.

Under those trees moss grew heavy, so thick and heavy that one could sink knee deep into it, and there was thick under-

Baron  
von  
Walrath



Still holding the smoking gun in his hand, Turk Madden hurled himself through the window

growth also. Yet, a knowing man could move swiftly even in that incredible tangle.

Turk started down the ridge upon which he had lain, sure now that nobody was in sight. Indeed, there was scarcely a chance that a man had been in this area in months, if not in years. He walked swiftly, headed for a promontory not far away where he might have a better view up the coast.

He had dropped from a rocky ledge and turned around a huge boulder when he saw something that brought him up short. For a instant, his eyes swept the area before him, a small, flat plain leading to the foot of the bluff toward which he had been going. There was nothing. Nothing now. Yet there upon the turf of the plain were the clear, unmistakable tracks of wheels!

Turk walked swiftly to the tracks, yet careful to step on stones, of which there were plenty, and thus leave no track himself. Then he stopped, staring at the tracks.

A plane. A fighter craft by the distance between the tires, and the weight as indicated by the impression left on the turf. If not a fighter, then a small plane, heavily loaded. More likely, a fighter. The landing here would not be bad.

Yet why here?

Carefully, and with infinite skill, he began to skirt the plain, examining every nook, every corner. Finally, he found a dead fire. He touched his hand to the ashes. There was, he thought, a bare suggestion of warmth.

He looked around at the camp site. Someone had stopped here, picked up wood, and built the fire. They had warmed a lunch, eaten, and then flown away.

Four small logs had been placed side by side, and the fire built upon them, thus the fire was kept off the damp ground. One of the men, and there had been two, had known something. He was a woodsman. At least, he was not unfamiliar with the wilds. That meant even more care must be exercised.

He shifted his carbine to his left hand and studied the scene thoughtfully. Was the visit here an accident? Had there been a mere forced landing? Or was it by intention?

Squatting on his haunches, he studied the ends of the sticks the fire had left unburned. Several of them were fresh, white and newly cut. But several were older, and yet as he dug into the bark

with his thumbnail, he saw they were still green.

It could mean but one thing. Someone had been here more than once. Someone had built a fire here before. Turning, he walked back to the tracks, and working carefully, he moved across the plain. He found two more sets of tracks.

So that was it. A patrol plane. A plane that flew along this bit of coast, stopped here occasionally while the pilot and his companion cooked and ate a warm meal, probably loafed awhile, and then took off again.

It meant more than that. It meant the Americans had slipped in but a short time after the patrol plane had left. That the fact they were alive at all was due to the fact that Turk Madden had touched the coast south of the San Tadeo River. Had he come right in over the coast they would have met the fighter plane! Or have missed it by the narrowest of margins!

Turk turned quickly, but even as he turned, something whipped by his face and hit the tree behind him with a *thud!*

Madden hit the ground all in one piece and rolled into the brush. Instantly, he was on his hands and knees and crawling. He made a dozen yards to the right before he stopped behind the trunk of a huge beech and stared out across the open.

Almost at once there were four more quick shots. Four shots evenly spaced and timed, and Turk heard one of them clip through the trees on his left, and the second flipped by him so close that he dropped flat and hugged the ground, his face white and his spine chilled by the close escape.

The other two shots clipped through the woods some distance off.

"Smart guy, eh?" Turk snarled. "Two shots evenly spaced on each side of where I hit the brush! You're not so dumb!"

Straightening up, he stood behind the tree and studied the situation. It was late, and it was cloudy. By the time he had skirted the plain it would be pitch dark, and he could find no tracks, while he was certain to make some noise and the chances of his being shot, if his assailant waited, would be great.

Walking back over the country between the campfire and the hidden base, he scowled over the problem. Who could be in the vicinity? Had one of the men with the plane remained behind? But if so, why? That didn't make sense, for

even if the enemy were expecting something of the kind. They would never expect it right here. Quite obviously, the entire coast was patrolled, probably as much against their own people, if any, as against foreigners.

If some one had remained behind in that vast and lonely country it could mean but one thing: they had been betrayed.

And if it wasn't a stranger, it could be only one of the men of his own party! Yet, if so, why shoot? They were anxious to keep their presence concealed. Could there be a traitor in his own group?

When he stepped through the door into the shelter under the trees, they were all there. Shan Bao was stewing something in a kettle over the fire. He glanced up, but said nothing.

Runnels grinned at him. "Well, we beat you back, but not by very long!"

Turk looked at him for a moment. "You were out, too?"

"Yeah, all of us. We decided it was as good a time as any to have a look around. We just got back. I went south along the river. Nothing down there."

"I didn't find anything either," Panola said. "Not a thing but some marshy, wet country."

"That seems to be the consensus," Winkler agreed. "Nothing around."

"I wouldn't say that," Turk said slowly. Was there a traitor in the crowd? There was no telling—now. They had each gone a separate way. "I found plenty!"

Winkler got up, frowning. "You found something? What?"

"The tracks of a patrol plane—a fighter. Evidently this region is carefully patrolled. The plane lands over in a little plain across the ridge. It has landed there more than once."

"How could you tell that?" Panola demanded.

"By the tracks. Also by the ends of the sticks used to make a fire. A good woodsman," he added, and he knew if there was a guilty man here he would sense added meaning in what he said, "can read a lot of things where the average man can see nothing."

Turk Madden sat down suddenly. He was mad all through. Maybe one of them had taken a shot at him, but if he had, there was no way to prove it. He would just have to wait. He felt the weight of the .45 automatic in his shoulder holster, and he liked the feel of it.

Winkler stared thoughtfully into the

fire. "So they are patrolling the coast? That means we've got to go very slow."

"Well," Panola suggested, "the attack comes off in three days. When the plane comes back, let's knock him off. It would be at least two days before they'd be able to get down to investigate, and by that time, we'd be gone."

"Why two days?" Runnels asked. "They might have a radio on that ship. Probably have, in fact."

"Even so, I doubt if there would be any search organized for a couple of days. You know how bad the storms are down here. It would be all too easy for a plane to get caught in one of those terrific blasts of wind."

"It won't do," Winkler said. "We've got to keep out of sight."

"That's right," Runnels said. "Our job is not to bother with these fellows. We're to get our information and get out, and if we can do it without them having even a suspicion, so much the better."

"Well, the first thing will be for nobody to do any wandering about," Winkler said. "If we do, we'll be seen. So everybody sticks this side of the ridge and keeps under the trees. We've got the plane camouflaged, so that won't have to be worried about."

That made sense. And yet? Suppose Winkler was the one? Suppose it was also a method of keeping them from finding anything more? And what about Panola?

"As though we were at the end of the world here," Runnels remarked. "Everything still as death except for that wind. A man would starve to death if lost on this shore."

"Yeah, and we're not so far as the crow flies from Buenos Aires. And what a town that is!"

"Have you been there?" Turk asked. "I thought I was the only one who knew South America?"

"Been there?" Panola grinned. "Shucks, man, I lived there for three years! Runnels has been here, too! Weren't you here during the war?"

"Uh-huh. I was on duty as Military Attaché for a couple of months."

Turk ate in silence. So Panola and Runnels had both been to the Argentine? It was easy to be influenced by all that wealth and glitter. The sixteen families or so that dictated the life in the Argentine could entertain very beautifully. Perhaps one, or both, of two men had been influenced? Persuaded?

Morning came, and he went down to the ship. Shan Bao joined him after a

few minutes. He looked thoughtfully at the Manchu, then glanced around to make sure no one heard him.

"You keep your eyes open, Shan," he said softly. "You savvy? You watch everybody. Anybody do anything wrong, you tell me."

He was working over the plane when he saw Hunnels and Winkler come out of the shelter. Turk turned and swung ashore. Panola was taking some weather observations, checking his instruments atop the ridge. It was as good an idea as any.

Stepping quickly over the logs, he got to the shack. None of the men had taken their carbines, and he picked up the nearest one, that of Winkler. A quick examination showed it clean. Runnel's checked the same. Then he picked up Panola's carbine. A quick glance into the barrel.

It had been fired.

Panola.

Turk went back outside and returned to the plane, his mind rehashing everything he could remember on Panola. All of them had been checked very thoroughly by the F.B.I., yet something had been missed.

Panola was of Italian parentage. He had been born in Brooklyn, raised there, had gone to college, and his war record had been excellent. He knew nothing beyond that, that and the fact that Panola had lived in Buenos Aires for three years some time during this period.

Another thing remained. How had Panola, if he was the marksman, returned to the shelter so quickly the night before? There must be another route than that over the ridge.

"I think," he said musingly, "a little trip around by plane would do more good than anything else!"

Major Winkler was coming down through the trees.

"Major," he said, when the tall, narrow faced man had come closer, "I think I'll take a cruise around. This country needs some looking over."

"You think it's wise?" Winkler asked thoughtfully. "Well, go ahead, but be careful!"

A half hour later, when Turk taxied the ship out from under the overhanging trees and the camouflaged shelter built for the plane, Shan Bao was ashore. Madden turned the ship down the pool and after a run, lifted it into the air, banked steeply, and swung away up the coast.

After a few minutes he lifted the

plane into the mists under the clouds. As he swung back and forth up the coast, he studied the terrain below. Suddenly, he saw a house!

It was a huge, gray stone building, back of a little cove with a black sand beach. A yacht was anchored in the cove, and a motor launch was at the small wharf. Easing back on the controls, he shot the amphibian into the clouds. Out of sight.

There was a chance he had not been seen, not recognized, as at the moment he had passed over the cove, the mists through which he had flown were thick.

He circled the ship higher, puzzling over the situation. That house was no more than five miles from their own base! Also, it was no more than three miles from where he had been fired upon! Could he have been wrong? Perhaps it wasn't one of his own crowd, but one of these people? And perhaps Panola was in the clear!

Turk scowled grimly and hunched his big shoulders. Then he turned the plane inland toward the Dome of St. Paul. Coming up to the mountain, he pulled back on the stick and climbed to get more altitude. He was still climbing when the fighter shot out of the clouds and came toward him with all her guns spouting flame!

Turk whipped away in a climbing turn. As the fighter shot beneath him, he fell away and let go with a burst at its tail assembly. Evidently he missed, for the fighter whipped around and came back at him!

### CHAPTER III.

#### CORNERED.

FLYING like a wild man, Turk put the amphibian through everything he knew, and suddenly made a break and got away into the heavy gray clouds. It was a momentary respite only, for he knew now that he dared not let the plane return to its base. Yet in a fight with a ship of that caliber, he would have no chance.

The other pilot was obviously not used to fighting, for he had missed several good chances that no member of the Luftwaffe would have missed, or a Jap, either. Turk swung around and dropped back toward the mountain, and then, suddenly he sighted the fighter again.

They saw each other at almost the same instant, but even as they sighted each other, Turk whipped over and dived

straight for the rounded top of the Dome!

And behind him, the wind screaming in its wings, came the fighter! Desperate, Turk was remembering something from his own experience, a stunt he had tried long before, in the South Pacific. He was remembering, too, that curious gap in the trees atop the Dome. Heading straight for the Dome in a wild, desperate dive, he saw tracers streaming by him, and then he whipped over and cut through that gap in the trees!

A few yards in either direction and he would have crashed into the trees, and as it was, he cleared the top of the dome by no more than four or five feet! Then, behind him, came a crash!

He took the stick back and reached for altitude, then glanced to the rear and down. A cone of leaping flame was mounting toward the sky, and he could see something he took to be the pilot's lifeless body, lying off to one side.

Thoughtfully, he turned toward home, flying high into the heavy clouds. If they searched, and they probably would, they would find the wreckage. A cursory examination would show only that the plane had crashed, and they might accept it as an accident.

Yet, if they examined closely what wreckage there was left, and one wing, at least, had fallen clear of the flames, they might find bullet holes. Still, the chances were he had missed. For the first time in his life, he found himself hoping he had missed.

He was gliding in for a landing on the pool when he saw the path, a dim trail along the rocky edge of the brook leading from the river. A path that would be a short cut to the house on the cove!

When Turk Madden put the plane down he was worried. He got up from the pilot's seat and swore swiftly. Then he slid the Colt from its shoulder holster and checked the magazine. It was ready. "I think," he said softly, "I'm going to need a gun!"

Shan Bao came out in the rubber boat and took him ashore, after which he left Shan the job of snugging the ship down and checking her.

Runnels looked up when Turk walked in, then his eyes sharpened. "What happened?"

"That fighter showed up. I tricked him into a crash on top of the Dome!" Turk spoke quietly, but even as he spoke he was trying to see all their expressions at once.

Panola wet his lips slowly. "Then they

know we're here. Or they will. That doesn't leave us much chance, does it?"

"Maybe they won't know," Turk suggested.

"What would prevent them?" Winkler demanded. His long, lantern jawed face had sharpened with worry. "My heavens, man! They aren't that dumb."

"If they actually send somebody to the top of the dome to check, I doubt if he'll find evidence of anything except a crash. They'll think he collided with the peak in a cloud. I doubt if he has any bullet holes."

"They may check his guns," Winkler suggested. "Had you thought of that?"

"I hadn't," Turk said. "But if they do, guns often fire in flames, and I doubt if there will be much left to examine. There was gasoline over everything."

"I'd say you were lucky, mighty lucky!" Runnels said. "Great stuff, old man!"

Then he told them of the yacht and the house. They watched his face curiously, but it was Winkler who seemed most worried. He paced the room thoughtfully.

"This thing scares me," he said. "They might find us!"

It was just daylight when Turk Madden slipped from the cabin. He took his carbine, and went toward the Goose, then turned away among the trees and started for the trail that led along the creek, the trail seen from the plane.

This was it. He could sense the building up of forces around him, could sense an intangible danger. Someone in his own group, he felt sure, was a traitor. It could be Panola, and yet, it might be either of the others. Winkler had been a good leader, and Turk could understand his natural worry. The atomic explosion was to be tomorrow, and if it was to be witnessed and checked, everything must move smoothly and easily. The explosion, unless the time was changed, of which they would be informed, would be at ten in the morning.

Panola was to remain here. Winkler, Runnels and himself would fly to the vicinity, taking advantage of the cloud cover. Then, just before ten, the explosion. They would drop through, make their check when the explosion occurred, and get away—if possible.

He knew what was at stake. The Fascists in the Argentine were strong, and they had been increased by refugees from Germany. More than one worker with atomic science had escaped to Buenos Aires and they had been joined by others. There were rumors of money being sent

to them from the north to aid the experiments by those interested in the commercial application of atomic power.

The experiments were strictly hush hush. Even the Argentine Government was supposed to know nothing about them. The presence of a North American here—well, Turk Madden knew the men he was working against.

Baron von Walrath, one of the shrewdest operatives in the former German military intelligence; Walther Rathow, atomic scientist and militarist; Wilhelm Messner, of the Gestapo, and Miguel Farales, of the Argentine military intelligence.

Yet they had seen none of these men. The patrol of the coast was apparently purely routine. The whole affair had moved so perfectly that he had become suspicious. And the next few hours would tell the story.

Hurrying, he worked along the trail, then rounding a fallen log, he saw there in the soft earth, the mark of a boot! The shape was not distinct in the moss, but the heel print was plain. It could have been made no earlier than the night before.

As he continued along the trail, Turk watched carefully, and found several more foot prints, but none was distinct. Yet someone had left their camp, or the vicinity of it, and had come over this trail. Then almost at the plain where he had seen the tracks of the fighter plane, he saw a double foot print. They were apparently of the same foot, and the second one was superimposed on the first, and that second track pointed toward camp! The man had come from the camp, and returned to it!

Following the footprints, he reached the dead campfire. The man he had followed had come this far. He had waited, he had smoked several cigarettes, and then he had returned the way he had come. He waited here—for the patrol plane!

Leaving the plain, Madden crossed by way of the woods to the range of hills beyond, stepped through the woods carefully toward the cove. He could see the cold water lapping on the gravel beach and he could hear the bump of the launch hull against the small pier.

Then he leaned forward to peer at the gray house. He leaned forward still further, and put a foot out to balance himself. A branch under his foot cracked like a pistol shot, and he jerked back.

Then something struck him on the head, and as he toppled forward he heard a pistol shot ringing in his ears!

He opened his eyes and saw a hardwood floor, then blood. His own blood. He closed his eyes against the throb of his head, and tried to place himself, to remember what had happened.

"Hang it, Stock," a voice was saying in English, "why did you have to shoot the man? Couldn't you get the drop on him and bring him in?"

"That guy's Turk Madden!" another voice said. "I'd know him anywhere. If you ask me, you better kill him. You leave him alive and you're borrowin' trouble. I knew him in China, and the guy is poison."

"Thanks, Pal!" Turk told himself mentally, "but I don't feel very much like poison right now."

"We've got to keep him alive!" The first voice was crisp and hard. "We must keep him alive until we know where they are. Messner was to have communicated with us as soon as they landed. They aren't far from here, we know that, and he has the patrol plane stops. One of them is sure to be close to where they will be."

"Perhaps, Baron," said a third voice, suave and smooth, "we can make Madden talk. Timeo has convincing methods."

"Not a chance!" Madden rolled over and sat up. His fingers touched his scalp gingerly. The bullet had cut a neat furrow along the right side of his head. He looked up. "Unless there's some money in it."

He glanced up at the three men. Stock would be the big man with the flat face. The man seated in the chair with the smoothly shaven face and the monocle could be no one but a German. That would be von Walrath. And the other was Latin. Probably Farales.

"Money?" Farales leaned closer. "Why should we pay you money? You have nothing we want."

"Maybe yes, and again, maybe not." Turk swallowed. "How about a drink? I'm allergic to bullets. They make me thirsty."

At a motion from Farales, Stock poured a drink and handed it to Madden. He tossed it off, shook his head, and then got slowly to his feet. There was an empty chair, and he fell back into it.

"I'm a business man," he said then. "I'm not in this for my health. If you guys have got a better offer, trot it out."

He was stalling for time, stalling and watching. Somehow, he had to get out of here, somehow he had to block Messner, whoever he was. Certainly, one of the

three men at camp was Messner, formerly of the Gestapo. To think that such a man could be in an American unit, on such a mission. But the man was there. Turk was under no illusions about stopping him. There would be only one way now.

"Who sent you here?" von Walrath demanded. "From what office do you work?"

"Office?" Turk shrugged. He took out a cigarette and put it between his lips. "I work for Turk Madden. I'm in this for myself. I'm goin' to get all the dope I can, and sell to the highest bidder."

"The United States?" Farales asked gently. He was studying Turk through narrowed eyes. "Why should they pay? They already know."

"Do they?" Madden shrugged again. "But you may find out something they won't know. Also, they may want to know how much you know."

"And that's why you're here. To find out how much we know. That's why your government sent you here." Farales voice was silky.

"My government?" Turk raised an eyebrow. "What is my government? I fought for China before I fought for the United States. I fought for them because they paid me well, and because I like the winning side. They were a cinch to win."

Von Walrath's eyes were cold. "Then you did not believe we Germans could win? The greatest military power on earth?"

Madden chuckled. "Why the greatest? Who did you ever lick? Nobody I can remember except a lot of little countries who never had a war. It's like Joe Louis punching a lot of guys who ride a subway. Anybody can lick an average guy if he's got some stuff. Germany was ready for war, the other countries weren't. Germany never whipped a major power who was even half ready for war."

"No?" Von Walrath sat up stiffly. "And why did we lose this one?"

"Mainly because you never had a chance." Turk warmed to his subject. "Any war can be figured on paper before it begins. You didn't have the natural resources. You were cut off from the countries that had them. You didn't have the industry."

"Next time," von Walrath replied coolly, "we won't need it. Atomic bombs change everything."

"That's right. The smallest nation has a chance now."

"Even," Farales suggested, "Argentina."

Von Walrath stood up suddenly.

"Where is your plane now?" he demanded.

"Around," Madden rested his elbows on his knees. His .45 was lying on the table not a dozen feet away. "Supposing we make a deal. You slip me a chunk of dough, and I keep my plane out of this? Your man Messner can't keep it out. I can."

"And why can't Messner keep it out?" Farales demanded.

"First place," Turk looked up from under his eyebrows. He had his feet drawn back and was on his toes now, "because he won't try. Why hasn't he communicated with you? I'll tell you why: because he hasn't any intention of it. Because he has another deal pending."

"You lie!" von Walrath hissed furiously. "I will vouch for Messner!"

Turk chuckled. "Listen, you guys. You're not so dumb. Who will pay most to get the atomic secret now? Who wants it worst? Not as a weapon, but just to make things more equal, to give herself more confidence. I ask you: who wants it? *Soviet Russia!*"

He lighted another cigarette. "What do you think they'd pay? A hundred thousand? Yes, and maybe more. Maybe a million. If a man had the secret, he could ask plenty, and get it! What can a poverty stricken Germany give Messner? What can even the Argentine give Messner? Would he get a million from them? From you? Not a chance! What can we give your friend Messner?"

Farales' sardonic black eyes lifted to von Walrath. "He speaks wisely, Señor. What can we give your friend Messner?"

"He lies." Von Walrath's eyes were blazing, yet Madden knew he had injected an element of doubt into the Prussian's mind. "Messner is loyal."

"Then why has he not communicated with us? He is days overdue." Farales looked at Madden. "How long have you been here?"

"We landed a week ago," he lied.

"A week, and still no word. How is this, Walrath?" Farales' voice was cold. "Four times in that week has our plane been at the prescribed places. And it cannot be far. This man walked."

"Wait until the plane comes today before you speak. Messner probably has been unable to get away."

Madden could see that the Baron was uncertain. "There will be word today."

"No," Turk said coolly, "there won't."

He had been stalling for time. Stock was across the room now, mixing a drink.

No one was near the table where the gun lay.

"What do you mean?" von Walrath demanded. "What makes you so sure?"

"Simply," Turk said—this was going to be close—"because your pilot is dead, and your patrol plane crashed. It's lying up there," he pointed suddenly toward the wide window and the Dome of St. Paul, "burned to a crisp!"

As he pointed, their heads almost automatically turned, and he was out of his chair and had made three steps before Farales swung and saw him. It was too late. Turk hurled himself at the table, grabbed the automatic and swung with his back to the table. Farales' shout brought a crash from Stock as he wheeled, dropping the glass and grabbing for his gun. Turk shot him in the stomach, and then wheeling, he hurled himself, shoulder first, through the window.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### DESPERATE CHANCES.

It was no more than six feet to the ground. The instant he hit he flattened against the building and ran along it close to the wall until he reached the end of the house.

The shore there was high, lifting in a straight bank at least ten feet above the shelving gravel beach. He jumped off the bank to the gravel, landed on his feet and fell back into a sitting position.

As he fell backward, he saw a man on the motor launch grab a rifle, and he blasted with the Colt from where he sat. The bullet hit the cabin of the boat and laced a white scar across its polished side. The man fell over, and then the glass crashed as the fellow thrust the rifle through a cabin port. Turk was on his feet then, but he wheeled and put two quick shots through that port, and then he was running.

He had made a dozen steps before a rifle cracked and a shot hit the rocks ahead of him and whined viciously away over the water. He zigged right, and then dodged back, and seeing a cut in the bank, dropped behind it just as several more shots struck nearby.

He paused just an instant, caught a quick breath, and then ran up the cut. Ahead of him it ended near a cliff and the forest came up to the foot of the cliff. Yet there he would have to dodge across twenty feet of open country before he could make the forest.

"That German is a shot, or I miss my

guess," Turk told himself. "He'll have his sights set on that open place, and I'm a dead pigeon!"

Yet even as he reached the end of the water cut, he saw there was a deep hollow, and another water drain that fell sharply away. The water that had made the deeper hole had fallen off a corner of the cliff around the shoulder. Perhaps he could get across.

A huge root thrust itself out, and, sticking his gun in its holster, he jumped. It was a terrific leap, but his hands just grasped the root, and he swung with all the impetus of his leap and hurled himself at the bank opposite.

He hit it, chest first, and grabbed wildly at the edge. Dust and rock cascaded into his face, and suddenly a rifle barked, and a shot smacked into the bank right between his clutching hands!

Frightened, he gave a mighty heave and hurled himself over the edge and rolled into the woods. A bullet clipped a tree over his head, and he scrambled to his feet and floundered away in the knee deep moss. Then he saw a fallen log and, leaping atop it, he ran its length, swung by a branch to another, and ran along it.

It wasn't going to be enough to get away. He had to lose them. Yet on one side was the plain, and if pushed into the open they would cut him down in an instant. On the other side was the river.

His breath was coming in great gasps, and his lungs cried out with pain at the effort. Yet he kept on, for speed meant everything now.

He had crossed a small clearing and was entering the woods along the river when suddenly another shot rang out, and he plunged head first into the soft, yielding moss. The shot had come from in *front* of him!

Turk Madden was mad. Suddenly, something had seemed to burst inside of him. The traitor, whoever he was, was up ahead, trying to kill him.

"All right!" Madden said suddenly, savagely, "if you want it you can have it!"

He slid the Colt into his hand. Four shots left. He felt in his pocket for the extra clip. Well, they hadn't taken that! Flat in the moss, he began to worm his way through the damp green softness, gun in hand, a fierce, leaping rage within him.

He crawled, and he felt the moss thinning. Was the watcher keeping an eye on him? This guy knew a thing or two, as he was the same one who had dusted

the brush so thoroughly on that first day. There was a crashing in the brush back the way he came. Wish he'd shoot some of his own men!

Another crash and then he could hear someone breathing hard. The man had stopped to stare around. Slowly, Turk gathered his knees under him, and then he straightened.

The man, a huge fellow with a blackish, greasy face, was not ten feet away!

As Turk arose, the fellow stared stupidly, then gave a gulp and jerked up the rifle. He was much too slow. Turk put a bullet through his heart, then sprang across the ten feet of space and grabbed the man's rifle. Then, without hesitating, he threw the rifle to his shoulder and dusted the woods, firing ten shots and spacing them neatly across the forest behind him.

Then he dropped the rifle, and plunged down to the gravel shore of the stream. For thirty minutes he twisted and turned in the woods, and then finally straightened out and headed for home. As he walked, he exchanged clips.

As he came up to the shelter, he found Shan Bao, a carbine in his hands, standing by the door.

"Where are the others?" Turk asked.

"Around. They all went out into the brush. Thought we might be attacked. Each one took a position." Shan Bao looked at Madden's head, and the blood. "You have had trouble," he said. "I hope you killed the man who did that."

Turk dug out a cigarette and lighted it. Then he looked at the Manchu.

"I don't know, Shan, but he's got one in the stomach he wishes he didn't have!"

Runnels came out of the woods. He looked flurried, and his eyes were narrow. He glanced at Turk's head.

"Looks like you had it tough!"

"Plenty!" Turk snapped. "Better get your gear aboard the plane. We're moving!"

"Moving?" he frowned. "Winkler won't like that. Better wait to see what he says. After all this is his show."

"Up to a point," Turk Madden replied shortly. "That happens to be my plane. Anyway, they came too close just now. They'll be back. We can't stay here?"

"And why shouldn't we stay here?" It was Major Winkler. His face was hot and his eyes looked angry. "I heard what you said, Madden, and we're staying, whether you like it or not."

"No," Turk replied shortly, "we're not. At least, I'm not. I'm taking my ship and getting out. I'm going back in the hills until tomorrow, back where we'll all be safe!"

"You'll stay right here." Winkler's carbine lifted, and Turk cursed himself for a fool. "You'll stay here, and like it. Panola, tie him up! This is mutiny. I'm in command here. We're in on danger, and we'll stay right here until tomorrow."

"I don't believe the gun is necessary, Major," Runnels protested. "Madden will stay."

"You bet he'll stay!" Winkler declared sharply. "I'll personally see that he stays. Tie him!"

Runnels looked at Panola, and the Italian shrugged, then he stepped forward and jerked Turk's hands behind him. Yet even as Panola tied his hands, Turk knew the officer was not tying him tight. Was it because he sympathized, or because he hoped he would try to escape, and be shot escaping?

Tied on his bed, Turk relaxed and lay quiet. How soon the Baron would find them, he couldn't guess. Obviously, it couldn't be long. The possible areas now were so limited, for they knew he had come from some place within walking distance, which meant no more than ten miles, or perhaps a bit more. It was rough, rugged country, but they would be looking.

Working a little, he loosened his ropes. Major Winkler had been lying down for several minutes now, and Runnels was sitting in the door.

Panola was nowhere in sight. Had he gone to warn von Walrath finally to make contact? Yet somehow, despite the apparently obvious evidence, Turk found himself doubting that Panola was the guilty man. But even that left only Runnels and Winkler, and Winkler was in command. He would be blamed for the success or failure of the effort.

Winkler got up suddenly and walked outside. He said something to Runnels about being nervous.

"Nothing must happen now," he muttered.

Turk lay still. His hands were free. Now where was Shan Bao? He drew his knees up and worked on the ropes on his ankles. Runnels still sat in the doorway. There was no sign of Panola or Major Winkler.

He put one foot down beside the cot, then turned carefully and sat up. Runnels had not moved. His head lay against

the door post, and he was apparently asleep. Turk got up and in two quick steps had crossed the room to his carbine.

He picked up a handful of extra clips and thrust them into his pockets. He retrieved his automatic, and more ammunition, then he stepped over to the back wall. In a few minutes he had worked his way through the branches and leaves of the shelter, and stood outside.

A shot rang out, and he heard a muffled curse, and then he saw men come streaming into camp. He had made it none too soon. He saw Runnels start up, and then go crashing down as he was struck by a gun butt. Then they charged inside, and he heard a shout as they failed to find him.

"And they knew where to look," Madden said viciously.

He moved swiftly through the darkness toward the cliff. He knew where he was going now. He needed shelter, and there was the cave above. He climbed swiftly, and found his way to the cave. For a while he had been afraid he would not be able to find it in the dark, but he did. Then he crawled in and lay still.

They were searching down below, and he heard the voice of von Walrath as well as that of Farales. Something had gone wrong, apparently something more than the fact that he was gone. They kept searching, then finally gave up. But they remained below. He was bottled up, unable to do a thing.

Where was Shan Bao? Had Runnels been killed? And what of the others? Unable to sit still, he turned on his flashlight, shielding it with his hand, and went to the back of the cave. It was a steep, winding passage, and he went down, walking swiftly. It took a sharp turn, and suddenly he realized it was going toward the shore of the pool!

There was dampness here, and occasional pools of water. He walked on, then feeling the air moving against his face, he proceeded more cautiously. It was a larger opening, almost concealed behind a fallen log. But he was looking over the pool—and there, not a dozen feet away, was the Goose!

How far had he walked? And what was the Goose doing here?

Considering, he realized he must have walked at least twenty minutes inside the cave. He could have come a mile, but probably it was no more than half that far. In his mind he ran his eye along the edge of the pool. Then he

knew. Somehow, some way, the Goose had been slipped away and hidden in this inlet at the extreme end of the pool.

It was only a delay, for with daylight they would find it with ease. And by daylight the Goose should be winging out to sea instead of lying here.

He crawled over the log, then moved ahead slowly, carefully. He was going to be aboard that plane or dead within the next few minutes. Suddenly, right ahead of him, something moved.

Turk froze. Then he saw a tall, lean form rise before him. Instantly, he grinned with relief. Shan Bao!

"Shan!" he whispered hoarsely, and saw the figure stiffen. Then the Manchu turned and beckoned.

"What is it?" Madden whispered as he came up. "How'd the plane get here!"

"Panola," Shan replied softly. "Panola and me."

"Panola?" Madden scowled. Then Panola wasn't the one. Crawling out along a log to the door of the ship, he puzzled over that. Then he slipped in. The Italian moved, and touched his arm.

"Madden? Man, I'm glad you're here! I can't fly this thing good enough. We towed her down here with the rubber boat. Maybe we can take off."

"We can!" Turk shifted his carbine. "Panola, who's the traitor, Runnels or Winkler?"

"I don't know," he shrugged. "You mean one of them isn't on the level?"

"That's right. And I thought it was you! You, because of your rifle. Somebody fired on me that first day, and your rifle was the only one fired that day."

Panola grabbed his arm.

"But Turk!" he said hoarsely. "I didn't have my own gun that day. I got another by mistake. Major Winkler had mine!"

"Major Winkler?" Turk's jaw set. "Then Winkler is Wilhelm Messner, the Gestapo agent!"

He turned sharply. "Panola, you stay with this ship. Stay with it and don't let anybody aboard but Shan or me. I'm going ashore."

"But what can you do?" Panola protested. "Only two of you?"

"Watch!" Turk snapped harshly. "Shan is worth a dozen. Watch, and you'll see how it's done. This isn't cricket, but it's business!"

He walked back to the gun case and took out a sub-machine gun, and slid in a magazine. He thrust three more in his belt. Then he went ashore. He went through the woods fast with Shan, also

armed with a sub-machine gun, following close behind.

There was no effort at concealment when he stepped up toward the shelter. His very carelessness made the guard relax. Turk stepped out of the brush, and saw the guard suddenly stiffen. Then he let out a low cry, and grabbed for his gun.

He never made it. Turk opened up with the tommy and cut him half in two with the first blast of fire. Men scrambled to their feet and the two men mowed them down. Leaping into the open, Turk felt a gun blast almost in his face, and then he shoved the tommy against the big man who lunged at him, and opened up.

The Baron charged from a door, gun spouting, and Turk Madden cut down on him and saw the blasting lead of the tommy almost smash his head to bits. The man went flat and rolled over, grabbing feebly at the earth, his hands helpless, his gun rattling on the rocks.

Then someone leaped from the shambles and made a dart for the outer darkness. It was Winkler!

Dropping his tommy-gun, Turk sprang after him. Plunging wildly through the brush, the man charged at the cliff and began a mad scramble up its surface with Turk close behind him.

## CHAPTER V.

### INTO THE SEA!

THEY met at the top, and Winkler, his features wolfish with fury, whirled to face him. He aimed a vicious kick at Turk's face as he came over the edge, but Turk ducked and grabbed his foot. His hold slipped, but it was enough to stagger Messner, and before the Gestapo man could get set, Turk Madden was on top.

In the darkness there on the brink of the cliff, they fought. Turk, sweating from his climb, leaped in for a kill, and Messner like a tiger at bay, struck out. His fist smashed Turk in the mouth, and Madden felt his lips smash and tasted blood, and something deep within him awakened and turned him utterly vicious. Toe to toe, the two big men slugged like madmen. There was no back step, no hesitation, no ducking or dodging. It was cruel and bitter and brutal. It was primeval in its fury.

Turk went down, and then he came up swinging, and Messner, triumph shining in his ugly eyes, smashed him down again, and leaped in to put the boots to

him. Turk rolled over and scrambled up, smashing Messner in the stomach with a wicked butt.

Staggering, the German couldn't get set before the furious onslaught of those iron fists. His face streaming blood, his nose a pulp where the bone had been crushed, he backed and backed.

Relentless, ruthless, Turk closed in. He ducked a left, and smashed a wicked right to the body. He felt the wind go out of the German, and he stepped in, hooked both hands to the head and then the body. He caught a long swing on his ear that made his head ring, but he was beyond pain, beyond fear, beyond doubt.

It was a fight to the death now, and he fought. He stepped under another swing and battered at the German's body with cruel punches. Then he straightened and whipped up a right uppercut that jerked the German's head back. Then a crushing left hook and as the German went to his knees he smashed him again in the face.

The man fell back, and then rolled over and got up. Turk started for him, and the man turned, gave a despairing cry, and sprang straight out from the cliff!

It was a sheer drop to the jagged rocks and upthrust roots and jagged dead branches below.

Turk stepped back, his chest heaving with effort, his eyes blind with sweat and blood. Then he turned, and slowly and with effort he walked back to the path, and went down to the shelter.

Runnels met him, a tommy-gun in his hands.

"Get him?" he asked.

Turk nodded. "Yeah." He glanced toward the east where the sky was beginning to lighten. "Shan, fix some coffee. Then we'll get the ship warmed up. We've got us a job to do."

"Madden," Panola said slowly, "I did some looking around myself. Rathow, the atomic scientist, and Miguel Farales are back at the house. The bomb that is to be dropped is there. One of them, anyway."

"You saw it?" Turk exclaimed, incredulously.

"I wired it," Panola said, grinning. "I wired the blasted thing." He added, then, "The other comes over the house about nine. It will be in a big bomber and guarded by a fighter plane. There will be another plane, a big passenger job, of scientists."

"Then that's our job!" Turk said.

"We've got to get the fighter. If we can knock out the fighter, the others are sitting pigeons." He turned to Panola. "How'd you wire that bomb?"

"The first person who slams the door on the back of the house will blow that whole cove into the mist," Panola replied grimly. "It isn't more than half the size of our Hiroshima bomb, though."

When Madden's amphibian took off, all were aboard. Turk Madden scowled at the sky, and his hard green eyes searched the horizon for the oncoming planes. They should be along soon. He reached for altitude, and squeezed the Goose against the low hanging clouds.

Getting a fighter was anything but simple, and he knew there was every chance it would end in failure. Of course, he could go ahead, observe the experiment, and return so they could report their findings.

Yet, if all could be destroyed, the experimenters who remained in Buenos Aires would be unsure of just what had happened, and where the mistake had been made. It would certainly slow up experimentation and increase uncertainty and fear.

Shan Bao saw them first. The Manchu leaned over and touched Turk on the shoulder, and gestured.

The bomber was flying at about six thousand feet, with the passenger plane and its observers on the right and a bit behind. For a moment the fighter eluded him, and then he saw it high against the sky, flying at probably nine thousand, his own level. He eased back on the stick and climbed, hoping with all his heart that the fighter pilot had not sighted him.

It would be touch and go now. There would be no such chance as with the other fighter, a few days before. He could not hope for such a thing twice. Even the maneuver was risky, and the chance of the pilot making a mistake was slight. The man in this ship would probably be tough and experienced. He had one chance in a million, and only one, that was to dive out of the clouds and get a burst into the fighter before he realized what had happened.

They were a good eight or ten miles from the house on the cove now. He leveled off at eleven thousand, thankful it wasn't as heavily overcast as usual, and watched the planes below him.

Suddenly, the Goose seemed to jump in the air. Startled, he looked at his instruments, and then a rolling wave of sound hit him and he jerked his head as

if struck, and at the same time the ship rolled heavily.

"Look!" Panola screamed, and following his outthrust arm and finger, they saw a gigantic column of smoke and debris lifting toward the sky!

"Somebody slammed a door!" Runnels said grimly.

Turk was jolted momentarily, and then suddenly, he saw his chance!

"Hold everything!" he yelled, and swung the ship over into a screaming dive.

The fighter had been jolted too, and the ships ahead were wavering. In the picture that flashed through his mind, Turk could see their doubt, their hesitation.

Something had happened. What? The bomb at the house had gone up, but how? Why? And their own bomber was carrying another bomb. Would there be enough radio activity at this distance to affect it? Who among them knew? After all, this was a new explosive, and how volatile it was they could not guess. And what had caused the other explosion? Might this one go, too?

The fighter pilot must have sensed something, or his roving eyes must have caught a glimpse of the plane shooting down on his tail. In a sudden, desperate effort, he pulled his fighter into a climbing turn, and it was the wrong thing.

Turk opened up with all his guns. Saw his tracers stream into the fighter's tail, saw the pursuit ship fall away, and then banking steeply, he sent a stream of tracer and steel, stabbing at the fighter's vitals like a white hot blade!

There was a sudden puff of smoke, a desperate effort as the fighter flopped over once and fired a final, despairing burst that streamed uselessly off into space. Then it rolled upside down, and, sheathed in flame, went screaming away down the thousands of feet toward the crags below.

The other ships must have seen the fighter go, for they split apart at once. One flying north, the other south. With a gleam in his eyes, Turk saw it was the bomber that turned south. "We got 'em!" he yelled. "This is the pay off!"

Runnels, his face deathly pale, touched his shoulder.

"Turk!" he yelled. "If you hit that bomb, we're done for!"

"Wait, and watch!" Madden yelled. He rolled over and went streaking after the passenger ship. His greater speed brought him up fast, and he could see the other plane fighting desperately to get away.

In that passenger plane would be the

men who knew, the men whose knowledge of atomic power would give the militarists of the world a terrible weapon, a weapon to bring chaos to the world. It was like shooting a sitting duck, but he had to do it. His face set and his jaw hard, he opened the Goose up and let it have everything it had left.

Swiftly he overhauled the passenger plane, which dived desperately to escape. It came closer to the hills below, and Turk swung closer. He glanced at the gigantic Dome of St. Paul, coming closer now, and then he did a vertical bank, swung around and went roaring at the plane!

The pilot was game. He made a desperate effort, and then the probing fingers of Turk's tracer stabbed into his tail assembly. The ship swung off her course, lost altitude, and the pilot tried to bank away from the rounded peak of the Dome. He tried too late. With a terrific crash and a gigantic burst of flame, the passenger plane crashed belly first against the mountain side.

For an instant the flaming wreck clung to the steep side, then it sagged, something gave way, and like a flaming arrow it plunged into the deep canyon below.

Turk shook himself, and his face relaxed a little, then he started climbing.

"Two down," he said aloud, "and one to go!"

He went into a climbing turn. Up, up, up. Far off to the south he could see the plane bearing the atomic bomb, a mere speck against the sky now.

It was an old type plane, with a cruising speed of no more than a hundred and fifty miles per hour. With his ship he could beat that by enough. For the fiftieth time he thanked all the gods that he was lucky enough to have picked up this experimental model with its exceptional speed. He leveled off and opened the ship up.

Runnels had moved up into the copilot's seat. He glanced at Turk, but said nothing. His face was white and strained. Behind him, Turk could hear Panola breathing with deep sighs. Only Shan Bao seemed unchanged, phlegmatic.

As the lean Manchu thrust his head lower for better vision, Turk glimpsed his hawklike yellow face, and the gleam in his eye. It was such a face as the Mongol raiders of the khans must have had, a face of a hunter, the face of a fighter. There was in that face no recognition of consequences, only the desperate eagerness to close with the enemy, to fight, to win.

Turk's eyes were cold now. He knew what he had to do. That atomic bomb must go. No such power could be left in the hands of these power mad, force minded men. It must go. If his own plane and all in it had to go, the cost would be slightly balanced against the great saving to civilization and the world of people. Yet that sacrifice might not be necessary. He had a plan.

He swung his ship inland for several miles, flying a diagonal course that carried him south and west. The bomber was still holding south, intent only on putting distance between them.

Turk knew what that pilot was thinking. He was thinking of the awful force he carried with him, of what would happen if they were machine gunned or forced to crash land. The pilot was afraid. He wanted distance, freedom from fear.

Yet Turk was wondering if the pilot could see what was happening. Did that other flyer guess what was in his mind? And Turk was gaining, slowly, steadily gaining, drawing up on the bomber. It was still a long way ahead. But it was over Canal Ladrillero now, and as Turk moved up to the landward, the bomber followed the canal southwest.

Deliberately Turk cut his speed back to one hundred and fifty. Runnels glanced at him, puzzled, but Turk held his course, and said nothing. At the last minute, the enemy pilot seemed to realize what was happening, and made a desperate effort to change course, but Turk moved up, and the bomber straightened out once again.

There was one thing to watch for. One thing that might get the bomber away. He would think of that soon, Turk realized. And that would be the instant of greatest danger.

"Watch!" he said suddenly, "If he drops that bomb, yell! That's the only chance now."

Runnels jumped suddenly as the idea hit him.

"Why! Why, you're herding him out to sea," he shouted. "You're herding him out there where his bomb won't do any damage!"

"Yeah," Madden nodded grimly, "and where he won't have gas enough to get back."

"What about us?" Panola asked.

"Us?" Turk shrugged. "I think we've got more gas than he has. He wasn't expecting this. We had enough to fly us back to our mother ship. If we have

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# NIP · NIPPERS, INC.

By RICK STRONG

*Lieutenant Chaping and Captain Fender learn that when a feller needs a friend, he might come riding in a Corsair!*

LIEUTENANT BENNY CHAPING hunched forward in the seat, his shoulders straining against the safety straps, tongue clamped between his teeth in concentration. The small Jap freighter seemed to grow in the Corsair's illuminated gun-sight. The pipper in the center of the concentric rings rode true on the gun crew clustered about their weapon in the bow of the ship as they feverishly tried to get it into action before death struck. They were too late.

Six streaks of bluewhite smoke flashed back intermittently from the leading edge of the Corsair's inverted gull wings and lost themselves in the churning wash of the plane's wake. Armor piercing death invisibly followed the course marked by the mercilessly accurate tracer path, obliterating the gun crew forward.

The six fifty caliber guns continued their yammering and bullets stamped angrily toward the stern, chewing lifeboats to bits, sieving cabins, making a shambles of brown men and their machinery.

When it was almost certain that the Hamilton propeller would gnaw into the bow of the enemy craft, Chaping eased back on the stick then forward again almost at once. The F4U neatly leap-frogged the freighter. The radio gear in the upper rigging of the ship swayed in testament to the closeness of its passage.

Under Benny's hand the Corsair leaped and slewed erratically close to the water until it was out of range of the avenging 11.7s in the stern of the riddled ship, then pulled up in a screaming chandelle. He craned his neck back toward the ship as soon as his chandelle was begun and he could see past his tail. He watched his wingman slice down from a high angle. Instead of making his first pass from bow to stern and working to knock out any anti-aircraft opposition from the freighter, the second Corsair was coming in from the beam, bucking all the lead the Nips could throw at him.

Benny's mouth dropped open in amazement as his wingman opened fire far out of range and held his trigger

down so that the boiling path of bullets splashed in the water and crawled slowly nearer the boat. When the missiles began to cleave the target the pilot kicked one rudder then the other, spewing the streams of tracers from one end of the ship to the other. But most of the bullets flashed wildly over the ship and splashed harmlessly into the blue water of the inlet.

Benny cursed volubly and pounded the writing pad strapped to his knee. What was the fool trying to do? He was exposing himself needlessly to enemy fire and sowing his own all over the place.

Benny was dumfounded. He had picked on this lone freighter when he and the new man were returning from a familiarization flight because he knew it was easy meat and the chances of getting hit were few indeed. That is if the attack were run correctly. Knock out the few guns these small freighters carry on the first couple of passes and the thing is a sitting duck. A pilot could make one leisurely pass after another and put it permanently out of commission.

Benny increased the tempo of his swearing as the pilot of the other F4U pulled up over the freighter in a straight climb, silhouetting himself against the brilliant white of the tropical cumulus clouds. The tracers of the still functioning gun crews aboard the ship chased him hungrily.

Instead of going in immediately on another strafing run, Benny circled out of range of the gunfire and snatched the mike out of its bracket by his right shin, black words in his mind. Then he thought of his commanding officer and his finger relaxed on the transmitter button.

Three hours before Benny Chaping had walked into his skipper's shack a few yards from the shelter laughingly called the "ready room." As his eyes became adjusted to the comparatively dark room he recognized the tall captain talking to the skipper. The captain

turned and extended his hand, a smile on his face and in his voice.

"Well, Chaping, we meet again. I see you finally made your wings."

Lt. Benny Chaping winced slightly but let the insult pass, outwardly at least.

Benny had met Captain Fender previously by way of the Navy training program. Many an hour Fender, then a lieutenant, had shouted at him through the gosports of a Stearman Trainer back at Glenview, Illinois. Benny had smarted and burned under the cynical admonitions but had gone ahead and finished the course despite or because of his dislike for his instructor.

Whenever the student's efforts made him master of one bit of the course the tyrant in the front seat became more vehement in the next. Nothing he could do suited the teacher. But the more discouragement was flung at him, the more the red-headed cadet was determined he would fly. And this determination stuck with him through the time he trained and won his wings, was assigned to fighters and was sent overseas to this island base.

Fender, on the other hand, had been kept at his instructing for a long time until his request for more active duty was honored and he was sent as a replacement to Benny's squadron. The skipper had ordered Lt. Chapman, veteran of long months of combat, to take the captain out on a flight to learn the landmarks of the neighboring islands and get his hand in after his stay in the pilot pool at Vella.

"Oh, and by the way, Chaping," the squadron leader had said before dismissing them. "Better stay out of scraps this first hop, until Captain Fender gets the feel of the plane again."

Now, in the air waiting for Fender to join him after his run, Benny changed his mind. No, it wouldn't do any good to cuss the captain out now; in fact it is never a good idea to berate your superiors in the Marine Corps. The captain was just a little excited and the experience new to him. Nevertheless he might get hurt if he continued. Chaping thought of turning back and letting another flight come out and finish off the ship, but he would really get ribbed by his buddies if he let it go.

He thought a minute, then punched the button with the mike brushing his lips.

"Bat-two this is Bat-one. Captain, I think I saw a bogey cloud-hopping above," he lied. "You cover me from

about angle seven while I work over the floater."

The young lieutenant grinned as the "Wilco" came from the other cockpit and the second Corsair broke off for the spiral upward.

"That will keep him out of trouble," thought the stubby redhead. "Up there looking for an imaginary Jap while I put this tub among Davey the Jones boy's collection."

The enemy had been steaming through a narrow waterway between two islands when the Corsairs had attacked. Now it was just about to stick its bow into the darker blue of the open sea. Chaping sized up the situation, cut back over the near island, then pulled streamers from his wingtips as he flashed back at the Japs.

He held the Corsair's belly over the jungle at tree-dusting level so that he was hidden to the enemy, then as he screamed out over the water he lined up on the harried ship. Almost subconsciously he checked the tell-tale black ball in its yellow arc under the gun-sight against skid, compensated with the rudder tab under his left hand and estimated range through his calibrated sight.

Eyes squinted against the blinding morning sun, tongue clamped again, as always when he was concentrating heavily, the freckle-faced pilot waited. Only a novice opens fire too soon and wastes bullets. The ship grew in the sight like dye spreading in water. Five mils, eight mils, ten mils—now!

On either side of him, just outboard of the break in the gull, blast tubes echoed a berserk *chunk-a-chunk* so that in the cockpit the explosions were almost blended. Tracers poured into the bathtub gunpit of the fantail until the crew wilted. Then the phosphorous lines raced savagely back to the superstructure where two 7.7 machines rifles sought to boresight the bent-winged vengeance.

The Yank had been triggering in bursts to keep his barrels cool under the pressure of the air. But now his fingers ground down to send a wall of shattering metal in a cone of fire the size of a hangar door. The upperworks disintegrated in a three second tornado.

He leaped the ship and jinked off across the water just in case there was an anti-aircraft gun still working. While he skidded the plane, he glanced back and whooped.

"Aha, Benny my boy, that one took the teeth out of the little beast! He is

hanging on the ropes with no one to throw in the towel!"

In his turn he glanced up at the Corsair circling high above and chuckled.

"Fender, old horse, if you weren't such a jerk I'd call you down for the fun, but you are so excited right now that you would probably misjudge and strain your carcass through the rigging," he thought to himself.

This time he came in on a quartering run, concentrating his fire just above the water line between the mizzen mast and the cluttered deck house. With his throttle eased back, he took his time placing the short bursts exactly where he wanted them and was rewarded with a sharp internal explosion. Steam boiled from engine and deck funnels. The ship started a quarter turn toward shore as though her crew was trying to run her aground. In her death throes an intermittent snort of oily black smoke gouged the humid air.

Benny Chaping racked around in a tight turn and probed for the vitals of the writhing tramp. The crew was hysterically abandoning ship; sliding down ropes, jumping on top of one another, trying to launch lifeboats, anything to be free of the doomed craft. An oil slick spread an undulating shroud to leeward, the lifeblood ebbing from the wounded monster.

The Marine swung high over the steamer, knowing it might erupt at any time. His caution was well founded. As he cocked his wings for a look-see, he detonation of the vessel shook him in the cockpit.

One concussion followed another. Debris and flame-shot smoke boiled upward like a technicolored cauliflower. Chaping and Fender drew a double orbit in the sky until the two halves of the freighter slid beneath the surface in their own gurgling way. Then both aircraft turned together and headed home.

Back at the strip, the youthful pilot and his older ex-instructor walked out of the hut after giving the Intelligence Officer a blow-by-blow description of the hop. Benny, short, bronze headed, and usually laughing, walked beside the rangy captain swinging his helmet in one hand, dragging contemplatively on a cigarette in the other.

Fender, exhilarated by the flight, was rattling on, reshaping the whole thing in his enthusiasm. Chaping looked sideways at him, studying him for a minute

then took a deep pull on his cigarette and began.

"Captain Fender, do you mind if I make a couple of suggestions? About the flight, I mean."

Something in his voice made Fender stop walking and look down at him.

"Like what, Chaping?"

"Well, sir," Benny fumbled, a little embarrassed, "when you start in on a small tub like that, the first thing to do is knock out the anti-aircraft, 11.7s or whatever they have for protection. They putter around these islands alone once in a while supplying cut-off groups and if you can catch them they are easy to knock out. But they might get a lucky shot in the wrong place."

The tall man flushed. His plane had taken a few bullets in his one pass while the other plane was unhit.

"Come in endwise," the lieutenant continued, "and jink off low so they can't get a bead on—"

"Chaping," Fender broke in, "you are getting a kick out of this, aren't you? The cadet gives his instructor the word on how to fly! The boys in the ready room will love to hear that one, won't they? Well, I'm not having any, and don't forget it. When I want the word on flying I will ask for it." The larger man's eyes flashed in anger before he turned his back and strode off toward the pilots' quarters.

Benny's freckles stood out darker on his flushed face. Then he almost smiled.

"Brother Fender, if I don't clip your wings on the ground the Nips will get you in the air," he muttered. He turned in the direction of the insect-screened mess hall glaring at his heavy boon-docker shoes.

His buddy Joe fell in step with him.

"Tell me, Copperhead," said Joe, "how is it that you go out with the new captain and come back without a blemish on your crate while your compatriot suffers a good baker's dozen on his big iron bird?"

Chaping gave him a quick synopsis of the hop, explaining the relationship and the reaction of the older pilot to criticism. Joe began laughing.

"In that case, Benjamin, old hot rock, I have bad news for you. I just saw the orderly putting up the flight schedule and you are flying wing on Captain Fender for the strike on the Kyota airstrip at 1330."

"You're kidding," said Benny unbelievably. "The skipper wouldn't send him out on a job like that so soon."

"Tut, tut, you accuse me of levity at a time like this? The world races on its axis, men are locked in deadly combat, and the manifestations of evil gallop rough-shod over the globe with—"

"Okay, okay," smiled Benny in spite of himself, "never mind the dramatics, I believe you."

An hour later, at the briefing, the Commanding Officer of the fighting squadron rocked forward on the balls of his feet, watching the faces before him.

"Men, this is a tough and important strike. Intelligence informs us that the little yellow fellows are expecting some high gold braid, admiral or something, at their field at around 1430. Our headquarters wants him knocked off.

"The first two divisions on the board here will take off first, proceed directly to the target, and work on aircraft over the field and gun emplacements. The last two divisions will scramble twenty minutes later, rendezvous with the dive bombers at point Option and escort them to the Kyota strip.

"Captains Brown and Fender, if your orders are understood you may take your flights out and wait for the signal from the tower so that you will get off in time. I will finish briefing the rest after you leave."

Chaping studied Fender as he nodded that he understood and got up to go. He was a little surprised that the Captain did not seem a bit nervous. Fender just picked up his plotting board and combat maps and ducked out the door as though he had been flying rugged strikes since he left grade school.

The eight men comprising the first two divisions left the crowded ready room and picked up their heavy parachute packs from the issue hut. They climbed into cockpits that were white hot under the blazing midday sun, careful not to touch the metal that would burn them through their flight suits. Crew chiefs helped them adjust their bulky flight gear and soon cartridge starters kicked the already warm Pratt and Whitneys into an even roar.

Out on the downwind end of the take-off strip of live coral, the Corsairs turned into the prevailing wind to clear out loaded engines and desludge superchargers. At a signal from the 2X4 tower the sleek blue fighters wheeled onto the runway and followed each other aloft with a precision interval to allow for propwash.

In his turn Benny Chaping squared

away on the coral. Tail wheel lock, engine flaps, crack wing flaps, and pour the coal to her. He loafed down the strip through the light tropical air and cleared the stumped jungle at the end with a few feet of grace.

A wide half circle of the field slid all eight planes into place and with Captain Brown leading they vectored out with their noses toward Kyota. Benny pattered with his housekeeping until his mixture, rpm, and manifold pressure suited him, then relaxed with his feet on the tubing above his rudder peddles and glanced at Fender a few feet away. The guy was doing all right. He could fly the crate, no doubt about that. His position was good and he was easy to fly wing on. Maybe he had just been excited that morning.

Captain Browne kept his flight close to the water and cruised fast, knowing that the Japs might have spotters along the way to tip them off in case of an attack.

As they neared their objective Benny began to feel that old tenseness creep up in him. It was always this way. No matter how many combat flights he had, he tingled until the action began.

Needlessly he checked instruments and settings over and over, purged his wing tanks with CO<sub>2</sub> to keep a chance incendiary from detonating them, recharged his guns and set his armament switches so that one flip would make them ready to fire. Then he looked out over the long nose of his plane and what he saw immediately stopped his fidgeting.

The Japs were more than surprised. There in the traffic pattern above their strip were a half dozen Zeros, wheels down, tailing each other in for a landing. They did not know there was an American within three hundred miles.

The Corsairs spread out in a comfortable formation of two staggered lines abreast and struck with their massed guns howling in concentrated fury.

As they catapulted over the top of the matted jungle surrounding the field Chaping saw an unbelievably beautiful target. The personnel of the field were assembled in neat formation to welcome the expected rank.

Taxiing up to the assembly was a Nell, obviously carrying the high ranking Jap aboard.

The Zeros in the traffic pattern had escorted the slow transport to the field.

Knowing that the Zeros, slowed down for landing, would be perfect targets and dangerous if they escaped, Captain Brown broke radio silence.

"Begger-two this is Begger-one!" he shouted, "Fender, you hit the deck. We'll jump the rats in the air!"

Benny hardly heard Captain Fender's "Wilco" in his earphones. The end of his tongue turned white under the pressure of his teeth in his habitual proof of concentration. He was giving all his attention to the Nell which was still about a hundred yards from the enemy ramp in front of the makeshift hangars.

Coldly he centered his sight on the Nell's cabin, let his gun barrels stay cool for a fraction of a second till he was sure he was in range, then his fifties began their lethal chant.

Holes appeared magically in the aluminum fuselage of the Nell. Windows and hatches disappeared as his fire chewed into the enemy. Between cockpit and tail it was flayed into scrap metal, mixed with the blood of its occupants.

The Marine blazed in on the stricken plane until the last second, jumped it, and squirted a long burst into the startled formation, cutting down men as though a rug had been jerked from under them.

He lifted up over the palms at the edge of the field and checked the rest of his division. Fender, leading, was a little ahead and off to the left, banking hard to come around for another run, the other two men were just a little behind to the right. In his turn Benny had time to check above to see how the other half of the flight was doing.

In the split seconds that he watched a section of Corsairs working together, he felt a surge of pride for his squadron mates. They had split so that as they came in on a Zero their crashing fifties converged for a moment on the Jap before he blew up. The two hurdled the flash area of the exploding Zero and spread like scissors to catch another enemy in the apex of their weave.

A grin rearranged the freckles on his face but he tore his eyes away from the drama above to pick his next target on the field.

"I'd better give that Jap gold braid a little more of a working over just to make sure," he thought.

Captain Fender had evidently planned the same for his tracers were already riddling the Nell with shattering precision.

"Hmmm, better and better," said Benny to his straining engine. "The lad is a pilot at that, look at him chop up the monkeymen."

Benny had stopped the Nell on his

first run and a group of Japs had dashed from the formation in an attempt to save their hissing visitor. Fender helped them get the Nip big-shot out of the plane by putting a few rounds in the partly empty fuel tanks. The Jap transport flew apart like a vase with a hand grenade in it.

Chaping groaned as he saw his leader whip back violently on the stick in an effort to clear the mushrooming chaff that had been an aircraft. The seething mass enveloped the Corsair and disgorged it, staggering, on the other side. For a bit it seemed certain that the captain's plane would flop onto the Jap field like a wounded pheasant, but he fought it down the clearing and up over the clawing palm fronds.

As Benny began to close up the distance between himself and Fender he noticed a growing stream of smoke from the engine and ugly slashes where chunks of the disintegrating transport had penetrated the wing and tail surfaces. One aireron was almost gone and the metal skin flapped in a dozen places. He shook his head, wondering how the thing managed to stay in the air at all.

Just then a fast-moving object caught his eye off to the right. A Zero was knifing in on the crippled plane. A quick scan of the sky above and in his mirrors told him that more Japs had joined the fray, probably a returning patrol. Captain Brown and the second section of Captain Fender's division had their hands full. It was up to one red-headed lieutenant to protect both himself and the crippled Corsair.

Centrifugal force ground Chaping down against his seat pack and his stomach muscles contracted to fight the violence of the turn as he swung to meet the Jap attacking his ex-instructor. He snapped off a long deflection burst that ate its way back from the prop hub to a point aft of the greenhouse. One of the red meatballed wings dipped and the little Nip fighter spread itself through a quarter mile of jungle waiting stolidly below.

Benny didn't have time to congratulate himself before he spied another son of Tojo picking up speed in a tight S run on the Corsair wobbling above the palms in its flight for the open sea. The Jap must have spotted him at the same time, for he changed direction with the phenomenal radius of turn that a Zero has, in an effort to get out of the Yank's sights.

The Japanese are over-tutored in aero-

batics and quite often live short lives in combat with the mistaken idea that a neat roll or loop will parry an attack.

Benny waited in the saddle position while the small crate executed a slow roll that would have drawn quite a round of applause at the air races back in the States. The Nip straightened in flight to the clap of the Marine's fifties shattering the propeller. The second burst pounded the acrobat and his cockpit to bits. In a shallow-glide the plane passed over the pink-white beach with a dead pilot at the controls, turned gracefully on his back and bounced high when it struck the water. It came apart at the seams, etching a dozen temporary white scars on the blue green surface with the momentum of the skittering pieces.

For an agonizing minute Chaping couldn't find Captain Fender. Then he glimpsed the ragged outline of the plane not fifty feet above the waves with sheet metal flapping like Mrs. O'Leary's wash-line. Two more slant-eyed fighter pilots were racing each other for the privilege of downing the stricken wreck.

Lt. Chaping squinted his eyes, slammed throttle full forward, prop control hard against the stop, for all the speed the Vought would give him.

Like cur dogs yapping on the heels of a wounded puma the Nips closed the gap so that the nearest one squeezed off an experimental burst from his 7.7s. Still too far away from them to do any accurate shooting Benny nosed out a little to give them a lead and squirted tracers in front of them. Anything to distract them from their prey.

The trailing Jap saw the bullet splashes in the water and whirled up to meet him with his guns winking. They slashed at each other head-on, trading steel for steel. At their combined speeds the distance between them was devoured with unbelievable rapidity. The battle of wills and machinery intensified.

Here was the proving ground, the evidence of abilities of two nations. This was the moment that American engineers had planned for, the reason so many thousands of workers had drilled and milled and riveted and worked overtime with their hearts and heads and hands. Now their work was done, their chips were down heavily on a red-headed youth thousands of miles away in a finish fight above the Pacific.

He had a stab of misgiving. Perhaps

this joker was one of those few Japs (few despite their propaganda to the contrary) who wanted to ram him and die for the Emperor. If he was he had picked the wrong cookie to do business with.

The freckled face tensed with determination as round after round gashed into both engines, shattered leading edges, ripped away antennae and plexiglas. Neither pilot would give an inch to avert the inevitable crash. Every fibre in the Yank's body tautened for the collision that never came. Instead the Jap aircraft gave way. It had absorbed too much metal labeled U.S.A.

First small bits of the engine flew out. Then the whirring propeller slammed the ruptured parts together with such dynamic force that large sections of the power plant literally exploded. One of these rent the left wing to the trailing edge so that it was torn off by the impinging air. This all happened so fast that through Benny's sights it looked as though the Jap had thrown one wing away and was doing weird acrobatics.

With an effort he released his grip on the trigger and bent his stick in the direction of his beleaguered leader. The Jap attacking the limping plane had come in fact from above, poured a long volley out, flashed under his quarry and was pulling sharply around for another run. The enemy pilot had put so many shots into the already crippled Corsair that he was careless of how he broke away, sure the enemy was harmless. That error cost him his life.

Captain Fender kicked the groaning shambles of a plane hard around and cut loose with the three guns that were functioning in the starboard wing. They were enough. Rudder and elevator surfaces vanished, dumping the diminutive Zero into the sea in a spume of white spray.

The Corsair turned slowly back toward its base like a fighter who had won his last match, but knew he wouldn't live to reach the showers. Chaping looked down at his own instruments shaking illegibly in their mounts. The engine had taken too much punishment in that head-on run. The little lieutenant sighed and began to prepare for the inevitable dunking. Holding the convulsed stick with his knees he jettisoned his canopy, unhooked his parachute, and checked his mae west, shoulder straps and safety belt. The control column increased its lashing, bruised the inside of his legs. It wouldn't be long now.

When the engine started to leap dangerously in its brackets he cut the switches and slanted down above the water parallel to the trough of the swells. Just before he hit the surface his left hand slammed the seat lever. He dropped low in the cockpit and the shoulder straps laced even tighter against the shock of the crash.

As the plane hit he threw his arms over his face and waited for the second major jolt that he knew would come. Previous experience had taught him that a fighter landing wheels-up in the water generally skims once before jolting to a stop. The second impact threw him forward violently. The straps cut into his shoulders and middle, but held.

The anguished shriek of rending metal was suddenly replaced by the smaller sounds of lapping wavelets, hot engine parts cooling too fast in the water, and the hiss of air where the sea was rushing in.

Knowing the fighter was good only for scant seconds afloat Chaping shook his head to clear his stunned senses. Still in a semi-fog he flipped the catch on his safety belt and scrambled over the side. Out on the wing, water slapped at his shins while he waited for the life raft to inflate.

For the first time he became conscious of the aircraft gliding down at him. Captain Fender, realizing that he could not reach the American-held island field was landing near him so they could stick together, doubling their chances of being spotted by rescue craft. Chaping shouted in alarm, for the tail of the plane catapulted high as it skidded to a stop not twenty yards from him. It hung for an eternity before it sagged back to ride soggly through the waves.

The chunky lieutenant lost sight of Fender when he climbed out of the sinking crate but on the crest of the next swell he saw the Captain safely on the wing, inflating his own raft. They paddled toward each other over the liquid mounds with difficulty. Neither spoke until they had lashed the two bobbing yellow boats together.

Captain Fender wore the trace of a smile as he looked into Chaping's eyes, and slowly tugged at the fingers of the glove on his right hand. Then he extended his arm over the doughnut gun-  
whales and both grinned as they shook

hands. The Captain broke the silence with a laugh.

"Chaping," he said, "This morning I told you I'd ask you when I wanted the word on flying. Well, meet your new student! After what I saw you do today I'm sure I can learn a lot from you."

"As I recall," laughed the redhead, "you didn't do so bad yourself—"

The last of his words died in his throat and both men turned to search for the source of the engines they heard. For a full minute they strained their eyes until the approaching speck in the sky was near enough to distinguish the inverted gull wings of a Corsair.

They were just a little to one side of its line of flight, perfect for being seen. After a quick caucus they decided to use only one of their dye markers and hold the others in reserve. Benny ripped the top from one of his packages and in a moment a bright yellow stain crept out around their rafts.

The F4U passed so near they could easily read the number on the side of the fuselage. Chaping sat up abruptly, nearly upsetting his tiny boat.

"That's Joe!" he yelled. "Joe, you blind bat, look over here! Oh, please don't be thinking about that dame in Ann Arbor! I'm right here, take a look!"

They both shouted gleefully as the Corsair cocked its wings once, then wrapped around to circle them in a slow, flaps down orbit. After a couple of complete turns the pilot dragged by them, barely skimming the water, so near they could see him thumb his nose at them. The two watched the wings rock in a salute then fade off into the late afternoon sky. They relaxed knowing that within an hour operations would know their position and make arrangements for their rescue. A glance at the sun told them they'd have to wait until morning for the Catalina to pick them up.

Benny looked gratefully at the receding dot. "Old Hawkeye Joe he was known as," he murmured.

There is something about bobbing around in a limitless ocean all night with another fellow that strengthens the bonds of friendship. If you don't believe me take a run down to the Dallas Municipal Airport sometime and look over the new flying school there. Oh, and you might talk to the business manager of The Chaping-Fender School of the Air. He is a guy named Joe.

# DOWNWIND

By ROBERT P. HANSEN

*The big C-47's came into the practice field smashing into one another, ripping out a fence, and presaging tragedy!*

CREWS of the C-47's and glider pilots were coming out of the briefing room. It was six a.m. It was dark. And, in spite of the fact this was a May morning, it was cold. British May mornings are always cold.

Lieutenant David Carnack stepped to one side of the entrance to let his eyes adjust. Darkness was sudden after the hard brilliance of the big Quonset hut.

"Gonna have a tail wind," Carmack was thinking. "Five miles an hour from almost east. Not too bad, but a tail wind, anyhow."

It meant the gliders were going to have a downwind landing. Carmack was a glider pilot. He was glider officer for the 91st Troop Carrier Squadron.

"Ninety-first transportation!" someone yelled. "Ninety-third truck! Hey, Baker. Where is Baker?"

Pilots and crews milled about the swinging tailgates of trucks, searching for toe-holds, laughing, helping, cursing. Equipment clattered and scraped against metal.

"Hold this thing," they said. "Shove down! Shove down!"

Carmack moved toward a looming, canvas-topped six-by-six. Men were jammed together in the seat-lined interior. He swung aboard and sat down next to the tailgate. The driver came and closed it. The men settled into position, some on the floor, some sitting on one another. They laughed, and there was rude horse-play. In the tight darkness existed a certain unspoken security from being together and close.

"Group Maneuver," the bulletin board had been titled. "Glider pilots will wear full field equipment."

Oddly enough, there was no storm of complaint about the equipment. They knew this was a D Day rehearsal, and they were willing to be serious.

The truck jerked away fast. The packed mass of men lurched to the rear as one. They were forced to talk in shouts over the whining grind of the six-by-six.

Carmack sat quietly with his head bent against the suck of dust that swirled up behind them.

"The wind might pick up at sunrise," he thought. "It might." They were landing at eight-o-eight. "A downwind land-

ing ain't good, not with a loaded ship it's not, and what if the wind picks up?"

He told himself he should have said something at briefing.

Their truck jolted off the dirt road and onto the cement perimeter track.

"I should have spoken to Currie."

Carmack blew a little snort of breath through his nose when he thought of Captain Currie. He knew very well why he hadn't asked about the wind. He didn't want to be quashed.

Currie could be sarcastic and extremely dogmatic concerning such a tentative point. Invariably the captain spoke from the pinnacle of his rank when questioned or opposed. So Carmack had remained silent and had quietly left with the rest when briefing was over.

He felt the truck list on a gradual turn and knew they were almost out to the runway. The driver wheeled onto the grass, went a little way, then slowed, and braked to an abrupt stop. As one, men careened to the front of the truck. And then they were pushing over one another to get out.

Almost half of Number Nine runway was consumed with the darkened shapes of C-47's, C.G. 4A's, and British Horsas's. The tow ships and gliders were neatly arranged into a close-fitting column, wing behind wing, with nylon tow ropes coiled and fastened from nose to tail, back and back, ship, sixty-four gliders and C-47's intermeshed in efficient, geometrical succession, all ready for take-off.

Carmack walked toward his glider, an American C.G. 4A, the first ship on the right of the runway. He was going to lead thirty-one other gliders into their landing zone. Against his cheek Carmack could feel the wind. It was fresh and cold—and it was more than five miles an hour!

The two airborne men who were going to ride with him were waiting at the ship. Their jeep had been loaded into the glider yesterday. Flight Officer Hart, the copilot, was taking off control locks as Carmack approached.

"What do you figure the wind at, Bull?" Carmack asked.

Hart faced around and moved his head

slowly to get the feel. "I'd say about ten, Dave."

"And almost east," Carmack added. "Look there."

He pointed to a small flag set on the edge of the runway. It fluttered slightly in the east wind and made brief little attempts to stand straight out.

"At sunrise," Carmack said, "that wind is going to pick up. Even if it doesn't, ten is too much for a downwind landing, don't you think?"

"Yeah," Bull agreed. "For a load like we got."

Three other pilots walked over. "Hey, Dave, what about this wind? It's east. Why can't we change the landing approach? We'll be coming in hot."

Carmack snapped on his flashlight and squatted. He picked up a stone and began to make marks on the cement. The pilots came down on their haunches to watch while he drew out a change of plan. It was a simple alternative, could easily be done. They all nodded agreement when he finished.

"I'll go find Currie," Carmack told them. "I'll see what we can do about this."

Captain Currie stood under the wing of the lead C-47 with a flight board in his hands. He was properly neat in pink pants, fur-collared flying jacket, and carefully crushed-down cap.

He was the group glider officer, in charge of all operations concerning gliders. Today he was directing this operation—from the ground, as usual. Currie seldom did any flying.

Carmack found him at the front of the formation.

"We're going to have a tail wind for our landing, Captain. How about a change on the approach?"

"Change?"

"Yeah, a reverse approach, so we can land to the east instead of the west. It would be simple. All you have to—"

"Change the approach?" Currie said, as if he didn't understand.

"So we can land into the wind."

Currie pushed his cap back and faced east. "How much wind do you estimate, Lieutenant?"

"About ten now. But by morning it will pick up."

"Will it?" Currie glanced quickly back. "Are you sure, Lieutenant?"

Carmack's lips tightened. He knew Currie was going to bicker.

"Even ten miles an hour is a lot for fully loaded gliders."

"That will give you a landing speed of not more than eighty," Currie replied.

"And you have a thousand-foot field, all the room in the world."

Carmack wanted to say, "What do you know about flying gliders? You go up four hours a month in a right seat, a co-pilot on a 47. And here you stand telling me how easy this is going to be."

"If you spoke to the colonel, the approach could be changed," was what Carmack did say.

Currie hesitated an impatient second before speaking.

"Look, Lieutenant," he said, waving the flight board. "These are orders from Command for this maneuver. They specify our landing time to the minute. The operation has been scheduled. Take off time has been set. Everything has been set. Nothing can be changed now."

Carmack wanted to turn and walk off, and to the devil with Currie.

"To the minute, and everything is set, and nothing can be changed." He shook his head stubbornly. "I think you should change the approach. You can do it. You know you can, right now, without any trouble. If the wind does pick up, it's going to be rough to land in that field, no matter how much room we have. I think you should change our approach."

Carmack knew he had made his voice hard and definite.

But Captain Currie was smiling indulgently. He waved his flight board.

"Everything is set here, Lieutenant. You'll make it. I don't believe you'll get hurt."

As Currie spoke, energizers whined up and down the marshaled rows of airplanes. Props spun slowly, caught and hesitated. Engines stuttered powerfully. Then, one by one, they roared into steady, shuddering sound.

Currie gave Carmack's shoulder a pat.

"Station time, Lieutenant."

Carmack turned immediately and walked away. He broke into a trot. Hart and the other pilots were waiting at his ship.

"No dice," Carmack yelled at them. "He won't change it. Tell everyone this is going to be a downwind landing and to be very careful."

The two airborne men had climbed into the glider and were seated in their jeep. Hart was in the co-pilot's seat, adjusting his safety belt. Carmack had to go belly-flat across the hood of the jeep in order to reach the cockpit. He wriggled himself forward and slid into the left seat.

He remembered the training school back in the States when he had first wormed himself into a jeep-loaded glider.

"How in hades do you get out of this thing?" he had asked his instructor.

"Get out?" the man laughed. "What for? You haven't got a chute."

After that, they flew jeeps and trailers, and fifteen fully equipped men; small bulldozers, tractors, ammunition, anything which would fit into a glider. Not wearing a chute no longer bothered Carmack.

He did worry about the loads. Up to 3,100 pounds could be lashed squarely behind the pilots' seats, and a bad landing could turn it loose in the middle of your back to crush you. Carmack had seen this type of accident more than once.

Hart now shouted above the roar of engines being run up, "So that desk jockey wouldn't change it."

Carmack shook his head and made a disgusted face. Hart handed him one end of the safety belt. Carmack adjusted it and snapped it snug across his legs. Then he reached up and turned the stabilizers for take-off. Hart set the altimeter.

Prop-wash from the 47 ahead made the glider sway clumsily in a kind of lugalubrious dance on its oleo struts. Carmack checked his controls again, full left and right rudders, wheel all the way back, and a complete twist to right and left. The wings rocked when he rolled the ailerons.

On the edge of the runway, about two hundred feet ahead, they saw a flagman take a position. He began to highball the lead 47. Its engines thundered and settled into a full roar.

Carmack quickly checked to see if the airborne boys were all right. He waved to them, and they waved back with elaborate unconcern.

"Both of them are scared," he told himself. "Anyone is nuts to ride back there in these orange crates."

The flagman was signaling the big 47 forward. Carmack watched his tow rope begin to give up slack. It writhed across the cement. It spit out coils rapidly and began to straighten. It tightened and tightened, then quivered taut. The flagman's hand shot down.

Engines rumbled power. The 47 moved faster, throttles full forward. The glider hung, hesitated a second, and lurched into a roll.

Carmack touched his brakes delicately, right, left; right, right. Touch, easy. Tail wheel, rattling. Control column, forward. Pick up the tail. Hold it. Steady now. Faster, faster. Slipstream increasing on the fuselage. Whine of tires. Faster. Slipstream building. Tire whine louder and louder.

Rattle of blown pebbles against the nose. Slipstream roaring. A hail of pebbles. Faster and faster. Whine and whine. Wind speed 70—75—80. Hold it down. Hold it. Speed 85—90—90—90. Pressure in the wheel. Hold it. Wings straining to lift. Want to lift. Want to fly. Hold it. Air speed 90—90. Ease back on column. Easy. Lift and lift it off. Free!

Glider flying. Slipstream screaming. Hold it level. Wait for the tow ship. He's coming off, coming off. Heels picking up. Follow him, follow. Climb with him. Steady. Trim the nose up. Climb. Climb gently. Steady. Straight away and follow. Follow square behind. Pick up a little left wing with the stabilizer. That's it. Got it. All set. Flying. Now relax.

Carmack turned and made a thumb-and-forefinger sign to the airborne boys. They grinned and nodded.

Up front their C-47 leveled out and began a gentle turn to the left. It was light enough to see the tow ship. The pilot has his navigation lights on. Carmack held squarely behind the white tail light and rolled out of the turn in perfect towing position.

He enjoyed night flying. Unlike daytime. There was no air turbulence, no vicious bumps to lift them and then drop out from underneath. Right now the air was like the undisturbed, glassy surface of a lake.

Carmack flew with one hand. He glanced out his window and saw 47's and gliders lifting from the runway. They were beautifully spaced, climbing and turning gracefully into formation.

Carmack's 47 made a huge circle of the field and came out on course trailed by sixty-two other ships, thirty-one gliders and thirty-one C-47's. They were in a long double line, a tight formation, each pair in echelon to the right, a sky train loaded with airborne. This was the way it would be on D Day.

Carmack tapped Hart's arm and signaled for him to fly. Hart nodded, set his feet on the rudders, and took the control column. Neither tried to talk. The solid rush and roar of air past the fabric fuselage was noisier than the loudest engine.

To be comfortable, Carmack un-snapped his safety belt and eased himself in the plywood seat. He leaned against a steel tube strut and looked out the window. They were at one thousand feet, flying smoothly, straight and level.

He checked his watch. Three quarters of an hour to fly. It was almost dawn and would be light before landing time.

He was glad of that. He wanted a good look at the landing zone before he cut himself loose and led the flight in.

Thinking of their field sent his mind back to Captain Currie and what he had said just before take-off—

"Everything is set to minute. Nothing can be changed now."

Carmack stared out into the vague light of near morning. And he shook his head thoughtfully.

"Currie's attitude was almost funny," Carmack thought. "Stick to orders and you can't be wrong—officially."

Currie was afraid. He was like too many people in too many places. They were all afraid, afraid to examine, afraid to notice, afraid to object, afraid even to look at themselves, afraid of what they might see. It was too easy to be officially correct. The outside appearance of an act was most important, how it would seem to others, how it looked on paper, on a flight board. Currie had waved the orders from Command confidently.

"It's all set here, Lieutenant," he had said. "You won't get hurt."

Carmack now said something that was lost in the scream of the slipstream.

He began to concern himself with the wind, checking the tow ship and his compass to see how much drift the 47's pilot was correcting for. From this he could get a fairly accurate idea about velocity. They had an almost southerly heading. The wind was broadside to them. And to maintain a straight course over the ground, the pilot had his 47 crabbed windward.

"Pretty big crab; eight degrees at least." Carmack figured for a moment. "That would make the wind about fifteen mph, easy fifteen. What about the surface wind? Was it as strong on the ground?" Carmack frowned. "The wind has picked up already. At sunrise it could—"

Behind him there was a sudden banging. He jerked around in his seat. One of the airborne men was thumping with his steel helmet on the hood of the jeep. He held up a pack of cigarettes questioningly and made smoking motions. Carmack smiled and nodded. His lips formed "careful." The soldier made a reassuring face and got out his lighter.

Carmack glanced at Hart. He was holding tow position perfectly. His feet merely rested on the rudders, and he flew with slight movements of the wheel. Bull Hart was singing. Carmack watched the pantomime of the unheard song. Hart's lips moved, and his face regis-

tered mood. He squinted for a high note and was wide-eyed, with chin on chest, for a bass. His head nodded in rhythm as he swung through a silent chorus.

Hart almost always sang while flying a glider. He said it was the only time no one could complain about his voice.

Carmack looked away and back at the ground. He could begin to make out houses and fields. No sign of life. Too early. No smoke. He searched hard for a sign from a chimney. He had to find smoke on the ground before they landed. He needed to get wind direction accurately and estimate velocity.

"What if it's more than fifteen miles an hour on the ground?" he wondered for a moment, considering the possibility, and then he glanced at his watch. "Twenty more minutes."

Dawn was in the east, all red, gold, and azure along a jagged horizon. They could sit high in the air and watch it swell larger, and broaden, and build. Color moved and changed minutely with imperceptible gradient. Beneath them, the landscape unrolled at one hundred and twenty miles an hour.

Tidy houses with pin-neat barnyards; hedge-rowed fields, angular and multi-green; narrow roads, curved and twisted; roads that doubled back on themselves every mile or so; clipped, clean countryside, and a town coming up.

Carmack leaned forward in his seat, automatically checking for smoke. There had to be smoke. There was none. Nothing.

This was a rectangular town narrow at one end, with a railroad coming straight in one side and curving out the other. This town was their "Initial Point." Carmack tapped Hart's arm and pointed down. He shaped "I.P." with his lips. Hart nodded. He had seen.

Here they would turn, pick up a new heading, and fly straight to their landing zone. Ten more minutes.

Carmack fastened his safety belt and waited until they were over the town before he took the controls. He swung cleanly around a twenty-degree turn, following the C-47 exactly.

Behind him, he knew the formation was turning pair by pair, four squadrons in tight alignment. They'd wake the town. Their rumbling thunder would urge people to their windows. He knew how a formation sounded passing over at a thousand feet. It would be a heart-stirring sound, a gradually building, roaring shudder that mounted and mounted overhead until it was past in

a trailing waver of noise, which faded and faded into distance and extra empty silence when they were gone.

Pressure came in the wheel. They were letting down. Carmack changed the nose trim. Three hundred feet a minute was a fine let-down. No air speed change. The tow ship leveled out at six hundred feet. It was holding a wide crab in the crosswind.

"Easy fifteen per hour, easy." Carmack shook his head. "Wind will be strong on the ground."

In a few moments he checked his watch.

"Should be almost there. Landing zone should be close. Where is the thing?"

His eyes searched rapidly ahead and to the left. He wanted to find an almost square field with a faint road in the middle. It should have trees to the north, a fence on the west, and a fence and power lines on the east.

"Where is it? Should be close. Where in the devil is it?"

He saw it. Flat and clean-looking, just as they had been told in the briefing, the field had lots of room. But what about the wind? No smoke any place. That was disastrous! What could he do?"

The landing zone came up under his left wing, came sliding up fast. Almost there. His hand went to the tow release, hovered. The two airborne men watched Carmack's hand. They stared at it.

Almost there. The tow ship rocked its wings slightly, a signal for the glider to get off.

"Yeah, I see it," Carmack said aloud "I see it."

His hand touched the release. He waited, judging, waited a second, another second, another second. He jabbed the release forward.

Loose! The nylon sprang away. Free flight. Carmack racked the glider over in a steep left turn to flying around the field. Air speed dying to 110—100—95. Noise dying; less and less. Slower and slower. Air speed now was seventy. Normal glide. There was almost dead silence. Only the hiss of air around the fuselage.

Carmack trimmed the nose up to ease pressure of the wheel. He was gliding free. The landing zone passed slowly on his left. Lots of wind. Headwind. More than fifteen. He was now moving slow above the ground and losing altitude fast. Three hundred and fifty feet was his altitude now.

Carmack turned left again and glided along the base leg of his landing pat-

tern. He leveled out at two hundred and fifty feet. Wind blew him *toward* the field. He had to use an almost sideways crab to correct.

"Opposite wind. Backwards! Blast Currie!"

Hart turned in his seat and grinned at the airborne men. Tenseness showed through their careless postures in the jeep.

"Almost in," Bull Hart said, and his voice was loud in the quiet.

Carmack hunched slightly, hands light and deliberate on the control column. He turned left once more, onto his final approach leg to the field and his spot on the ground. There was no changing now, no turning back. The decision was made and could not be unmade. He had to land, had to be right with this one pass at the field.

He yelled at Hart, "Feel this wind? Feel it?"

The glider had picked up ground speed from the moment of the last turn. It had a tailwind. A downwind landing had to be done. No way out now. Carmack held his air speed steady at seventy miles an hour. He couldn't control ground speed. The field was coming up under them. They were going too fast, weren't losing enough altitude.

He pulled on full spoilers to kill lift across his wings. They sank. Not enough. Almost to the edge of the field now. One hundred and fifty feet altitude. Too high. Carmack put a wing down, stepped on opposite rudder and slipped off seventy-five feet.

That was better. Enough to clear the power lines. Just about right.

They crossed the edge of the field. He held the spoilers on. Fifty feet altitude now. Ground flew past under them. Almost down. Too fast. Too much ground speed!

Ease back on the wheel. Ground coming up. Level out. Level out. Too fast. Back on the wheel, back, back!

Down. Wheels on. Front wheels only! Hold the control column full back. Tail won't come down. Using up field fast. Touch the brakes easy. Touch. Touch. Fence coming closer. On the skids. Wheel forward. Jam it on the nose skids. Jouncing. Skidding on dew-wet grass. Slithering. Full brakes!

Fence coming up. Hold hard. Hold. Tearing turf. Plowing. Jarring.

The glider hung on its nose for a second, then flopped ungracefully back into a three-point position and stopped.

Carmack let out his breath. Hart

flipped his safety belt open, and Carmack undid his.

"There sure is one peach of a tail wind," Carmack said. "Did you see how I—"

Suddenly there was a hollow crumpling crash.

"In the fence!" Hart yelled. "Got a wing."

"Who?" Carmack said, straining to see across to the right.

"Can't see the number." Hart began to crawl back over the jeep. "Let's get out of here before somebody runs over us."

The airborne boys were standing under the big wing when Carmack and Hart scrambled out. From the glider which had crashed, men were crawling. No one appeared to be hurt.

"He must have stuck a wing in on purpose," Hart said.

At the east end of the field, ships were touching down one-by-one, all of them too hot. Each ran with its tail up, seeming to skim the grass. Then they went onto nose skids and slewed to dirt-churning halts. On they came, towing in, releasing, filing into the approach pattern, letting down, turn by turn, planing, judging, feeling for a spot on the ground.

Hart noticed the airborne men had begun to unload their jeep.

"Let's give 'em a hand, Dave," he said.

They helped raise the glider's tail and set props under it. Then they tugged with the rest to lift the heavy nose section so that the jeep could be driven out. All the while, Carmack kept an eye on the gliders as they landed.

They were using the entire length of the field to stop. The west end was rapidly filling with badly dispersed ships, haphazardly scattered wherever they managed to come to a stop.

A C.G. put its wheels on the earth and speeded tail-high up the field. Abruptly it sheered viciously to the left, and its gear buckled. A wing crumpled as the ship ground-looped. Two men spilled through the fabric side, rolled over and over across the grass—and got up and walked back to the crash.

"Judas Priest!" one of the airborne men said. "Did you see that?"

Carmack kept watching the field and shook his head.

Their jeep was driven clear. They were letting the nose section down, easing the clumsy thing closed, when there was a tearing crunch of plywood from the landing zone. Two Horsas had locked wings and were careening in a fast semi-circle.

A second later, A C.G. that had just set down was headed straight at the pair. It couldn't stop. Couldn't turn. On the nose. Skidding. Closer, closer. And it smashed wing-first into the interlocked British gliders. A three-ship crash!

Now there was screaming! A man's painfilleed scream.

"Gosh!" Hart said. "Somebody got it."

They finished with locking their glider's nose section. Men were jumping from the torn, gaping sides of the ruined airplanes. The screaming stopped.

Still the gliders came in and landed in steady succession, in deliberate order, nose to tail, out of the pattern, over the fence. They couldn't change, couldn't try again, had to land. Pilots were fighting the tail wind. Men on the ground stood helplessly watching, glad to be down.

A big Horsa landed, a huge glider that could carry a jeep and a trailer, or thirty men. It lunged and swayed on its tricycle gear through a confused maze of parked ships, missing crash after crash by inches.

It couldn't stop. No air pressure for the brakes. Its great flaps were like sails in the tail wind. On and on it came, not slowing. And it went right through the fence. Its nose wheel collapsed. Its pointed cockpit dug in, plowed for thirty feet before it stopped.

"See what you did, Currie!" Carmack said aloud.

"What?" Hart asked.

Carmack didn't answer. The airborne boys had climbed into their jeep and were ready to leave.

"We better take off for our C.P.," one of them said. "Thanks for the good ride, Lieutenant."

"Yeah, sure," Carmack said. "Take care, fellers."

They drove off along the edge of the field.

Airborne were collecting in groups, assembling to go to their Command Post. Jeeps with trailers, 57's, and field radios loaded to the fenders moved off the landing zone.

The last glider in the air crossed the power lines, just cleared the fence, and flew up the field a few feet off the ground. The pilot had to put the wheels on. His ship hurtled across the landing zone at over one hundred miles an hour.

He swerved and headed for a spot that was clear of gliders, straight at a small group of airborne. They didn't see him. They couldn't hear him. He was almost on top of them. Someone yelled. The

men went flat. All but one. He crouched, looked over his shoulder.

A heavy strut caught him! A dull punking thump! He flew end-over-end into the air, hit the ground, rolled, and was still. His helmet bounced on and stopped. The glider skidded to a halt far down the field.

Men were running toward the motionless figure. Hart ran. Carmack walked.

"You won't get hurt," a voice told him. "It's all set here, Lieutenant. You won't get hurt."

The limp figure on the ground was surrounded by a thick crowd. One of Carmack's pilots elbowed his way out of the noisy jam. Carmack looked at him questioningly.

"He's dead," the pilot said. "A mess. It's a dirty shame."

A corporal picked up the dead man's helmet and instantly dropped it.

Someone came with a blanket. Carmack turned and walked toward his glider.

He passed the three-ship crash. Medics were lifting a man out of one airplane. He was smoking a cigarette, and his shin bone stuck out through a legging. He was the man who had screamed. Wind flapped the torn fabric and dangling plywood on the smashed up ships, an east wind, about twenty miles an hour.

The airborne were gone from the field. The dead man had been taken away. Only glider pilots remained, waiting to go back to their home base. Carmack sat on the grass, leaning against one wheel of his airplane.

It was a beautiful day, a day of small white puffs of clouds high upstairs, a day of sharp sunshine and brisk air. Carmack sat there, dull and heavy-weighted inside. He forced himself to think, and his mind went from their downwind landing to Currie, then to the dead man.

They were well-collected thoughts. They concerned the report he, as a squadron glider officer, had to turn in on this training maneuver.

Carmack lit a cigarette and got out a pad and pencil. He began to make notes.

Next afternoon Captain Currie was alone in his office. He was examining a set of "Top Secret" orders he had just received. This was the long-awaited, official plan for D Day. It had come. It was here on paper.

His group was to conduct three separate missions—a small one on the night of June fifth, another on the morning of June sixth, which was designated as the D Day mission, and a last oper-

ation on June seventh as a reinforcement tactic.

Currie had to go on one. He had to fly. There was no question about this. And he had rationalized perfectly to bear out his selection of the June seventh mission. He told himself he would be on hand to direct the first two operations, and then he could lead the third.

Currie had not even considered leading the first, which would be a night job. Gliders would be flying blind in the dark, landing in strange fields. There would certainly be shooting. They would be alone, completely surrounded by enemy until they were relieved on D Day. There was no guarantee of relief. It was asking for it, to go on the night mission. Command wanted five ships from Currie for this job, five ships and crews.

A sergeant stepped into the captain's office and dropped a paper on the desk.

"Lieutenant Carmack's report on yesterday's maneuver, sir," the sergeant said and left.

Currie picked up the report, glanced at it, and noticed the unusually long heading. It was addressed through channels all the way to General Headquarters. Currie quickly scanned the pages. Then he frowned and read thoroughly.

When he finished, Captain Currie sat thoughtfully for a few minutes. His eyes went to the desk calendar. It was June the first. He called the sergeant, and the man came in from the outer office.

"I've checked Lieutenant Carmack's report," Currie said. "It requires correction. He's neglected to number the separate paragraphs on the second sheet. And the colons which follow 'To' and 'Subject' are not arranged beneath one another on the first page. Will you make a note to that effect when you send this back to the lieutenant for revision?"

The sergeant picked up the report. "Yes, sir."

"You needn't hurry it," Currie instructed. "We'll be very busy in this office shortly. As long as the lieutenant receives this sometime in the next few days, it will be all right."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant said and went out.

Captain Currie went back to checking the "Top Secret" orders. He spent some time reading and then picked up a pen. On a new sheet of paper he printed—

#### NIGHT MISSION, JUNE 5th

#### GLIDER CREWS:

1. Lt. David R. Carmack

# Flight out of Death

By JACKSON COLE

*Blinded in mid-air by a Jap bullet, Pilot Johnny Fallon prepares to die—and then a seeming miracle takes place!*

JOHNNY FALLON was blind, and in a few more moments he would be dead!

It had happened at the top of his wing screaming climbing turn. There had been a faint *pop* and a simultaneous sharp stab of pain diagonally down the right side of his head. Then a terrific crescendo of sound, like all the coal in the world roaring down a huge chute in his brain. And lastly, a heavy black curtain that blotted out everything.

Instinctively he had whipped off his goggles, but doing so had not made any difference. The black curtain was down to stay. He was blind. Not blind from the blood from the Jap Zero bullet wound seeping into his eyes. Just plain blind. That single bullet had touched something in his head, perhaps snapped a nerve, and he couldn't see any more.

Blind, and strength draining out of him like water through a leaky basin. Blind, and riding his Lockheed Lightning somewhere between the glassy flat surface of the Southwest Pacific and High Heaven. If he could manage to fly by the seat of his pants and hold his P-38 level he might stay alive for an hour or more. If he couldn't—if he was in a dive—it was going to be all over in practically nothing flat. Then, too, there was the not too small item of the buck toothed Zero pilot who had nailed him. One more pass would really be a cold meat one for the Nip!

Three chances, but all just to live a little longer. Not one of them maybe some day to tell his grandchildren all about this. Definitely no! The thing that couldn't happen, and wasn't going to happen, had happened. Some Nip up Tokyo way had made a bullet. The gods had written Johnny Fallon's name on that bullet. And now it was in his head.

Funny thing, though. You didn't feel so bad when you knew your number was up. Not a bit like he'd imagined it a hundred times a hundred times. No terror, and no feeling of panic, or a desire to cry, and swear, and bang things with his fists. Nothing you could do was going to change anything.

Oh, yes, sure! He could bail out. Bail out blind and float down there? Into some water full of sharks? Or maybe by

luck onto some Jap-held island? But supposing he hit the water and there were no sharks, and no Japs? Slow death, so what was the difference? Either way meant curtains for keeps. Okay, okay! He was about to die. War was like that. You did, or you didn't. Hello, or good-bye. No, he wasn't afraid; not even a little scared. Maybe you got this way, after you'd been in it long enough.

Okay, good-bye, world! But, there was one thing. Just one little thing that he'd like to do before he went wherever shot down Lockheed Lightning pilots go. He'd like to get his hands on Harry Bates. Preferably around Bates' neck. And when he was through choking, to hit him. And lastly, the added touch of kicking in his teeth!

He should have known that Bates would let him down. Hadn't Bates always been like that? Just missing the messy shows because a plug failed, or his radio went wacky, or some other little thing that prevented him from getting in and pitching? A hot pilot, granted. But a hot pilot without courage wasn't worth beans. Yeah, he should have known that Bates would let him down. He should have known it, and stated so, yesterday when Major Hawks called him into the Ops shack. . . .

"You want to see me, sir?" Johnny Fallon had said as he pushed in through the netting door.

Major Hawks, C.O. of the Two Hundred and Sixth, looked up from some paper work on his make-shift desk, and nodded.

"Yes, Johnny," he said, and pointed. "Park it there. Got a cigarette?"

Johnny parked it, produced two crumpled cigarettes, and produced a light for both. The C.O. dragged deep, spewed smoke ceilingward, and followed it with a heavy sigh.

"G.H.Q. is honoring us again, Johnny," he presently said with no attempt to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. "Another one of those cute little above and beyond the call of duty things. Interested?"

Johnny grinned, and shook his head. "No," he said. "But does that matter? What is it this time?"

Instead of answering right away the

C.O. first unrolled a mosaic photo map on his desk, and motioned for Johnny to hitch his chair closer. When the fighter pilot had, he touched a fingertip to the map and started talking.

"As usual, High Brass is looking ahead, but we can't blame them for that," he said, "even if Guadal is still crawling with Nips. Anyway, here's what it's all about. This little island of Choiseul, just off the toe of Bougainville. Intelligence knows that the place is swarming with Japs, that they've got a couple of fighter and bomber strips there, and all that sort of thing. But what is real, and what is fake, nobody seems to know."

"The Marines could find out quick enough," Johnny Fallon answered as the senior officer paused for breath. "Just a small landing party to recon around."

"True, but High Brass doesn't want to disturb the Japs there, if it isn't necessary," Major Hawks said with a shrug. "In other words, Bougainville is going to be the next stop, provided there is no chance that we'd get an awful boot in the rear from Choiseul."

"And High Brass doesn't know?" Johnny echoed with a frown. "Not after all the recon and photo flights that have been made over that hunk of coral?"

"So High Brass tells me," the senior officer replied gravely. "One spot in particular bothers them. This spot called Bambatana, here on the west coast. See that little natural bay? It looks empty, but it could well be holding two or three Jap destroyers, and maybe a cruiser, just waiting for our troop transports to slide up out of the Slot. If High Brass only knew for sure, a plan could be worked out to take care of it. But, not knowing for sure, messes up the parade."

"And here is something that is very top drawer secret. High Brass wants to let fly at Bougainville three days from now. In short, everything is set. Except, whether or not the assault force stands a chance of getting to Bougainville without drowning."

The Commanding Officer paused for breath, and although half a dozen questions rose to Johnny Fallon's lips, he held them back and waited.

"It's a big enough gamble without having to worry about Choiseul," Major Hawks went on speaking presently. "Our air cover will be terribly thin, because we just haven't got the planes. And the naval escort will be about one half of what High Brass would like it to be. So you see, that little item of Choiseul can make or break the whole works."

The pilot nodded understandingly.

"Well, my gosh, low altitude photos!" Fallon exclaimed. "Send a flock of photo planes out and snap shutters. The very best camouflaging in the world shows up at real low altitudes. Put some cameras in some bombers and send them over Bambatana. High Brass will soon know what is there, and what isn't!"

"They thought of that, too, but ruled it out," the C.O. said quickly with a shake of his head. "A photo flight in force would put the Nips wise to the fact that we are up to something. And that's just what High Brass doesn't want. They feel that the Nips don't expect any new attacks by us so soon. Complete surprise at Bougainville would be half the scrap for us."

"I see," Fallon murmured, and let a slow smile steal across his lips. "So High Brass figures that maybe if a fighter, fitted with a high speed camera, could sort of sneak in and out of Bambatana—like it was just coming from patrol, or something—and catch a few low altitude pictures, everything would be fine. Something like that?"

Major Hawks matched his grin, and nodded.

"Just about," he said. "And it *could* make all the difference. Only it won't be one fighter, it will be two. Just to make sure. If there is a lot of Jap stuff there, one fighter would be just a waste of plane and pilot. But with two, one of them stands a chance of getting back—with pictures to bear out what he saw. More than two planes, is out. That would start the Japs wondering, maybe."

"So I'm one of the two elected, eh?" Fallon said without any show of enthusiasm.

The C.O. shook his head sharply.

"No, not exactly," he said. "I've simply done some heavy thinking and picked the two pilots I think best fitted for the job. The two hottest pilots under my command. And it will take a hot pilot to wave-skip up there, take the pictures, and wave-skip back. Particularly if the Japs decide to do something about it, and have the stuff in the air to do it with. No, I'm not selecting you. I'm just briefing you. You can say, yes or no, as you wish."

"And the other sucker?" Johnny asked.

"Bates," the C.O. replied. "I've already talked with him, and he's game for the try. In my opinion you two make up the best team I could throw into this thing."

With a mighty effort Johnny Fallon curbed an impulsive start, and kept the frown from his brows.

Harry Bates? Not so good.

He had flown with Bates before, and although the red head was a hot pilot, he wasn't what Johnny would call a dependable one in his book. True, not a thing he could put his finger on, but a couple of times Bates hadn't been around when the going got tough. Later it was learned that Bates had been forced to drop out of the particular patrol and limp home because this or that had happened to his plane or engines.

No, Johnny didn't care at all for Bates as a flying mate on what could well be a very tough mission. Nor had his dislike arisen because Bates had yet to nail his first Zero, though he'd been out here four months or more. It was simply that Fallon just didn't like the guy. Didn't hate him, or give him the cold shoulder, or anything like that. Just didn't like him, and wasn't exactly sure why he didn't. Lack of faith and trust in the clinches, maybe.

"What's the matter, Johnny? Bates doesn't shape up in your opinion?"

Major Hawks' sharp questions snapped Johnny out of his thought reverie. For a second he was tempted to nod, and speak his piece. But he suddenly changed his mind. After all, he had no proof. It was simply the way he thought about Bates. And the red head could fly. He had demonstrated that often enough. And lastly, Bates had already accepted the job. A job that might turn out very tough, and with no chance to run away from it even if you wanted to.

"No, Bates is a good pilot," Johnny said instead. "And as for me, I'll take a crack at it. When?"

The C.O. smiled, and seemed to let out a long sigh of relief.

"Good," he said. "You'll be in charge of the show. I've already made that clear to Bates. Tomorrow morning, first thing. You'll get off in the dark, and time it to arrive at Bambatana just when it's getting light enough to take a good look around, and get some pictures. The cameras will be installed tonight, and a gadget fixed so that you can work the shutter from the stick. Now, any questions? Or better yet, I'll get Bates in here, and then you both can ask questions."

Johnny Fallon nodded agreement to that and lighted a second cigarette while Major Hawks stepped out to send somebody to round up Harry Bates.

Some sixteen hours later two Lockheed Lightning P-38s rested wingtip to wingtip at the lee end of the Henderson Field airstrip. The props of all four Allison

engines were idling over, and the steady soft beat of the engines was an undertone for desultory battle fire at the northern end of the island.

Standing in front of the two fighters, Johnny Fallon and Harry Bates silently puffed on last minute cigarettes. They had their chute harness on, and were all set to go just as soon as there was light enough for a take-off.

Eventually, Fallon glanced toward the east, spotted the first thin line of gray that would change to brilliant shafts of reds and wellows and purples in a matter of minutes, and dropped his butt to the ground.

"Okay, let's go," he said quietly. "Get off right after me, and get on your course as soon as you're clear. When you can see me, pull into my right rear, and stick there. Got that?"

Bates killed his cigarette, too, and nodded.

"And the rest of it, too," he said evenly. "Water high all the way up. The first sweep will be south to north. The second east to west. More if we get the chance. Radio silence until it's over. Avoid combat, and get back here fast. Check?"

"Check," Fallon said gravely. Then after a moment's hesitation, he said: "Together we can maybe make it a milk run. Maybe it'll be that, anyway. But just keep it in mind; stick with me, and keep on sticking with me. Alone, either of us could catch it for keeps. Do you get what I mean?"

Bates seemed to stiffen in the bad light, but when he spoke there was no indication of it in his voice.

"Exactly," he said. "I understand exactly what you mean. And don't worry, I won't let you down. Regardless of what you may have thought in the past, Fallon."

A sharp retort rose up in Johnny's throat but he quickly swallowed it.

"Tush, for the past!" he said. "It's the present that counts. Okay, then. If there isn't anything else, let's go."

Harry Bates shook his head that there wasn't anything else, and turned and walked over to his plane. Johnny climbed into his own nacelle pit, made a last minute check and then signal raced his two engines. The winking reply of the flashlight at the other end told him that the strip was clear of personnel and vehicles. He took an impulsive look over at Bates, then kicked off his wheel brakes, and slowly opened up the throttles. The P-38 snorted, shook, and started forward

A few seconds later he was clear and whipping up over the shredded tops of the battle blasted palms that bordered the far end of the strip. Flattening off at practically palm top level he held the P-38 steady until he was clear of the island and out over the water. There he banked toward the northwest and put his aircraft on a course that would keep him just off shore from Santa Isabel Island. He wasn't thirty feet above the half night, half day shadowed waters, but he nosed down even more, until his Lightning was practically kissing the flat, glassy surface.

Sliding forward at a speed calculated to get him over the "target" at exactly the right time, he relaxed a little in the pit and stared hard into the rear view mirror. It took a few seconds because the light was still far from good, but finally he spotted Bates coming up on his right rear, and coming fast. He continued to look until Bates was in position, and had throttled to his speed. Then he took his eyes off the rear view mirror and peered steadily ahead.

Now that he was on the way, some of the tension that had been building up inside of him eased off a bit. But it didn't all go away by any manner of means. A conglomeration of thoughts remained with him, and, to add a bit of the unusual, little lumps of lead began to stir about in his stomach. That puzzled him, and added to a clinging uneasiness.

This mission wasn't the first so-called "special job" that Major Hawks had dished out to him. But this time he had a feeling that he had never experienced before, a feeling that he found difficult to describe to himself. It was as though something was wrong—very definitely wrong. And that if he didn't do something about it, and right away, something unpleasant was going to happen. A feeling of impending doom? He didn't know, but he didn't think it was exactly that. It was more. . . .

"It's simply because Bates is with you," he broke aloud into his train of thought. "You're jittery because you don't trust the guy, that's all. Well? Why didn't you say something to Hawks?"

He let the question go unanswered because at that moment he spotted something that needed every bit of his attention. That something was a flight of fifteen dots way off to his left and a million miles up in the air. One look at the dots, that formed a perfect V against the dawn-flooded heavens, and he knew instantly that they were Japs.

Jap bombers, he guessed, making their usual morning sortie down from Bougainville to add to the misery of the guys hanging on by their teeth to Guadalcanal.

For a crazy instant he was almost overcome by the urge to change course and go tearing up to do something about those moving dots. Fifteen was a nice number, and if Bates was any good they might make a real turkey shoot out of it. Yeah, but not today. Rather than it being a question of going up after the mess of Jap planes, it was a case of hugging the flat ocean's surface a few inches closer, and praying that the Japs up there would not see the two Lockheeds. Let those Nips, themselves, make the attack and Major Hawks' special job would indeed go sailing out of the window.

A minute or so later, Johnny breathed a bit more like normal. The Nips went sailing on by, and not a one of them even bluffed peeling off and starting down. So far, so good. Johnny hoped! Those Jap bombers had radios aboard, and there was the possibility that they might have whistled up some Zeros near by and told them the news, strength, and course, and so forth.

However, as the minutes dragged on by, and the bomber flight faded out of sight to the southeast, no wing-screaming Jap Zeros put in an appearance. And then, eventually, the greenish brown smudge that was Choiseul Island came sliding up over the distant horizon.

Johnny saw it, checked his course toward it, and took a snap glance back over his shoulder to make sure that Bates was in position. Bates was. Sailing along with him as though the two P-38s were nailed together by invisible boards. And as Johnny looked at him the red headed pilot stuck a thumb upward and over his left shoulder to indicate that he had seen the Jap bombers, too. Johnny nodded and turned front.

"Has his eyes opened, anyway," he muttered. "So maybe that's something. But, just the same. . . . Aw, shut up!"

With a vicious shake of his head to emphasize the last, he hunched forward slightly and riveted his gaze on Choiseul Island coming up toward him dead ahead. That is to say, he riveted his eyes on the island, and *also* searched the skies all about for any enemy aircraft that might be waiting to drop down in surprise attack. He saw none, however, and as Choiseul rushed toward him closer

and closer the odd nagging feeling left him, and he began to wonder if maybe it really was going to be just a milk run after all.

He could see the little natural harbor at Bambatana quite clearly, now. And it looked like just that. A natural harbor, with absolutely nothing in it. Not even so much as a stick of floating wood. And as for signs of Jap occupation? There just weren't any at all. Nothing but tangled jungle growth that began right at the water's edge and rolled backward into the hills.

"A cinch!" he murmured softly. "A cinch, and praise Allah! If there was something there, sure as shooting there'd be at least one Jap plane up looking around, just in case. But, nope. Nothing. So maybe High Brass can sleep sweet tonight."

As he breathed the last he turned and looked back off his right shoulder at Bates. The red head was already looking his way, grinning, and holding one hand up with thumb and forefinger making a circle and the other three extended. Yes, sir! Right on the beam, and it looked like there was going to be nothing to it. Just a pleasant early morning airplane ride. Just a milk run!

And then the gods on high laughed in wild glee.

The echo of the laughter drifted down to Johnny Fallon in the form of yammering staccato sound. In a flash he jerked his head back and peered upward. He instantly spotted three silver winged Zeros. They had dropped down out of nowhere, maybe, but there they were just the same. Three of them were in line, slicing downward like meteors in high gear, the leading edges of their wings spewing out jetting streams of orange and red tracers.

Sight and action were one for Johnny Fallon. He flat turned quickly, and at the same instant broke radio silence. No need for radio silence, now. The Japs on Choiseul knew they had visitors.

"Bates!" he barked into his mike. "Flat turn them dizzy, and keep going. The show's still on. You hear me?"

"I hear you!" came the excited voice in his earphones. "But, my gosh, Fallon, they've got us pinned. We can't do a thing stuck this low."

"And neither can they!" Johnny yelled back. "With their fancy crates they don't dare come down too low. So zigzag, and keep going. We've got a job to do!"

Harry Bates made some kind of a reply to that, but it didn't come through

the ear phones clear. Something had gone haywire with the transmitter in one plane, or with the receiving set in the other. Anyway, the words were garbled up, and Johnny didn't bother to make a check. Bambatana was practically spitting distance from him now, and it was time to go to work—Zeros or no Zeros.

A finger curled about the trigger that would trip the special camera's shutters, he flat turned once more to get clear of red and orange tracers biting down past his right wing, and then shot off on a tangent course that carried him straight along the harbor shore line. And the sight that was suddenly unfolded before his staring eyes almost made him forget to trip the camera's shutters. Hugging the shore, and completely hidden from above by the vast maze of over-hanging jungle growth were four Jap destroyers, and a fifth that he took to be a supply ship.

And even as he caught sight of them, all five naval ships opened fire, and for one blood chilling moment he had the sensation of being thrown bodily out of his plane. An instant later he realized that a violent instinctive maneuver on his part had caused the sensation. And another instant after that he found himself tearing full out toward a Jap Zero that had dropped down to his jungle top level. Sight and action again were one. His fifty-caliber guns chanted their mighty song. The Jap Zero became a swirling ball of flame and smoke, and the P-38 was rocketing through a shower of flaming embers.

Though the urge was great to prop claw for altitude, and get into the clear while he could, he killed the urge and doggedly held his Lockheed to ground altitude and went thundering along the opposite shore line of the little natural harbor. No more hidden Jap ships this trip, but plenty of shore guns. And the gunners were throwing everything at him except their commanding officers.

For a mad moment it was like flying straight through the heart of a blast furnace. He could almost feel the heat of the stuff bursting all about him. And the thundering roar in his ears was like that of worlds colliding.

And then suddenly he went ripping out into clear air. Clear air, but with the belly of his plane almost kissing the surface of the natural harbor's waters. As a matter of fact he was sure that he did kiss the top of the water a split moment later. At any rate, something struck the underside of the Lightning a

terrific wallop, and practically put the aircraft up on wingtip. Only by frantic, fast flying was he able to prevent the plane from whipping over and going in nose first.

Beads of sweat dropping off his brow, and his whole body shaking like a leaf, he righted the plane, zoomed up for a bit of safety altitude and snapped his gaze about the sky. Two or three thousand feet above him a couple of Zeros were wheeling about and on the point of starting down at him. But the two Zeros were the only two planes he saw. There was no sign from horizon to horizon of Harry Bates' plane.

His immediate reaction was the feel of chilly fingers clutching at his heart. Then an odd kind of rage surged through him, and his voice speaking into the flap mike was practically a snarl.

"Bates! where the devil are you? Bates! Come in, Bates! *Come in!*"

There was a half second of silence and then Bates' voice in the earphones. Clear, strong, but filled with fear it sounded like.

"Where are you, Fallon? I got clipped, and had to pull out. Having trouble, now. Something's. . . . Did you. . . . pictures? Where. . . . Fallon. . . . going home. . . . Fallon. . . .!"

The static whine, or something, that blotted out words suddenly hit high C and blotted out everything. Fallon yelled and cursed into his mike, but the only reply he got was static, or some other electrical disturbance screaming away in high C. And then he cut off trying to re-establish contact with Bates. The two Zeros were slicing down, and orange and red fingers were poking lines of bullet holes in both of his wings.

A wicked flap turn that almost spun him in got him clear of the spattering of colored death showering down. Then while the plane groaned in protest he hauled it up and around in a corkscrew climbing turn. Too late one of the Nip pilots tried to slant his Zero off and away. He just didn't make it for the simple reason that he sliced right through the bullet pattern of Johnny Fallon's yammering guns. For once, though, the Zero did not perform the usual. It did not come apart in flaming, smoking shreds. On the contrary it ripped right on down to hit the water clean as a knife blade and completely disappeared beneath the surface.

But Johnny Fallon only saw the Zero hit out the corner of his eye. He had no time to spare to take in all the details.

The other Jap had pulled out of his gun-yammering dive and was now also corkscrewing back upward for another from-above attack on the Lockheed.

Begging, cursing his plane to stay with it Fallon went heavenward, too, and for a brief instant he almost had the other plane in his sights. But not quite. The finger of fate seemed to touch the port engine and make it sputter and cough three times. Just three times and then the power plant went on thundering out its full throated song as powerfully as before.

But that precious moment lost made all the difference. The slight loss of power gave the Jap pilot the advantage that he needed. The Nip whipped out of Johnny's gunsights, and came cutting around and back in like a flash of silver light. Almost as quickly Fallon tried to cut the Lockheed inside the Zero's turn. But he missed it by a hair.

And it was then—at that very instant—it happened! There was a faint *pop* and a simultaneous sharp stab of pain diagonally down the right side of his head. Then a terrific crescendo of sound, like all the coal in the world roaring down a huge chute in his brain. And lastly, came a heavy black curtain. . . .

Okay, okay! He was about to die. So what? War was like that. You did, or you didn't. Hello, or good-by. No, he wasn't afraid—not even a little scared.

"Fallon! Fallon! Pull up, man. Pull up! What's the matter? Are you hit? Fallon!"

Words? Bates voice speaking words? He wondered if he was a little crazy, or what? No! He wasn't crazy! It was Bates' voice in his earphones. Whatever had gone wacky with either radio wasn't wacky any more. Harry Bates was talking to him from beyond his world of darkness. Telling him to pull up.

That must mean that he wasn't flying level as he thought. He must be in a dive, and getting mighty close to water, or land, too. He hauled back on the controls, and babbled into his mike at the same time.

"Bates, where are you? Bates! I'm blind, and can't see a thing. Are you okay, Bates?"

"Sure, I'm okay, now," came the instant reply. "Blind, huh? Tough! I'm just off your right wing. . . . Hold it, fellow! You're climbing to a stall. Down nose. Steady! Up left wing a hair. Up—up! There! Hold it. Look, Fallon. . . ."

"Did you get pictures, Bates?" Johnny

cut in. "Did you see those four destroyers, and that supply ship?"

"Sure, I saw everything they've got," Bates answered. "And took a million pictures. Easy, Fallon! You're dropping your left wing. There. God. Now, a touch of right rudder. Just a shade, Mister! Just—a—shade! Right. Listen, Fallon—"

"You listen, Bates!" Johnny stopped him. "You saw things, and got pictures. Never mind me. I'm out of luck. Get back to Guadal fast. There may be more Zeros around here. Chase along, Bates. I'll make it back somehow."

"Yeah?" came the sharp reply. "How? You're starting in a circle right now. To the left. Right rudder, Fallon. More—more! Hold it! Now, just do as I yell at you, Fallon, and it'll be Jake! How you feel? Think your strength can hold up? Up a little on the nose, there. Right!"

A crazy conglomeration of emotions swept through Johnny Fallon with hurricane force. He wanted to cry and swear in the same voice. He wanted to yell and scream at Bates to tear on home before Zeros put him out of business, too. High Brass had to know what was at Bamatana. It was important that they knew at once. And the one to let them know was Bates.

Yet in the same instant he wanted to beg Yates, and get him to promise to stay with him, and guide him through his world of darkness. Maybe, if he could reach Guadal in one piece he might stand a chance. A very slim one, but still a chance.

"Bates, I'm giving you an order!" he choked out into the flap-mike. "Leave me alone and get on back while you have the chance. Do you hear me, Bates? You've got to get back and let Hawks know things. That's an order. You hear me, Bates?"

"Up your left wing a hair, and bosh to you, Fallon," the voice snapped in his earphones. "We're going back together. Believe it or not, I'm not that kind of a guy, Fallon. Not even a little bit like you called me over the radio. You see, Fallon, I really—Hold it! *Hold it!* Up with your left wing, and the nose. Way up, man. You're in a dive. Get them up, Fallon!"

The voice that a moment before had been clear and strong was suddenly faint, and fuzzy in Fallon's ears. It was as though Bates was talking to him from the other end of a long tunnel. He tried to get the wing, and nose up as directed,

but it seemed to take every ounce of his strength. Every time he moved a muscle it was as though it became caught in the jaws of a vise. His heart pounded savagely against his ribs, and there were a hundred little demons inside his skull trying to hack their way out with razor edged axes.

"Left wing up, Falon! No, no! Too much! There. Down a hair with the nose. Not so much left rudder. Steady, Fallon. . . . Steady, Fallon. . . ."

Words, and words, and more words. Bates' faint, fuzzy sounding voice coming to him from a million miles away. Words telling him to do things. He hoped and prayed that he was. He guessed that he was, because he kept hearing more words from Bates. And still more. He tried several times to call back to Bates, but his tongue seemed to refuse to move. It seemed to fill his whole mouth, and if he did manage to speak words he was not conscious of doing so even once. Just a steady pouring of words into his ears; coming to him from far away through a solid black world to where he was at its very core.

And then, after the years had seemingly totaled up to make a full century, he was somehow conscious of a change in the steady stream of word instructions. And it seemed, too, that Bates' voice was more high keyed, and vibrant.

"Do you hear me, Fallon? Raise your hand, and shove open your hatch! If you hear me, raise your hand and shove open your hatch. *Fallon!*"

Johnny wasn't conscious that he had moved either hand the fraction of an inch, but suddenly there was a terrific draft of wind down into the cockpit, and Bates was yelling thankful words in his earphones.

"Thank God! I thought you'd passed out. Listen to me, Fallon. We are approaching the field at two thousand. At two thousand. I can't get you down this way, but you can get yourself down. Can you move? Is your 'chute okay? I can't hear you, so wave a hand if you think you can manage to bail out."

Bail out! The words were like a powerful tonic to his entire system. Instantly he knew what Bates meant. Bail out over the field, of course! In his world of complete darkness that thought hadn't even once occurred to him. Bail out, of course. Wave! Wave to let him know that you can. *Wave!*

"Good, Fallon! Now, listen, because I've got to make it fast. When I yell, go, throw her over on her back, and shove

with your feet. Your hatch hood is wide open so you should come out okay. But unsnap your safety harness, Fallon. Okay, now. Just a couple of seconds more. Up the nose just a hair. That's it! Okay, Fallon. Luck. Go, Fallon!"

For one mad, heart stabbing instant Johnny Fallon was certain that he had not been able to roll the P-38 over on its back. Then he realized that he had Gravity was exerting its pull on him. His head and shoulders were being blasted by a tornado of wind.

He had yanked his radio jack so Bates' voice was no longer in his ears. Instead there was a wild whistle that had hands that were clawing at every stitch of clothing he had on. The urge to yank the ripcord ring was like a raging fire within him. But he curbed the flames and counted three times the normal six before he jerked the metal ring outward from his body.

He heard the sharp snap of the pilot chute opening. And then an instant later invisible hands grabbed hold of him violently and tried to yank him back up toward heaven. They stopped yanking, and then he was floating silently down through an all engulfing ocean of pitch darkness. Instinctively he jackknifed his knees slightly to take up the shock of hitting the ground. He wondered if there was a wind, and which way it was drifting him. A horse on him if a tricky wind should drift him into the gun sights of a Jap patrol lurking in the jungle growth north of Henderson.

And then he hit, at an angle, and white fire traveled from his heels all the way up into his brain. He felt himself topple over backwards, but there was nothing he could do to stop it. He hit the second time, half bounced and rolled over onto his stomach as pink stars chased purple comets around in his brain.

From a long way off he heard running feet, and muffled voices shouting in blessed English. And then there were not stars, or comets, or pounding feet, or muffled voices. There was nothing but peaceful, utterly peaceful silence.

After a long, long time the peaceful silence was broken by the sound of Bates' voice. But a different Bates' voice. Not shouting, or yelling, or even a little excited. It was quiet, and calm. But perhaps there was just a faint note of anxiety in it.

"Are you awake, Fallon? The Doc said just a minute, if you were awake. Can you hear me?"

Johnny Fallon did, and then also the sound of his own voice.

"Sure, hear you, Bates. Where are we? I—hold it! We must have made it! Where am I, Bates?"

The pressure of a hand gripping his stopped him.

"Everything's Jake, Fallon," Bates' voice told him. "High Brass is very pleased, and so forth. You're on Guadal, in a sick shack. Air Transport is flying you out in a couple of minutes. Just wanted to know you were okay. The Doc says they can fix your eyes as good as new in Melbourne. Why you're being flown out, pronto. So everything's Jake. The Doc swears you'll be able to see okay soon.

Johnny Fallon tried to speak and had a hard time forcing the words past the lump that somehow stuck in his throat.

"Listen, Bates, I owe my life to you," he heard his voice blurt out. "And I'm a guy who thought screwy things about you, too. I feel like a heel, now—"

Bates' fingers pressing against his lips stopped Johnny.

"Skip that, Fallon. Just one of those things. I heard what you thought—over the radio when we were at Bambatana. Something went haywire with my set, though. Couldn't get through to you. I really hadn't let you down, though, as you thought. Two more Zeros cut in between us, and before I could scam out of it, I was way over on the other side of the island. Didn't get back to you until just as the slant eye was getting in his burst. Another reason why I made the Doc let me see you. Didn't want you to leave Guadal thinking I had let you down. It was just one of those things."

Johnny wondered if his face looked as much on fire as it felt. He didn't remember shouting his thoughts of Bates over the radio, but he must have. Gosh, how wrong you can figure a guy sometimes! He fumbled for the hand that was touching his and gripped it hard.

"Only a fool would go away thinking those things, Bates," he said. "And I want you to know I stopped thinking them the very first time you told me to pull my nose up. Look, Bates, I—I don't know how to say it, but . . . Listen, if High Brass comes up with any medals for that Choiseul thing, they are all to be hung on you, see? Any guy who can do what you—"

At that point his words, and Harry Bates' words, became all tangled up together. And then suddenly there weren't any words at all, because Johnny Fallon had slipped back into the state of peaceful slumber.

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# Thrills in the Air

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By JACK KOFOED

## THE MARINES CLEAR THE WAY FOR THE DOUGHBOYS

THERE were Army, Navy and Marine units on Okinawa . . . and the going was tough. Assault troops had come in easily enough, but then resistance stiffened all over the big island. The Doughfeet found their way blocked by suicidal little yellow men, well armed and hidden in caves and tombs and trenches. The infantry had to move into tyhpoons of fire that decimated their ranks. So, when the task became too tough, one regiment called on the sky-birds.

That was at the taking of the town of Gusakama. The defenders were hidden in such spots that Naval guns couldn't reach them, nor could artillery planted to the North.

The regiment that was to move in would be decimated before it came to grips with the foe. Their colonel called the Marine Air Support Control Unit, and explained the situation.

The two men talked to each other over the radio, each with a map of the terrain before them. The fliers didn't know the locations of the machine guns and DPs that were holding up the infantry. They had to be told, exactly. So, on the target squares and an aerial photo of the region the Gyrene spotted just what the army wanted knocked off.

Now, this is one of the marvels of modern warfare! Over the front were four Marine Corsairs, with loads of bombs, rockets and .50 calibre ammunition. The Air Support director called them, and told them what the job was. They were tickled at the idea of blasting Japs out of their strongholds. But, with the lines so close together there was little margin for error, and the Marines didn't want to drop explosives on the necks of the other Americans down there.

So, the army officer, hidden in an Okinawan tomb, within close range of the Japanese dual purpose guns, talked

with the fliers through the Marine Officer at Air Support.

The flight leader suggested that the men on the ground pull back while the bombing went on. But that idea was negated. The clatter guns would start as soon as they showed themselves, and that meant somebody would get hurt. The man in the air said: "All right, all right, but give us some kind of a marker. These things we're going to drop aren't firecrackers."

So, a soldier draped a white panel on his back, crawled out, and lay down in a ditch. That information was passed on to the flight leader. Keep those bombs west of the panel, and everything will be all right.

It was time to put the show on the road, as fliers say.

The Corsairs went gunning. The infantry officer, through Air Support, pointed out what he wanted destroyed. See that gully? There are machine guns there, yes, and on the ridge, too. There's a dual purpose gun in the clump of trees. Give it to 'em, boys. Bombs first . . . then rockets . . . .50 calibres if there's anything left kicking!

Talk about co-operation. That was it. Men in the sky directed by men holed up on the ground. The fliers made a dry run. The infantry officer edged them a little closer to where he wanted them to be.

"Okay," said the flight leader over his radio. "Now, we'll go."

He was the first one in. His bombs hit right on the button. The others followed. Theirs blasted the proper places, too. The infantry was screaming with delight. Their voices came over the radio into the Air Support headquarters.

The Corsairs, empty of their bombs, made another run with rockets. There weren't any machine guns or DP's or Japanese left in their gully or on the ridge.

"Thanks, guys," said the infantry officer, and there was a heaven of gratitude in his voice.

"It's a pleasure," the flight leader answered.

A little later, the doughboys went on toward Gusakama. They walked upright, and unafraid.

The Marine fliers had cleared the way for them.

### THE AIRMEN ALWAYS HAVE A WISE CRACK READY!

MANY gag stories were told about airmen. I think in another issue I told you about the lieutenant who was crabbing about the general in command of the mission, unaware that his words were going over the inter com system. He wound up by declaring the commander's tactics were making him dizzy.

The outraged general said: "The officer who said that will please identify himself," and the lieutenant promptly replied, "I'm not dizzy enough for that!"

Even the toughest situations can't smother the wise crack. One flier roared

over Guam during the typhoon season, which is about the foulest flying weather in the world, barring the Aleutians. The tower at Orote field told him to come in. That was all right, but in the blackness and rain, the fighter couldn't see a thing. He came in low, then took off again. He could not see a thing.

After what happened a couple of times, the man in the control tower said: "What's the matter. Can't you see the field?"

"Field, hell!" cracked the fighter. "Where's Guam?"

### ADRIFT ON A LIFE-RAFT IN THE PACIFIC

THE Marine's fuel pressure went bad, though the plane checked out all right. However, there were a lot of "Washing Machine Charlies" around, and he wanted to get one before he returned to base. He found one, and dove under, thinking to get at the unprotected belly, but the cannon got him. He was hit three times. A flicker of flame started in the cockpit.

A fighter pilot hasn't time to think. He does things instinctively, and through long practice. As soon as he saw the fire, the Marine disconnected his radio, unfastened the safety belt and shoulder straps, and threw open the canopy. He meant to get out of there.

The idea was all right, but he was traveling three hundred miles an hour, and the rushing air was like a concrete wall. He couldn't get out. A giant held him in his seat. The wind fanned the small fire into a flame. The Marine felt it searing his legs.

He tried to stand up, and couldn't. He thought that this was the finish, and the easiest thing would be to ride his plane into the sea, and end everything that way. There was no fear or fright, just resignation. He was through, and knew it. He didn't even feel the pain in his legs.

What happened then the Marine never knew. He had been straining against the rudder bars, and nothing happened. Then, suddenly, he was in the air, and the plane was gone.

He wondered vaguely if he had a para-

chute on, but automatically pulled the ripcord, hardly even noticing when the risers braced against his back. Then, somehow or other, perhaps out of the corner of his eye, he saw his plane crash into the sea. The sun was coming up, and the water was flat and peaceful, and he didn't care much about anything.

Suddenly, the Marine came out of his half coma. The sock on one leg was smoldering, and he reached down, and batted it out. The skin on both legs was kind of a white ash, but didn't pain much. But, pieces of flesh hung around his lips and his face and arms hurt like the very devil.

The sky was overhead, the Pacific Ocean underneath, nothing else was in sight, and he was badly burned. That's what the boys faced. Kids, that's all they were, but kids with more guts than anybody ever imagined.

Reactions occur in split seconds that seem like hours . . . just as they do in dreams. The Marine suddenly knew that he was going to make a water landing, and had to prepare for it. He did it automatically. When he landed, he inflated the Mae West, and disengaged the parachute, and located the life raft. It took only a moment to jerk the pin from the neck of the CO<sub>2</sub> bottle, and turn the handle. When it was inflated, the Marine climbed onto the raft.

Safe? Yes, for a minute. Burned, exhausted, with a Jap held island as the nearest point of refuge. After awhile his

pals flew over on the way back to Munda, but didn't see him. Several hours later, two others appeared. They were search planes, looking for him, but they were so far away, they didn't catch sight of that little raft.

The Marine should have been panicky, but somehow or other, he wasn't. Pain, lethargy, exhaustion made everything else seem of no consequence. The water in the raft made his legs feel better. He lay there, looking up at the cloudless sky, and thinking of home. He thought of his mother, and his girl, and the kind of soda they made in the drug store on Main Street. Main Street was a hell of a long way from the Pacific, and there weren't any Japs there.

It didn't occur to the Marine that he was going to die . . . that there wasn't morphine or plasma or skilled doctors and nurses. There wasn't anybody out there but him, and the Pacific is so big it's pretty hard to find anyone who is lost. He lay on his back, with his eyes

shut, and the pain wasn't so bad, really.

Only a few hours had elapsed since he climbed into his plane, and his crew chief had said: "Good luck, lieutenant," and he had taken off with the choked feeling of excitement that was his at the start of every mission. Now, here he was in the life raft, and his pals had given up the search for him, and he was all alone.

PT boats scurried around looking for him, but the Marine didn't know that, and looking for a drowned flier in the Pacific is like looking for a needle in a haystack. They didn't find him. Nobody knows what happened. Perhaps a storm came up, and turned the raft over. Perhaps he died there peacefully, never really understanding what happened.

The aerial war was not only one of victories. Many of our boys died . . . some in the painless flash of a bullet or a cannon shell; some in the warm Pacific waters . . . some . . . well, it's better not to say how they died.

#### CHARLIE HARRIS FACES DESPERATE SKY PERIL!

HERE is what it's like to get into a great big, hairy dog-fight:

Charlie Harris, and two of his Marine pals, broke through the overcast at 16,000 feet above the Pacific, and ran into what looked like the whole Jap air force. They didn't turn and run, because that would have put the Zekes on their tails, so they continued to climb.

The Japs dropped their belly tanks, and came roaring in. They missed that first pass, and then the whole formation split, cork-screwing up and down, diving and zooming and shooting.

Harris followed two Zeros that had dived past him. Then one came out of his spiral, and just as he leveled off, Charlie squeeze'd a couple of bursts into him, and the Nip began to burn.

Charlie went down to ten thousand, looked for his friends, but couldn't find them, and went back into the clouds. No less than six Nips were waiting for him there. But, they were too eager, and overled their victim. He could see the tracers whipping past his nose.

Harris went away from there fast, but two others came boring in from one o'clock . . . one high and one level. The latter took a full burst of 5.0 calibers. His canopy flew off and he burst into flames. That was fine . . . and the Marine had two certainties, but the sky was still

full of Zekes. Two more came for Charlie, but Charlie took the inside man, and got him in the cockpit with a short burst. The Jap began to burn. There couldn't have been much left of that pilot after a moment or two, for the fire ate through the bottom of the plane.

Charlie pulled off, and saw the second ship falling away to the left. He came down, and caught him with a 90 degree deflection shot that was a beauty. This one began to burn in the cockpit, too, which probably meant the Japs were carrying gas tanks just forward of the pilot.

Then, a couple more Zekes came at him . . . they were fighting teams . . . and bracketed the Marine beautifully. This was at fifteen thousand feet, and Charlie went for the deck. He really firewalled everything, and by the time he hit eight thousand, was going five hundred miles an hour. Well, a Zero can turn like a ballet dancer, but it can't dive like a Corsair, so the Nips pulled out, and left Charlie alone.

It was time to go home, for the gas gauge showed the tanks nearly empty. But, Harris didn't know which way was home, for his compass was spinning around like crazy. He tried to raise his friends on the radio, but couldn't get them. Knocking off four Japs in one day was a man sized job, but now it looked

as though he wouldn't get home to tell about it.

Then, he looked up, and figured the end was really at hand, for a flock of planes were diving on him. With his gas practically gone, and very little ammo left, Charlie was a gone goose. That's all there was to it, and no argument.

Suddenly Harris let out a yip of joy that was really a prayer of thanksgiving. They were low mid-wing planes, not low wings like the Zeros, and that made them army P47s. He wagged his own wings like mad, and they caught on, and pulled out of their dives.

By that time Charlie caught his breath, and began to talk to them over his radio. They were about through with their job for the day, and agreed to take him home. He worried on the way about what might have happened to his two pals, but when he set down on the strip, he found them waiting.

They had gotten nine planes among the three of them, which was good going. So, they all had something to eat, and piled into their cots for a well deserved nap.

It was just another day in the life of Marine fighter pilots!

### IT HAPPENED NEAR SOERABAYA

ONE day, when the Japs were bombing Soerabaya, Lt. Bill Hennon, and a Dutch fighter pilot named Bedet, were at another airfield when the bombing started. The Mitsubishis, of course, were accompanied by Zeros.

"Great planes, Zeros," Hennon said.

"Brewster turn inside Zero," Bedet replied complacently.

"You're crazy."

"I show you," said the Dutchman.

He put on his parachute, climbed into his CW21, and took off. In about ten minutes he was back in the slit trench with Hennon.

"You right, Bill," he said. "Brewster cannot turn inside Zero!"

### MAHONEY PLAYS RING AROUND THE ROSY IN THE AIR!

MAHONEY was the pilot's name. He was in the Philippines. The Japs had taken the Legaspi airfield, and were trying to jam radio communications of the American fighters.

Mahoney decided to fix that personally. He knew Legaspi very well. So, he dodged down fields and valley toward his objective. When the radio shack came into sight, he went in on it in a howling dive .50 calibres clattering like mad.

The ack ack gunners hammered away at him, and the radiomen came pouring out of the shack, but Mahoney finished the place, for awhile, anyway. He cut up over the trees, and started for home. Then, what should he see but twelve big bombers, a lot of Zeros and a transport plane all lined up, wing tip to wing tip.

"That's for me," Mahoney thought. "They've been giving us hell in Cavite. Now, I'll give some of it back."

He took a look around to see if everything was all right, and found out immediately that it wasn't. Four Zeros were zooming down on him, straight as rain.

Mahoney went for the parked planes. There wasn't anything else to do. He and the four Zeros arrived over them at the same time . . . everyone blazing away. Mahoney was shooting at the ships on

the ground, and the Japs were firing at him. Not being the best marksmen in the world, the Nips missed Mahoney, and hit the parked planes. Between them, they just about ruined everything down there, which was perfectly ducky.

The Yankee decided to get out of there, but quick. He went over the top of Mount Mayan, but the Zeros were faster and more maneuverable than his P40, and Mahoney figured he was a gone goose.

Mount Mayan is about a mile and a half high, with a cone shaped peak, which made it look like a giant pylon.

"Looks like I'd better play ring around the rosy," the pilot said to himself. "It's my only chance and not much of a one, at that."

So, around he went. The Japs were smart. They split up, two going in each direction.

"But," said Mahoney grinning, "after we had gone around twice, they were so confused trying to guess which was themselves, and which was me, that I dropped down to tree top level and made a getaway through the valley!"

Those Yanks were always figuring the angles!

# FLIGHT TO FATE

By ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN

*Pilot Johnny Tate banks northward to Canada in his trusty Stinson, on the search for a downed transport from Europe—and with him fly international jewel thieves who back their orders with deadly guns!*

## CHAPTER I.

### LOST IN THE ARCTIC STORM.

"Doc" HOLDEN, captain of the *Comet*, flagship of Over-World Airways, squinted through the clear space made by the wiper blades and saw nothing but a solid gray-black wall of water through which the airliner rocked and bucked. To port, the plumes of the inboard and outboard engines were visible, and so was the faint glow of the red wing light. Well, at least that was something. Twenty minutes ago hail and snow had blotted out everything.

He ran his eyes over the instrument panel. Everything was functioning as it should, though something had gone wrong, very wrong. Four hours ago they had passed over Point de Monts in perfect daylight weather. Then without warning, one of those roaring storms that come sweeping down out of the Arctic, and compass and radio had let them down. They had been unable to make contact with any ground station.

North Bay was where the *Comet* was scheduled to sit down next, then on to Chicago, the end of the flight that had begun in England. But now he was flying twenty-eight tons of airplane by guess!

"Thank heaven for no passengers this trip, anyway," he said to himself. "Just cargo and the five of us."

He looked at Frank Baker, his co-pilot. This was Baker's first trip as co on the *Comet*, and though he seemed to know his stuff, it would help a lot right now to have Johnny Tate sitting where Baker was. Blast Johnny's hide for getting into that jam that had bounced him off the Over-World pay-roll—and had black-balled him with every other airline, according to rumor.

Some day he'd catch up with Johnny and find out what that jam had been all about. He had been in Cairo at the time, and when he'd returned to North Bay it had been to learn that Johnny was gone and nobody seemed to know the facts. Just that Johnny and some pilot had been ferrying a new ship from the

Coast. When it landed Johnny hadn't been aboard. He had shown up two days later, had been fired on the spot, and since that time, four months ago, Johnny Tate had been among the missing. None of his pals had even seen him.

"Any chance at all, Skipper?"

Baker's question snapped Holden out of his unhappy reverie. He grinned at his co-pilot, and winked.

"Secrets, Baker," he said. "I'll let you in on them just as soon as we're on the ground. Take over a minute."

"What ground—where?" the co-pilot said hoarsely. "We're lost! This air-wagon is a jinx!"

Holden paused half-way out of his seat. A lazy smile was on his lips, but his eyes were cold blue steel.

"You're talking about the plane I love, son," he said quietly. "She and I have gone through worse than this. And we'll go through it this time. Just relax, Baker, and take over."

As Doc Holden went aft he bitterly cursed the fact that he had agreed to captain this green crew back to North Bay. Damn the chief of European Operations for talking him into it. As senior captain, and a million-miler, he could pick his crew, but he had let the CEO do that. He deserved this mess for being such a sucker.

When he reached the nook where Allen, the navigator, sat hunched over his charts and gadgets, the young redhead's face was drawn. Holden placed a hand on the kid's shoulder.

"Don't think those thoughts, son," he said easily. "You did a swell job bringing us across the pond. What's happened's happened—that's all."

The young navigator gave a half-dazed shake of his head.

"But we should have been over Pembroke two hours ago," he blurted. "If only—"

"Just one of those things, son," Holden cut in quietly. "Why, I remember once crossing the Hump. Everything just the way you'd want it. We had even radioed Kunming to put some beer on ice. Then,

*whacko!* The storm hit us, and we got turned inside out. We finally sat down at Hanoi. Four hundred off course. I still don't know the answer. Just something in the air. So forget it. Nobody's blaming you, boy."

"Can't you get us up on top, sir?" the redhead asked. "Then I could maybe take a fix."

"There isn't any top," Holden said. "Not for this baby's ceiling, anyway. I tried it. Just take it easy. Tomorrow we'll all have something to tell the boys."

Holden went back to where Parker was fiddling with his radio stuff. Parker was one of the line's old hands, but this was his first trip aboard the *Comet*.

Parker slipped off his phones and shook his head slowly.

"Nothing but the voices of the angels, Doc," he said. "And this static is even drowning that out. I wish I had a beer."

"A case on me when we're on the ground," Holden said, and grinned. Then quietly, "Nothing, huh?"

Parker held up the phones.

"You listen," he said.

From six inches away Holden could clearly hear the crackle-snapping of a million giants breaking sticks. He sighed heavily.

"A wonderful thing, radio," he grunted. "When it's in your living room. Keep pitching, kid. All the time in the world. Thirty-eight whole minutes of it."

The things I've done in less," he said. "You'd be surprised!"

"So surprise me again, pal," Holden said, and turned away.

On the way forward he had a word with Tracey, the flight engineer. Tracey's high math calculations gave the *Comet's* engines thirty-two minutes more of gas. And only that by running them starved. If they hit another storm? Holden couldn't figure that one out himself.

The *Comet's* captain went forward and, without a word, took over from Baker.

The *Comet* was out of the rain now. Just in oceans and oceans of gray-black clouds. What was in front, heaven alone knew. And what spot of North America was under the wings, only heaven knew, too. Thirty minutes left. Then he'd have to let down whether he wanted to or not. Down into what? The North Bay airport would be very nice indeed. Any airport would.

"Well, what *are* you going to do?"

Baker's question jerked Holden up. He didn't say anything for a second or two. He suddenly didn't like Baker.

"Fly, and pray," was what he finally said. "What else?"

"The cargo!" the co-pilot yelled. "Dump it. That will lighten the ship!"

"You saw it put aboard in England, Baker," Holden said sternly. "Crated machine parts, and stuff. Six tons. The five of us couldn't move one crate. Besides, I'll sit us down. You just shut up!"

The co-pilot's face went white and his lips trembled.

"You'll sit us down?" he screamed. "Where? With that box aft you personally brought aboard? The red-painted one marked 'Explosives'? You'll not sit us down with that aboard!" He hurled himself up out of the seat. "I'm going to dump that, right now!"

Holden hit him—a terrific clip on the button. Baker fell over the back of his seat to hang there motionless. Holden shot him one contemptuous glance, then turned his eyes front.

His heart leaped up to clog in his throat. The oceans of clouds were breaking up. Off to the left he saw what he thought was a big hole in them. He banked over with every nerve in him on fire.

Fervently he prayed it *was* a hole!

\* \* \* \* \*

Johnny Tate slowly twisted his glass of beer on the mahogany and stared moodily at his own not too bad-looking face reflected in the huge mirror behind the bar.

"Why, you chump?" he asked his reflection. "Why did you get off the train here in this dump of North Bay? You like being kicked in the teeth, or something?"

The face in the mirror didn't give him any answer. But he knew the answer. He knew why he had popped off the train on the spur of the moment, instead of going on to Pembroke where a good paying bush flying job was waiting for him. It was on the off chance that he might meet Doc Holden again.

Good old Doc. He had been a heel not to write Doc about that ferry flight mess, not even let him know where he was. But when Over-World Airways had handed

him the dirty end of that stick, everything had turned red. He had hated the whole world. And one heel in particular. A heel by the name of Frank Baker. If he ever saw Baker again, so help him, he'd—

With an angry shake of his head he drained his glass and lifted a finger at the bartender. So what if he, had suddenly dropped off the train when it had pulled into North Bay, and was having a couple of beers, trying to make up his mind whether or not to go out to the field and maybe see Doc. Sweet weather he had picked, too. A million rainstorms all the way up from Chicago.

"I'm crazy, that's what I am!" he grunted. "Supposing I should see Caldwell? I'd kill him, too!"

"That'll be a dime, bud."

Johnny flipped the coin on the bar and pointed at the radio on the mirror shelf.

"That thing make music?" he asked.

"Sure," the barkeep growled. "Anything to please the customers."

Tate sipped his beer while the tubes warmed up, then listened to a hot band coming through from the Palmer House. Then suddenly the band went, and the announcer's voice came on.

"We interrupt this program to bring you the latest news on the missing airliner *Comet*, of Over-World Airways. At seven o'clock this evening, our time, the *Comet's* fuel supply had been exhausted, according to company officials. That being true the giant airliner, which was not carrying passengers, only cargo and a crew of five, has now been down for some four hours. An unconfirmed report states that at six forty-five the Cochrane radio station picked up weak, but undecipherable signals from the *Comet's* operator.

"Based on the signals, it is believed that the *Comet* went down somewhere in the ten-thousand-square-mile North Bay-Pembroke area. But just where, and if a safe landing was made, is anybody's guess. Meanwhile, Over-World Airways is assembling a fleet of search planes. Just as soon as the weather permits this vast searching party will fly out to determine the fate of the *Comet*, and her five crew members. I now return you to the program to which you were listening."

The hot band music came on almost instantly, but Johnny Tate didn't even hear it.

He heard only the thunderous roar inside his head.

"The *Comet!*" he choked hoarsely.

"That would be Doc. The *Comet's* his ship!"

"What's that, bud? You sick, or something?"

Johnny Tate stared at and through the barkeep without even seeing the man. Then with a choking sob he spung off the stool, and raced out through the door.

"Hey!" the barkeep bellowed. "Your suitcase, bud!"

A howling wind slammed a wall of rain into Johnny as he hit the sidewalk, and almost knocked him off his feet. Hunching his body against it he cut across the street to a hack stand. A single cab was at the curb. He jerked open the door and dived in.

"Airport, and fast!" he panted, crouching on the edge of the seat.

"In *this*, mister?" the cabby wanted to know. "I can tell you right now that there ain't none of them planes flying tonight."

"I like rain!" Johnny snapped, and flashed a five-dollar bill. "Get going to the airport!"

## CHAPTER II.

### SAVAGE, BURNING HOPE.

At the airport the rain oddly enough was just a drizzle. Johnny tossed the five to the driver, and went out of the cab running, on his way to Operations. A fellow just outside the door yelled something at him but he didn't check his stride. He went through the door and into a lighted room. Over a dozen men were gathered about a huge table. Practically all of them were in flying garb. On the table were several maps, and charts.

They all looked up quickly as Tate came barging in. One of them, a man with graying hair, and a hawklike face, was not wearing flight garb. He was T. C. Caldwell, Western Operations Manager for Over-World. His eyes went brittle and he took an impulsive step or two forward as though to bar the way.

"What the devil are you doing in here?" he demanded harshly. "Get out!"

Johnny Tate shook water from his face.

"What's the latest, Caldwell?" he said evenly. "Any word, at all?"

The hawk-faced man's mouth opened to snarl something, then glanced at the group of silently watching pilots and changed his mind.

"No word at all, Tate," he said evenly. "Nothing since six forty-five. We don't know where they went down. Or anything about them. Now, get out, please!"

"Doc Holden?" Johnny demanded.

Caldwell nodded. "Holden's our one hope. If anybody can pull a miracle, Doc can. Now beat it, will you? We're busy."

Johnny Tate shook his head.

"I'm staying. Doc's my best friend. I'm going to help find him."

Caldwell's eyes flashed. "Not in an Over-World plane, you're not!" he said tight-lipped. "Get the devil out of here!"

Tate took a single step forward.

"Other things are out, now, Caldwell," he said softly. "I'm staying. Maybe there's something I can do. If there is, Johnny Tate's going to do it!"

A hushed silence settled over the room. Eyes became fixed on Caldwell. The Western Operations manager glared at Tate with pure hate in his own eyes. Then suddenly he nodded.

"All right, stay and listen," he said. "But that's all! Over-World doesn't need anything from you, any more!"

Johnny Tate walked up to the table. A couple of other pilots made room for him. He didn't look at any of them, but fixed his gaze on the charts and maps. He found where the *Comet* had last been heard from, closed his eyes and tried to put himself in the *Comet's* pit alongside Doc Holden.

As he stood there in a sort of trance the others considered this possibility, and that possibility. They talked of existing weather from Over-World's stations clear east to Gander, Newfoundland. Some argued that weather had carried the *Comet* north; others that it had carried the plane south. But all agreed that it would take a couple of dozen planes three days at the least to search the entire area where the *Comet* might possibly have gone down.

"Wait a minute!" Johnny Tate suddenly cried. "Hold it!"

Everybody looked at him. Caldwell's lips twisted.

"Tate! Didn't I tell you—"

"Shut up!" Johnny rasped. "You, me, nobody counts now. Only Doc, and the boys he has with him. All of you listen to me!"

Eyes dangerous, and chin thrust out, Tate waited for anybody to make something of it. Nobody did. Not even Caldwell. His face was brick-red with smoldering hate, but he didn't say a word. Johnny's gaze was back on the charts.

"At four he was dead over Point de Monts, right on course," he said. "At five La Tuque heard him but couldn't contact. They figured he was approach-

ing the storm center in that area while others—that storm moved south, or more late—east. It swept him right into that cross-storm. At five-thirty Long Lac reports hearing him, but couldn't make contact. So he's back north of course again. He had an hour and a half gas left. Call it two hours. Say his speed was two twenty-five. All right! He rode that storm for forty-fifty miles, then went down. That should put him right about here."

He touched a fingertip to a spot on the chart about three hundred miles north, and a hundred miles west of North Bay. Everybody craned their necks for a look. A short, red-headed pilot snorted.

"If he's down there, he's dead," he said flatly. "So are the other poor guys. I've been over that area. Nothing worse than that from here to the Circle. No flat area bigger than a tennis court."

"If he could see it," somebody else said. "That storm passed right over that area. And I don't think he was a thousand miles close to there. He's way south. His radio signals—"

"Look," Tate cut him off. "I've done that trip a few times. Storms take you north! Nine times out of ten. And here's another thing. East of Pembroke there's some kind of magnetic deposits in the ground. Or maybe in the air. I don't know. I only know what happened to me twice when I got north off course. It jiggled up my compass so that I was going north when the compass told me west. If Doc was holding her west, riding the tail of that storm, he—"

Johnny suddenly stopped and looked at Caldwell.

"Who's co with Doc?" he demanded.

Caldwell's lips twitched as though he were going to smile, but he didn't.

"Frank Baker," he said in a flat voice.

For a moment the yellow glow of the room lights turned to a swimming red for Johnny Tate. With an effort he beat back his fury.

"I see," he murmured. "Well, Doc always said his luck would run out some day."

"Now, listen here!" Caldwell blazed "I'll—"

"Skip it," Tate said wearily. "The main thing is that Doc is down somewhere right about here. And knowing Doc, I'm saying that he and the others are still in one piece. Anyway, that's the area to search first."

"You've had your say, Tate," Caldwell cut in harshly. "You've made your

Harry Bat my money, they're all wet. He had you fellows think?"

He looked at the others about the table. So did Johnny Tate, and he felt like crying. Not a pilot among them agreed with him. He knew almost all of them, and had flown many thousands of miles with at least half of them. But not one agreed. Perhaps in his heart. But not with his eyes, or his tongue.

"All right, Tate," Caldwell broke the silence. "Now, get out of here!"

Johnny Tate fought down blind surging rage, and put all the pleading he knew how in his voice.

"Look, Caldwell, forget for a minute, can't you? Just one plane. I'll take off now and be there by light. I feel it, see? Good glory, haven't I flown that route with Doc enough times? Don't I know what Doc would do, how he'd figure? Just one plane. It's worth it, Caldwell. I tell you it's worth it!"

"Not a chance, Tate!" Caldwell said. "Get out of here, right now!"

Tears of helpless rage stung Johnny Tate's eyeballs. He couldn't see anything but red. Then Caldwell's face came swimming through it. That was the breaking point.

"You've hated me since the day I joined the Over-World, Caldwell," he said through clenched teeth. "I don't know why, and I never cared. Until you backed up that heel, Baker. Now I'm going to give you something I've been saving up—just for you!"

Johnny Tate swung and there was dynamite at the end of his arm. It exploded square in the middle of Caldwell's face. The man went down like a felled tree.

Johnny Tate stood there, his eyes raking the startled faces

"As for you fellows," he said in a whisper, "I'll still find Doc. So help me I'll find him somehow!"

Savagely he spun around and went slamming out the door.

The drizzle had slackened off to little more than a mist. It was cold on Tate's feverish face, but he didn't even feel it. With eyes that did not see he looked at the dozen or fifteen planes lined up and waiting for the search green light. And with ears that did not hear, he listened to engines being run up.

It was as though he stood in the middle of a world that had no meaning, and even less feeling. His brain was numbed by helpless anger. And his body was like something solid it was not worth the effort to move. All that was alive in him

was the blazing flame of certainty that he *knew* where the *Comet* had gone down.

"Hey, any news? Have they found it yet?"

Like a drowning swimmer struggling to the surface Johnny Tate groped his way back to reality. Two men in rain slickers were standing in front of him, their faces glistening with rain drops. One was thin and hollow-cheeked. The other was more on the chunky side, and he carried a small-sized suitcase.

"Huh?" Johnny grunted absently.

"We saw you just come out of there," said the chunky man. "They know where that plane is, yet?"

A bitter laugh rose up out of Tate's throat.

"They don't know a thing, mister!" he grated. "And they won't listen to somebody who does."

The chunky man seemed to stiffen a little. He peered hard at Tate.

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "Won't listen to who?"

Johnny Tate stared dull-eyed over toward the line of waiting search planes. That he could not fly one of them choked him up.

"Me!" he spat out. "I know where Doc must have gone down. I *know* it! I showed them just how it must have been. But he hates me, and the others rode along with him. Doc'll starve to death before they get around to where he really is!"

"Wait a minute!" the chunky man said quickly, as Tate started to turn away. "Who's this Doc?"

"The *Comet's* pilot," Johnny replied, "and the best pal I ever had."

"You a pilot, huh?" the thin man asked.

"Yeah." Johnny laughed wryly. "Yeah, a pilot, but no plane. And Doc would be counting on me, too, if he knew!"

The roaring in Tate's head was so loud that the thin man had to ask his next question twice before Johnny heard it.

"Do you think the plane's down safe, and all right?"

"Doc Holden's tops!" Johnny replied, almost belligerently. "If he had half a chance he put her down. And my money says he did!"

The thin man hesitated, looked at his chunky companion, then back to Tate.

"Aren't you with Over-World?" he asked.

"Not any more," Johnny said, his bitter gaze on the search planes again.

"A punk bounced me out. That's why he won't listen to me now. Me, who knows right where Doc is!"

"Where?" The question came off the chunky man's lips like a pistol shot, but Johnny Tate was too steeped in his own misery to notice.

"About three hundred north, and a hundred west," he said automatically. "Bad country, but lots of places where Doc might set her down."

"Look," the thin man said. "If you know where the plane is, couldn't you hire a plane and go find it? I mean, with this Holden being your best pal, and all."

"With what?" Johnny said bitterly. "I've got just ten bucks to my name. Sure I could hire a ship—for five hundred bucks, or maybe a thousand. You got a thousand bucks, mister, you could loan me?"

The man's reply cut Tate's bitter laugh off in the middle.

"Yes, if you'll take us along with you. And put us on the ground with that *Comet*."

Johnny Tate stood rock-still, staring at the man almost glassy-eyed.

"What did you say?" he finally got out.

"We'll pay for this plane you say you can hire, if you'll take us along and put us down by the *Comet*," the man repeated. "You're not kidding? You *do* know where it is?"

"It has to be where I think it is!" Johnny snapped. "I've flown that route hundreds of times. Most of them with Doc, too. I know what he bumped into. I know what he did about it—figured he was doing about it, anyway. I . . . Hold it! What's it to *you* to reach the *Comet*?"

"Plenty!" the thin man said evenly. "Our company carries the insurance coverage on the *Comet's* cargo. If it's a total loss we stand to lose plenty. That's why we came to North Bay the instant we heard the first radio report. We've got to find out what's what as quickly as we can. Maybe you know where the *Comet* is; maybe you don't. For our company it's worth the gamble. You get a plane and fly us there, and we'll pay the freight. What about it?"

Something stirred inside Johnny Tate, violently, but smothering it almost completely was the realization of the chance to go find Doc Holden and the others. Sure, he could be wrong. But somehow every part of him screamed that his figuring was right on the nose. Anyway, he would be doing something. If he

waited here at North Bay while others did the job—and maybe did it too late—he would go stark raving mad.

"Well, what about it?" the thin man repeated.

For the fraction of an instant Johnny Tate hesitated, then the flood waters of savage, burning hope rose up and engulfed everything.

"Come on!" he said hoarsely. "If Doc put the *Comet* down on one of those spots, I'll put a Stinson down there, too!"

### CHAPTER III.

#### SURPRISE PARTY.

WHEN the first faint thread of dawn's light etched the eastern rim of the world, Johnny Tate lifted a chartered five-place cabin Stinson job off the storm-swept surface of the North Bay airport toward the seven-hundred-foot ceiling. A fresh rain had sprung up, with a little wind, but according to latest weather Johnny had obtained just at take-off, he would be out of the rain in the matter of minutes, and should have a gradually rising ceiling.

However, there were no available weather reports on the treacherous area which was his objective. What he might hit there was in the lap of the gods. And it was probably an odds-on bet that it would be bad. Very bad.

However, whether it would be bad or worse than bad took up but little of Johnny's thoughts as he climbed up, then leveled off on his fixed course. All that mattered was that a miracle had come to pass. He was in a plane, flying in search of Doc Holden and the *Comet*. That he would find both in time, he had not the slightest doubt.

He had no proof, no logical guarantee; simply that something inside of him—a hunch, perhaps. Anyway, it is that motivating something in a pilot that, without any reason, causes him to bank when flying blind and miss a mountain he didn't even suspect was there ahead of him.

He might be all wrong. But he was sure he was right. And for a man with Johnny Tate's thousands of air hours on all the air routes of the world, that was more than sufficient for him!

"Hang on, Doc," he whispered. "I'm coming, pal!"

He hunched forward a little over the controls, as though in so doing he might sooner spot what he was looking for, still some three hundred crow-flight miles

away. Behind him his two passengers sat talking in low tones. Johnny couldn't hear what they were saying, and he didn't care. As far as he was concerned he was alone in the plane.

He had learned that the thin man's name was Collins, and the chunky one's, Heftner. And the company they represented was the National Aero Insurance Corp. He might have learned more, but he wasn't interested. That his passengers had put up the money to charter the Stinson was all that mattered.

He had felt a twinge of anger toward them, because of their evident worry over the fate of the cargo covered by their company. The fate of Doc Holden, and the others of the crew hadn't seemed to bother them at all. However, since they had chartered the plane, and given him the chance to fly it, they were entitled to worry about any blasted thing they wished. The devil with his passengers!

The first hour out of North Bay proved the weather boys to be absolutely correct. The rain stopped, and the ceiling got higher and higher. Visibility lengthened until it ran to five miles or so. But at the end of that first sixty minutes things started going into reverse. The fifteen-hundred-foot ceiling started to drop, a couple of small storm spots got in the way of the Stinson, and Johnny was forced to fly around them in order to keep visible contact with the ground which became more and more rugged.

But Johnny had flown it uncounted times, and he was practically on speaking terms with every jagged peak, and not a few of them poked right up into the clouds. If it remained like it was, it wouldn't be so bad. If it got worse, though!

He fixed anxious eyes on some rolling black clouds far off to the west. A careful study of them told him that the storm they were hiding was moving due south, parallel to his course. If it should suddenly swing eastward—good night! There would probably be two missing planes out of North Bay. And he had told no one the Stinson's destination when he had chartered it. The aircraft had been paid for in advance on an hourly basis, not mileage, or point-to-point.

"Cut it!" Johnny squared his rising thoughts. "You'll miss that storm spot by miles. And if you don't, you'll still keep going. You're right, and you *know* you're right!"

Johnny ignored the trouble clouds and

gave all of his attention to keeping the Stinson just under the lowering ceiling. In another twenty minutes he was over the area he had selected as his best bet to search first.

To the inexperienced eye it was a frightening sight below. Rugged, rock-topped hills stretched off in all directions, and narrow twisting valleys were choked with heavy growth. Not a big enough clear space for a tired bird to light on, let alone an airplane.

Yes, to the inexperienced eye. But Johnny Tate saw several spots, and as each came into his vision he peered at it with pounding heart and soaring hopes. But one after another the small clear spaces told him nothing. And as the Stinson's fuel gauge needle began to swing closer and closer to the half-full mark, invisible steel fingers squeezed tighter and tighter about his heart.

Up and down valley after valley he guided the Stinson, the aircraft's wings well below the tops of the hills and half-mountains, all the time widening out the area covered. Spot after spot revealed nothing of interest. The firm conviction that Doc Holden had been given the chance to spot a landing space before it was too late began to slip away from Tate. Cold sweat chilled his body, and tight bands about his chest made it an effort to breathe.

Desperately he clung to his belief. Doc was down in this area *somewhere*. But where? In a spot where he'd had a fifty-fifty chance? Or had the *Comet* gone hurtling into a mountainside?

"I thought you said you knew where it was? You'll have us down there, if you keep this up much longer!"

Collins' unpleasant voice, and the man's hand gripping his shoulder seemed to touch off fire-crackers in Johnny Tate's brain. He knocked the man's hand flying.

"Go sit down, and shut up!" he rasped savagely. "You wanted to come along. So shut up, or I'll—"

It was at that exact instant that Johnny Tate saw the *Comet*. He had circled the mountain and was just starting down a long valley when he saw the airliner. That is, he saw what was left of the *Comet*. It was nose-buried in wild shrub growth. The left wing was sheared off and the right wing was like a crumpled length of paper. The tail was partly broken and twisted crazily. The cabin, though, and the forward end looked to be not damaged at all.

And then what Johnny saw made his

heart almost explode with joy, the tears of relief pressed hot against his eyeballs. In back of the broken tail section was a group of figures. Four were standing up, and waving wildly. The fifth was on the ground, partly covered by a blanket.

Johnny slid the Stinson right over the little group. And then his joy was complete. One of those waving men was big, broad-shouldered Doc Holden.

"Doc, you old so-and-so!" Johnny sobbed as he banked off and around. "I knew you'd make it!"

"Good going, Tate!" came Collins' excited voice in his ear. "Can you get down there, and get off again, too!"

"Both, and go sit tight, you fool!" Tate shouted. "I've first got to get us down!"

Johnny Tate did just that. It took the skill that only the best possess, but Johnny was one of the best. Also, the Fates were kind enough to provide him with a wind that ran right up the valley from where the crash-landed *Comet* lay cuddled among broken-off shrub and saplings.

With that wind he was able to float the Stinson in and down to a slow-brake stop and still leave plenty of clear space for a full-out take-off.

The instant he had braked the aircraft he cut the ignition, practically booted open the door and went out onto the ground in a flying leap. Completely forgetful of his two passengers he raced toward the *Comet* men.

"You old bum, you!" he cried and threw himself at Holden. "I knew I'd find you. I knew it, see? Hey, you okay?"

Holden's face was lined and sunken from the ordeal he had been through. And he gaped at the grinning Johnny Tate as though he were looking at a ghost.

"Johnny!" he finally got out. "You, Johnny? Where in thunder did you come from, sonny?"

"Right out of Santa Claus' pack, Doc!" Tate cried happily. "Just for you. Surprise, surprise, huh?"

Tate stopped short, and his smile died as he looked at the motionless figure of a red-headed kid on the ground.

"The only casualty, and not too bad," he heard Holden say. "Young Allen, the navigator. Got his right leg busted in a couple of places. I had to give him a shot from the medical kit to make him sleep. Look, Johnny—"

But Johnny Tate didn't hear. He was looking at the other members of the *Comet*'s crew. At Frank Baker in par-

ticular. And hot coals were beginning to move around inside of him. Baker's jaw was swollen, and there were some scratches and bruises on other parts of his face. But his eyes were all right—except that they were brimming over with stark fear. Johnny smiled stiffly into those eyes.

"Well, well, well!" he said softly. "They told me you were aboard, Baker. Another reason why I had to find the *Comet*. You didn't give me a chance—to see you again, Baker. I wanted to—"

"Johnny! What the devil is this?"

Something in Doc Holden's voice caused Johnny Tate to wheel around. And what he saw froze any question on his lips. Collins and Heftner were standing about a dozen paces away. In Collins' hand was an ugly-looking automatic. And in Heftner's hands was a short-barreled submachine-gun. The muzzles of both weapons pointed straight at the group.

"Surprise, surprise, like you were saying, Tate," Collins said, with a tight grin. "Like I said, nice going. All right! Line up, all of you. Over by that kid on the ground."

Johnny Tate stood stock-still, his clenched fists at his sides.

"What's the idea?" he demanded. "What do you think you're trying to do?"

"What does it look like, chump?" the thin man said, in a flat voice. "I told you we were interested in this plane's cargo, didn't I? Well, we are. Only not quite the way we fed it to you, Tate. Just one piece of it. That's all we're interested in."

Doc Holden made sounds like a growling animal at bay. Johnny kept his gaze fixed on Collins and Heftner, and had a crazy urge to pinch himself and make sure that this wasn't some goofy nightmare.

"What do you mean?" he heard his own voice ask hoarsely.

The thin man switched his eyes to Doc Holden's face.

"You the captain of that wreck, Holden?" he asked.

"Right," Holden replied evenly. "So what?"

"So where is it?" Collins demanded. "I'll find it, but telling me will use up less time."

"Okay, go find it if you've got something to find," Holden said. "Me, I wouldn't know."

Collins laughed softly, and it was not nice to hear.

"You may be a hot pilot, Holden, but

you can't bluff," he said. "I happen to know that those stones were put aboard your plane in England. In your personal charge. In a locked courier's pouch, if you want details. The guy that sent them over to be cut and classed thought he was smart. But we're smarter, see? If you had landed at North Bay we were all set. It would have gone off as smooth as the movies. But you messed things up, Holden. You got your plane in a jam. And maybe nobody will get hurt. Maybe! Where's the pouch, Holden?"

"Say, what *is* this?" Johnny Tate blazed.

"You mean *you* wouldn't know, Johnny?"

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### OUT OF LUCK ALL AROUND.

DOC HOLDEN had asked the question quietly, but Johnny felt as though he had been hit in the face with a cake of ice. Little chilling rivulets of it trickled through his body. He stared at his old friend, and only then realized that Holden, Baker, and the two other uninjured crew members had moved back around the sleeping Allen. That left Johnny between them and the two men with guns. Swaying from the shock of what Doc's words had implied, he gaped incredulously.

"Doc!" he choked out. "Doc! Great glory, *Doc!*"

Holden's eyes were cold, and his smile thin.

"I never heard the story of the other business, Johnny," he said quietly. "Only that you pulled something no airline would take. And you always had a wild streak, Johnny. Look at this picture! What do you think I should think?"

Johnny Tate felt as though the ground were dropping away from beneath his feet. He stared into Holden's cold, unfriendly eyes; at Baker, and at the other two. Then he whirled and glared at Collins and Heftner.

"You two crazy?" he rasped. "Maybe there is something you want on the plane. So what? You two going to walk it out—three hundred miles across heaven knows what?"

Collins chuckled, and shook his head.

"No, Tate," he said. "We go out the same way we came in. And if you're smart you'll realize that your pal, there, is making it easier for you. Just watch them, Heft." Without giving Tate, or any of the others a second look, he

walked over to the crashed plane and disappeared through the cabin door.

Johnny had a sudden urge to charge the chunky man who was holding the submachine-gun easily, but expertly in his hands. Like something that had happened last week, he remembered that Heftner had carried a small suitcase aboard the Stinson with him. Then it had made no impression on Tate at all. Now Heftner was standing there with what had been inside that suitcase.

The urge to charge was great, but cold sense was strong enough to hold Johnny back. He would only get shot. And there were a couple of other things he wanted to do before he risked that. One was to get Doc Holden straightened out. Doc, of all people!

He turned his back on the submachine-gun, and looked appealingly at his best friend.

"Doc, you can't think I'd have any part in a deal like this!" he said brokenly. "I'd dropped off at the North Bay to see you. I learned what had happened, and went straight to Caldwell. I figured how it must have been with you—that dead radio spot east of Pembroke, and the storms. I guessed you'd come down around here somewhere. But they wouldn't listen, Doc. They—they threw me out."

"I'm listening, Johnny," Holden said coldly. "So you just *happened* to drop in and heard the news. Then your two pals said, 'Look, we want a little plane ride. It should be fun hunting for the *Comet*?' Just a couple of strangers stepped up to you and said that, huh, Johnny?"

Tate felt as though steel-clawed fingers were ripping him apart. He wanted to yell, to throw his fists at Doc Holden and beat sense into the senior pilot's head. But in his heart there was a great emptiness. He went on talking, hardly realizing he was doing so.

"Yes, a couple of strangers, Doc," he said. "But they told me they represented the insurance company that covered the *Comet's* cargo. I didn't care about that. All that mattered was that they had the dough to charter this Stinson. It was a chance for me to come after you, Doc. That's all I thought about. I know I should have found out a thing or two, but—but you were in trouble, Doc, and maybe I could help. I was sure I could find you. I was sure, too, that you had got her down somehow. I . . . Doc! Don't you see how it was?"

Johnny was almost crying, and then it

seemed as though a knife sliced his heart into small pieces, when Doc Holden's expression didn't change. His eyes were still cold, and his smile still thin.

"Quite a story, Johnny," he said. "How's the ending going to be, huh?"

Tate stared at him for a long moment, then slowly let the breath out of his lungs.

"Okay, Doc," he said in a dead voice. "Okay."

Turning his back on Holden, Johnny looked at Heftner. The chunky man grinned, arched an eyebrow, and shrugged.

"I've got a little something to settle here, Heftner," Tate said. "All right with you?"

"What?" he demanded.

Johnny pointed a finger at Baker.

"I've been saving something for that punk a long time," he said. "I want to give it to him now!"

The chunky man shot a squinting glance at the *Comet's* co-pilot, then flicked his eyes back to Johnny.

"Go ahead," he said. "But keep out of line with the others. They might not like what you have to give him."

Johnny walked straight over to Baker. He half-expected Doc Holden to move swiftly, but the *Comet's* captain didn't move a muscle. He just watched quietly as Tate hooked fingers in the front of the cringing Baker's flight jacket and jerked him away from the group.

"Well, Baker, there is one thing you can clear up!" Johnny said, into the fear-twisted face. "I want Doc and the others to hear it. At least it will be nice to know that you and Caldwell will get yours. Go on—talk!"

Johnny lifted his clenched fist, and held it poised to chop down with everything he had. Baker's knees half-buckled, and he lifted shaking hands to ward off the expected blow.

"Not now, Tate!" he choked. "I can't fight you now. Not after what I've been through!"

"What you've been through!" Holden's voice cut in scornfully. "I knocked you cold in the air, and you were still cold after we'd touched."

"What's that?" Johnny snapped. "knocked him cold in the air? Why?"

"He went yellow on me," Holden replied. He added with a scowl, "Baker was mixed up in that mess of yours? How? What was it, anyway?"

"Another thriller," Johnny Tate said tonelessly. "But I'll give it to you just

the same. Maybe you can have something done about Caldwell."

"That job-grabbing heel, huh?" Holden growled. "Maybe it'll be a pleasure. So?"

"Baker and I went to the Coast to pick up a new ship," Tate said. "Sweet as a nut, and there was good flying back. Well, a couple of weeks before, I'd met a cute number passing through North Bay. You were across at the time. She came from Cobalt, and I made a crack about dropping in next time I was over Cobalt. You know."

"So?" Holden grunted, the ice still in his eyes.

"So as Baker and I neared Cobalt I thought I'd make the gag good," Tate said. "We had chutes aboard and. . . Well, Baker said it would be okay by him. I could bail out and he'd take the ship on in, and say nothing. It was only a couple of hundred miles more. He'd go in and sign in the new ship, making it look like I'd hopped out on the field. So I bailed out over Cobalt. Got to North Bay a couple of days later."

Suddenly the pent-up flames of fury blazed up fiercely within Johnny Tate and spilled over. He grabbed Baker and shook him savagely. The *Comet's* co-pilot struggled desperately to wrench himself free. Tate shook him all the harder.

"You heel!" he grated. "You double-dealing heel! You and that Caldwell!"

"Don't, Tate!" Baker got out through chattering teeth. "It wasn't all my fault. It. . . Caldwell was in the office. He saw that I was alone. He—he asked me. I didn't know what to say. He. . . So help me, Tate, I had to tell him, see? Then he made me promise to tell that other story. He made that one up. Promised me a left seat in a ship of my own in six months. It was all Caldwell's idea, Tate! He didn't like you. You were always yelling about things. He said that you were a Red, and this was a good way to get you out. So—so I told that story to the Board, Tate. What could I do?"

Baker started blubbing like a baby. Johnny Tate hoisted him up with one hand, and smashed him in the face with his other. Baker screamed, went backward and down flat. He covered his bleeding face with his hands, and made no effort to get up. Panting, and with everything swimming before him, Johnny Tate stared down at Baker, utterly sick with the world, and everybody in it.

"What was the story he told the

Board?" Holden's voice broke the moment of tingling silence.

Johnny looked at him, and through him.

"One you probably would have believed!" he said tight-lipped. "That we hit weather, and I went yellow, and ordered us both to hit the silk. That I went out alone when Baker declared he'd stick with the ship, and take his chances. Thing of it was, there was a bit of weather just after I touched ground. Not much. But it was noted in Baker's log. It was his word, and Caldwell's. The Board didn't even give me a chance to tell my side. When they wouldn't I said a few things and walked out. I didn't come near North Bay again until last night."

"What about the cutey?" Holden asked quietly. "She could have backed up your story."

"No," Johnny said. "That was tough, too, like the unexpected spot of weather. She had moved away from Cobalt the week before. I was out of luck. Nobody would believe the truth. *You* won't."

Johnny spat out his accusation viciously, for the iciness in Doc Holden's eyes had driven him close to the borderline of insanity. If something didn't happen soon, he knew that he was going to smash the ice out of those steady eyes.

And something did happen. Collins spoke right behind him. "Take it easy, Tate. That lad's too big for you. Besides you've still got to fly us out of here."

Collins was but a couple of steps away. The grin was on his lips, and the automatic was still in his right hand. His left hand was curled about the handle of a padlocked courier's pouch. He looked past the glaring Tate at Holden.

"See what I mean?" He chuckled and hefted the pouch. "And here's something else you probably didn't know. In the Amsterdam markets these stones are valued at a million and a half. Wonder if you'd been tempted, had you known. . . . Come on, Tate."

"Come where, Collins?" Johnny said. The man looked at him narrow-eyed, and broadened his grin.

"I'll tell you when we're in the air," he said. "Don't worry, Tate, Heftner and I are big-hearted guys. We could use a good pilot like you in our business."

"Not a chance," Johnny said quietly. "This time you picked the wrong sucker. Whatever you're taking out, you'll take out on your feet. What do you think of that?"

## CHAPTER V.

### BOTTLED BLUFF.

COLLINS' grin faded slowly. His face became set, then frozen. His eyelids narrowed, and from between them came the bright gleam that showed him to be a ruthless killer.

"I don't think you're even smart a little bit, Tate," he said. "And your pals, here, they think you're a no-good. Look, Tate, I'm giving you a beautiful out. And a nice wad of cash later, too. After what I've been listening to I thought you'd be all set for my little deal. Didn't think I'd have to play it the way I had planned when you agreed to pilot that Stinson. But you're sort of forcing me into it, because you're not very smart."

"Forcing into what?" Johnny asked, dry-lipped. "Just because *they* don't believe, still doesn't make me a part of this."

"Come over here, Heft!" Collins said. "This chump wants to be stupid. Back up, Tate!"

His hand shove on Johnny's chest, sent him reeling back a few steps before he could stop himself. The few steps brought him almost shoulder to shoulder with Doc Holden. The *Comet's* pilot was watching Collins, and Heftner a little to one side of Collins.

"Okay, Tate, here's the play," Collins said. "Take it or leave it. My partner, here, just loves to shoot guns and see people fall down. Take my word for it. One by one your flying pals are going to get blasted from his gun. He will start with Holden, then the next, and so on until there's just you left. If you still don't want to fly us out—and get paid plenty for it—I guess we'll have to let you have the last burst and try to make it out of here on foot. I'm not kidding, Tate. One by one, with the big baboon first. . . . Well?"

Johnny Tate didn't make any attempt to reply. A million thoughts were racing around in his brain. He was like a man frantically grasping at straws. If he agreed to the deal, and hoped for a break once he had those two in the air, they'd watch him like a hawk. Sure he could dive the Stinson and wipe the three of them out. But that would only be postponing the fate he faced now.

No, there had to be something else. There *had* to be! He looked at Doc Holden's icy, set face. Holden coldly ignored him. Blind rage charged through Johnny, and he made his decision. He looked at Collins and Heftner, and nodded.

"A deal," he said, flat-voiced. Then, with a sneer at Holden, "What difference the company I keep now? But I've got a condition, Collins!"

"Yeah?" the man echoed lazily. "And that would be what?"

Johnny Tate took a couple of steps forward so that he at least couldn't see the eyes of the *Comet's* crew fixed on him.

"Nothing that won't be okay by you, Collins," he said. "There doesn't seem to be anything for me to do but deal in with you now. If these guys won't believe me, would the cops? So okay. I'll fly you any place the ship's gas will take us—and take whatever split is my share. Right?"

"What's the condition, Tate?" Collins said evenly.

"I didn't mean condition, that way," Johnny said. "I only meant that it'll take a little time. The Stinson's compass isn't what I need, unless you want to go right back to North Bay. Do you?"

"Maybe not," Collins said. "Know a better place?"

"Much better," Johnny said. "About four hundred west by north. But not on that Stinson's compass. I need the one that's in this wreck. It'll take an hour to make the switch. Just one hour while you hold these guys off my neck, in case they get ideas. Then I'll fly you any place, in any direction. Okay?"

The two men with guns exchanged looks, and both shrugged.

"You had me worried for a second, Tate," Collins chuckled. "Maybe you are a little smart at that. We certainly don't want to get lost. Okay, make the change, but make it as fast as you can."

Johnny turned his head and laughed at Holden derisively.

"I'll parcel post it back to you, Holden," he jeered.

Then he walked up in through the crash-landed *Comet's* cabin door. The instant he was inside and out of sight he stopped dead, and leaned against the cabin wall. Sweat was breaking out all over him, and his furiously pounding heart was fighting its way out through his aching ribs. But he paused only for an instant, to collect himself. Then he headed toward the pilots' compartment and instrument panels.

He stopped just this side of the little door, and looked down. A sob of wild relief clogged his throat, and for a moment he was unable to force himself to bend over and reach down. But when he managed to he unbuckled the floor

straps that held a wooden box solidly in place. The box was painted bright red, and white lettering on the cover and all four sides spelled:

### EXPLOSIVES.

Johnny didn't bother with the padlock. He hoisted the box, turned, and as he went back toward the cabin door his lips moved in silent prayer.

Then he reached the cabin door. Even as he yelled he saw the startled faces of Collins and Heftner turned up toward him.

"Shoot, curse you!" he bellowed. "This'll take us all to perdition!"

He heaved outward and downward with the red box, straight to Heftner's middle. He heard a scream of terror, and a short burst of shots. He even felt something hot fan his left cheek, but he was already in motion, his arms outstretched not toward Heftner, but toward Collins.

Through a haze he saw Collins' gun muzzle come swinging around toward him, but he didn't see the flash of fire, nor hear the blasting report. And he didn't because there was neither.

His diving body hit Collins' chest like a ton of brick. His outflung arms knocked the gun to one side, then wrapped themselves about the man. Collins went down like a felled ox. And Tate's body crashing down on top of him knocked every ounce of air from his lungs. Somehow he managed to hang onto his gun, but little good that did him. Collins was powerless to move his gun hand. He couldn't because Johnny had brought a heel down on the wrist. Then Collins wasn't able to move a muscle. Five rapid smashing blows of Tate's fist to the man's face and jaw laid him as flat and as lifeless as a rug.

Twisting up onto his feet Johnny spun, then relaxed. Heftner was flat and cold, too. Standing above him was Doc Holden, and in Doc's hands was the sub-machine-gun. The *Comet's* captain looked at Johnny, and grinned.

"I knew it, Johnny," he said, and now in his eyes was just a flood of warmth. "I knew you'd figure on something. But not this, or so soon. I counted on you figuring up something when you'd got them in the air."

"You counted?" Tate echoed harshly. "On me? After the things you'd said—what you believed."

Holden walked over to him. The big

pilot was still smiling, but there was hurt in his eyes now.

"Why, Johnny, I thought you got it," Holden said quietly. "I played it like that for a reason—to put you in the middle, of course. Don't you see? So's they wouldn't worry so much about you. And so's you could play up to them, like you did. Why when you pulled that compass-changing hogwash I was certain you'd caught on. That's why I was ready for anything when you ducked into the plane. I . . . Great heavens, you don't think, do you, Johnny—?"

Doc Holden was unable to go on. Tate stared into his hurt eyes for an instant, then gave him a playful punch to the ribs.

"Let's both stop thinking, hey, pal?" he said, with a catch in his voice. "Anyway, you've got to get to North Bay. You're a little overdue. Remember? And, here, take this along. Were you bluffing, Doc, or didn't you know?"

Tate picked up the courier's pouch from beside the unconscious form of Collins, and held it out. Holden took it in his big fist, hefted it, and scowled.

"No, not what was in it," he said, shaking his head. "Only that it was something special I was to look after personally, and turn over to our Receiving Agent at North Bay. Had I known what was in it I'd have said, nix. Like the guy cracked, maybe I would have been tempted. One and a half million bucks worth of uncut stones, huh? Brother! The things they make us fly around these days!"

"Well, take the stuff and get going, Doc," Johnny said, grinning. "Before both of us get tempted. The rest of us will wait here for the second trip. You're three hundred north and some to the west, of North Bay. Set her a hundred and seventy-six degrees south, and you'll hit North Bay on the nose. Don't be long coming back—or whoever you send."

"Hold it, Johnny," Holden said. "That Stinson takes five, even with young Allen stretched out. You come along."

"The second trip." Johnny shook his head. "I've still a little unfinished business. While we're waiting Baker is going to put it all down in black and white. And sign it, or else! Just in case he should change his mind, see? Or Caldwell tries something. No, get going and come back soon, Doc. Or send somebody."

"It'll be me, Johnny," Holden said

grimly. "Right after I've wiped up the North Bay field with Caldwell's face."

"No, Doc," Tate cut in. "That's for me—if he's still around. You just tell how things are. I'd like him to sweat a while."

"Okay, son," Holden sighed, and opened and closed one big fist. "But, it'll take will power. Anyway, I'll be back—but soon!"

Twenty minutes later the Stinson's drone was lost to the echo in the south. Collins and Heftner, bound hand and foot, were propped up against a section of the *Comet's* broken tail. Beside them sat Baker, a fountain pen in one hand and a pad of paper in the other. Sullen-eyed, but fascinated, the trio watched Johnny Tate turn the red box right side up and put a key in the lock. When he lifted the lid the trio craned their necks slightly and fixed fearful but curious eyes on what was inside.

"What the—" Collins exploded hoarsely. "Bottles!"

Johnny Tate grinned at him.

"Bottles of the best Scotch produced in bonnie Scotland, chump," he said and lifted one out. "Like we each said once before, Collins—surprise, surprise, huh?"

Baker tried to speak but words were failing him, too. The expression on his face was that of a man who has bitten into a rotten apple and been kicked in the stomach at the same time.

"Bottles of Scotch?" he finally managed. "Then it wasn't—wasn't—?"

"No, and never was," Johnny said drily. "Just an idea of Doc's and mine to keep nosey passengers—and crew members, too—away from our personal property. We dreamed it up on our second trans-ocean trip together. The boys hadn't let you in on the stunt yet, Baker? Well, all pilots bring in a little of this and that for their personal use. Some guys bring Brazil coffee, some bring a few pounds of sugar, others bring something else they especially like. With me and Doc, it was a few bottles of Scotland's best."

Johnny Tate calmly peeled off the foil and worked out the cork. Then he looked at Baker again.

"Get that ferry plane story all down, and signed, and maybe I'll be human enough to give you a drink, Baker," he said. Then grinning at Collins and Heftner, he added, "You two rats, too, I guess. After all, you have been a big help to me—and you're certainly not going to get even an imitation of this stuff where you're going!"

# HERO OF HELL

By ROBERT J. HOGAN

*Determined not to show his fright, Ace Marty Douglas closes in single combat with Der Schwarz, Nazi terror of the skies!*

THE thought that the mutton chop he was eating for breakfast had once been part of a living sheep and that the sheep had had to die so he could eat it, made the meat stick in his throat. Most likely, the sheep hadn't wanted to die. Marty Douglas didn't want to die, either, but the thought of the sheep was a kind of presentiment that he would die and that this was the day for it. In fact, he felt psychic about it. It was a rotten sensation.

The flying officers' mess at Hunterdon 6, Fighter Group Field, was a stable of a place—wide, long and low, its roof criss-crossed by rafters to hold up the soggy snows that come to England. Long tables ran across the width of the building where young men sat eating and pretending they were at a family reunion picnic back home rather than at war.

Down at the south end of the long hall, the platform was still up where the U.S.O. troop had entertained last night. There'd been girls up there on that platform, singing and dancing. One with the genuine flaxen hair and a clear, sweet little voice had reminded Marty of Janie, his kid sister, when Janie had sung in the children's choir back home. That was three years ago.

Captain Martin Douglas cut across the tail of his mutton chop. He always ate the tail of the chop first because he liked to save the best until last. But Janie'd always wanted her dessert first and next whatever else she liked best and so on because in that way she was always eating the best. But Marty had liked to look ahead to the better things. Now his knife hesitated because, from where he sat, there wasn't much for him to look forward to.

His muscles drew up tight leaving no empty space in him, like they had last night when he lay awake thinking about the mission today. He hadn't slept much.

The idea of eating part of a sheep that hadn't wanted to die suddenly stayed his hand and he all but pushed back his plate. Then he remembered the others.

Funny how a thing like that would react upon men. Funny how the combat boys would watch a leader at the head of

the table and tell how tough the job would be by the way the leader ate his breakfast. Marty had been able to do that himself a long time ago.

Remembering those things, Douglas bent over his chop and his fried potatoes and his marmalade and toast and went to work again as if this was not his day to die.

He chewed on the tail of the chop. It was tough and greasy with fat that stuck to the roof of his mouth. The mutton was going down hard and he raised his eyes to the first three of his men along his right.

They were all wing men. Their names were, in order of seating, Greenberg, Avery and Trinkers. There was a little joke about the three. Trinkers to Avery to Greenberg, like Tinker to Evers to Chance.

Greenberg turned his small, dark head toward the nearest window and saw the fog drifting by outside. He grinned.

"Oh, what a beautiful morning," he sang. "Oh, what a beautiful day."

Everybody at that end of the table laughed. Marty Douglas laughed, too. Bergie was a swell tonic. He was a good guy with his guns, also, and had a four-Swastika tally on the side of his cockpit. Avery and Trinkers had three each.

Marty Douglas had as many as all three put together, plus one. Marty was top man of the squadron. It was a most unsatisfactory position up there on the pedestal with everybody watching, where he couldn't show the fear that grew inside him.

"What's on the board this morning, chief," Avery said in his boyish voice. "We got some trains to beat up?"

Douglas tried to make his smile calm and slow and steady.

"How would I know? We'll get all the dope at briefing in fifteen minutes."

Trinkers was a Texas bov. He turned his long face on Douglas.

"Don't give us that old stuff," he said. "Reckon you wasn't just playin' two-handed poker with the Old Man last night for mighty near two hours."

Eyes the length of the table turned on Douglas and men poised their forks and their knives. Big Mike Tarchak was looking at him with mild fish eyes that never blinked or swerved.

Marty chewed on his mutton chop. If he'd blurted out the first thing that came into his head, in response to the searching eyes, and had told it truthfully, he would have said:

"We're going out after Der Schwarz this morning and I'm scared cockeyed."

But, of course, he didn't say that.

"This mutton is getting tougher all the time," he remarked. "I'm beginning to suspect that they're importing goats from Ireland."

Avery laughed his head off. Avery always laughed at any humorous crack Marty made. Some of the others laughed, too. Mike Tarchak just went on eating.

It wasn't enough to be held up from the very start, as a great football star. Before he'd enlisted, Marty Douglas had been All-American Quarterback at Illinois, so the brass hats had dug up that his old man, Sam Douglas, had been one of the top aces of World War I.

From the very beginning, Marty had heard about his father's skill at killing Germans back in 1918. They'd started when he got his commission at Randolph Field a thousand years ago.

"I knew your dad in the last World War," the commanding general had said. "I flew with him. You have a great heritage to live up to, Douglas."

That was how it had been ever since. So far he'd managed to swallow his heart at the right time, get the little yellow ball of light on the enemy plane at the proper moment and press his trigger button at the correct instant.

Funny thing, but he hadn't been nearly as scared at first as he was now. It was a little like starting a crap game. You had the game ahead of you and the odds weren't so strongly against you. But when you had rolled a string of naturals with the dice and had won over and over again, you began to wonder how much longer you played, the higher grew the chances that fate was going to sock you with a brick.

This was more important than just gambling with money. You gambled with your life. Lose once, and the whole show would be over for you.

So the odds had been running out on Marty. Fate had been holding him up by the boot straps. The more he battled in the air, the greater were the odds that his turn would come next to go spiraling

down in a column of black smoke and fire. Each Swastika he painted on his cockpit-cowling brought him that much closer to the moment when his sign would be painted on some Nazi plane.

The men were joking as they filed into the briefing room but under the light talk there was plenty of tension. All the flights of the squadron were going in. Some had on their flak vests. Mike Tarchak wore his big flying suit, while Trinker carried his gear over his high, broad shoulder. There was a guy that never would look military. He'd spent too much of his life wearing high-heeled riding boots.

Chairs rattled as the men took seats. When they were all down, a tall, slim Intelligence officer, with gray temples, soft blue eyes and a straight, pointed nose, glanced at the closed door to make sure, and took his place in the front of the room.

"Men," he said. "All flights are going out this morning to beat up trains, clabber flak towers or mess up whatever you can find a hundred miles inside the Reich. However, those will not be your main objectives."

He snuffed out his cigarette and the room was very still.

Marty Douglas knew what was coming. He stood waiting, facing the men with two other flight leaders. His eyes were focused on a cross rafter that made him think of the extra prop that he and his father had nailed up across the old barn in Michigan to keep the sides of the leaning barn from bulging out.

His father had bought the farm so Marty and Janie could be raised in the country and so his mother could have fresher air while Sam Douglas ran the Detroit Airport as his job.

Intelligence was talking.

"Der Schwarz is an ace that the Nazis are building up to greatness. They call him The Schwarz, meaning Black, for propaganda purposes. The Germans have tried to make of him another Richthofen and they've done very well. It will damage Nazi morale if this pilot can be shot down and destroyed."

Like the rest, Marty knew all those things and, last night, Lieutenant Colonel Cochran had laid plans. Schwarz liked the old single combat idea.

Intelligence glanced at Marty and the other leaders.

"The three flight leaders will be up front and their flights will make an effort to draw on Der Schwarz. Whichever flight leader he attacks will engage him in single

combat while the rest of his flight fights it out with the other Nazi One-Nineties. Dismissed."

That was about all, except that the fog was lifting outside. It would be clear over Westphalia where Schwarz was stationed.

Marty walked toward the Mustangs ahead of his men. He heard them talking behind him.

"The Krauts stay pretty corny with their single combat," one of them said. "Where do they think they are, in the last World War?"

"Aw, the Heinies ain't so dumb," another man answered. "They build up a pilot like this guy Schwarz, they give him a name and then they have Hitler pin medals on him every two weeks. It makes propaganda so the Germans don't notice so much the clabbering our bombers are giving them."

In his Mustang, climbing for altitude over the Channel, Marty Douglas felt good. At least, by himself, he didn't have to be afraid the boys, and particularly Mike Tarchak, would see through him and know how scared he was. It was a relief to be alone and not watched.

He didn't have to act like a hero. He didn't have to smile with slow confidence. He could be his own scared self and if his hand shook when he took the safety off his guns, that was all right too. Now only his voice could show how scared he was, but he could control that.

His mouth seemed half its normal size. That was from his fear last night, while he had lain awake on his cot, worrying, trying to figure how he would act when and if Der Schwarz tangled with him and came in for the kill.

"You're the best man we have in the group," the Group Commander had told him last night.

Marty sure felt sorry for the others.

The mists were far behind them and the sun was high in the sky. They'd passed Dollberg and Treiner and Meinster and Baden, and they were flying at twenty-three thousand. The oxygen kept him bright and made the blood tingle as it raced through his body.

Pretty soon they'd spot something far below, a moving train, or a military depot or something to attack as an excuse for coming over.

They were flying light without extra tanks. Their wing guns were fully loaded. They were out for combat and nothing else except as a blind.

He'd wondered a hundred times before how it would be to die. He'd seen plenty

of fliers die. Some had gone down with wings chopped off and others had gone down burning. He shuddered at these memories.

Now and then he checked his instruments. He did everything by instinct. He checked his gas gauge and his oil pressure, his oxygen and his air speed and tachometer and the others behind him in their close formation. He did it all with one swift flick of his eye and then his eyes shifted up into the sun.

Der Schwarz would lie waiting in the blinding sun until planes from England



came along. Yes, Der Schwarz would be up there with his flight.

He narrowed his eyes to slits. The sun had specks, now. Black specks, but growing slightly larger. Seven black specks.

Marty didn't speak on his radio. That would warn the enemy planes that they were sighted. Better to let them think they were not suspected. His only move was to bring his nose up ever so slightly. The other pilots might not notice the slight movement at first. Soon they'd find out he was climbing a little, and that would be the signal that they were being attacked. There wasn't any great hurry.

Turning, Marty took another tense look. The seven One-Nineties were coming with such reckless speed that they evidently didn't think they'd been discovered. That was all to the good.

He adjusted his rear view mirror and took his trigger button off safety. With his thumb lever he increased the pitch of his propeller very slightly to be ready for action.

Marty found himself calmer now that battle was almost upon him. His hands moved with surprising ease and sureness. He made everything about him ready for the fight that was to come. He turned his head and looked at Greenberg, his wing man. Bergie's head wasn't in sight at the moment but Bergie was holding his place in formation perfectly. Bergie was pre-

paring for battle, too. Bergie knew. Likely enough the others, too.

Marty leveled off—only a hair's breadth movement of the controls—to get a little more speed in his flight. Later, he'd climb slightly again to make up for the altitude that the enemy planes had over him.

He tried to relax and checked his instruments again with one sweep of his eyes and there, hanging at the top of his instrument panel, was the little ten-cent-store four-leaf clover, incased in plastic, that Janie had given him the night he'd left for good.

For good?

The enemy planes were much nearer. He could make them out in his mirror. They were Focke-Wulf One-Nineties. He tried to see if the lead plane was black, but they weren't near enough yet.

Funny, but before a fight the last words his father had spoken to him, always came to him.

"Keep lots of flying speed, Skipper," Sam Douglas had said. On the train from Detroit, Marty had wondered why his father had looked so worried. Now he knew. The old man had been through it. He realized what Marty was getting into.

Marty gunned the engine wide and moved the stick back a little to pick up that altitude. It would be only a matter of seconds before the attack would come bursting upon them. He could see in the mirror. Another few hundred yards gain and those lunging FWs would open fire.

His heart came up in his throat and he swallowed it again. There in the lead was a Focke-Wulf painted a dull black color all over.

Now that they were climbing, the Nazis must know they had been seen.

Marty looked over his shoulder and gave the signal to his men. It would be every man for himself, since he was to tangle personally with Schwarz. Funny, but the idea of Der Schwarz didn't hold any terror for him. In that black FW sat another man and except that his was painted black, he flew a plane that was like all other One-Nineties. So what?

Careful of his timing now. If he turned too soon, Schwarz would turn with him and that would be that. If he were late, Schwarz would get him before he could move his controls. The turn must be just right.

He waited and he watched. Three seconds seemed like a million years. He watched behind him, looking over his shoulder, as the FWs came on down.

The Nazis were almost in range. This was the time!

Marty signaled quick, yanked his stick into his lap and over to the right. He kicked rudder and the Mustang flipped over to the side and changed direction.

He caught a glimpse of his men doing the same, but in either direction, to right and left. And then he blacked out.

His head cleared. He saw that the black FW had passed him and was trying to make a fast turn to come back. Marty turned too. They went round and round. The sky was thinly specked with planes, One-Nineties and Mustangs, circling and firing and circling. An FW blew apart. A white parachute took shape below it. That made Marty feel good. It made him feel swell.

Der Schwarz was a fine pilot. He was the best Marty had ever been up against. They went round and round. Then Marty throttled back, but the FW half rolled and ran for it. Schwarz pulled up in a loop, rolled off the top and came in again. It was fascinating to watch this Nazi. He was superb in his maneuvers.

Marty half-rolled and dived away. The FW went with him and took a quick shot at the Mustang. He missed.

They went on and on, fighting down, down, down to lower levels over the country side. Schwarz tried a long shot and missed again. They circled and Marty looped and rolled, and the German did the same. Schwarz got a short burst at him and his slugs cut through the tail of the Mustang and made the ship shudder from the smashing force of the blows.

Again they were circling and maneuvering and suddenly, Marty dived, cut in short on a hairpin turn and blacked out. He was out a long time—maybe four seconds—and when he came to, Schwarz was going up in a loop and rolling.

The tiny ball of light danced in Marty's sights and then it was on Schwarz's but he was away again. Marty turned sharp and blacked out again. When he could see, Schwarz had turned and was coming at him, head on.

They were down to two thousand feet and the cows below kept on grazing, and a man and woman in the field stood and watched. The two planes came at each other head on and the closure was terrific with speed. Again Marty focused his sights and half pressed his trigger button, waiting for the moment.

They came on and on and the seconds were like ages and space was nothing, and there were only two objects in the

world and they were hurtling at each other at a combined speed of nearly eight hundred miles an hour.

When the sights focused, Marty pressed his button. Puffs of smoke and flame burst from the guns of the black FW at the same time and engines snorted. Then, as they were almost at each other, Marty tried to swerve.

Schwarz swerved too, slightly. There wasn't time to hear the tearing rip of wing against wing, it was so swift. Splinters of steel and duralumin flew all over the sky. Marty was going down in a lopsided dive that he couldn't break out of, with his controls locked.

There wasn't time to try again. In a swift movement, he ripped off the cockpit cover, leaped and pulled his cord, and there was the earth of Belgium or France or someplace along the border directly below him.

He was caught up and his body began swinging. He heard a crash behind him and turned his head. It was his Mustang and it seemed to be crashing all over Europe. He looked the other way and there was no parachute in the sky, but only a streaking ball of flame with black smoke for a tail. It tore on and crashed a mile away, with Schwarz dead in the wreckage.

Marty's legs hit the earth and caved in under him. He'd run and hide somewhere before Germans came to search for him. He'd get as far away as he could before he came. He tore off his chute harness and started to run. His legs wobbled and he could scarcely stand.

"Golly, am I tired," he muttered.

He tried to run faster for a hedgerow.

"Oh, golly, am I tired.

It was like a prayer. He got to the hedgerow and, stumbling, fell on his face among the branches.

It was so wonderful to lie down and not be tense. It would be swell just to lie there and not try to go on, ever. Only it would be more comfortable in his own bed in the west room of the big farm house back in Michigan. He thought about those mornings briefly, then sat up.

"I'm going dotty," he told himself.

He got to his feet, pushed through the hedge, and ran to the corner of the field, keeping to the cover of the hedgerow, then along toward the west which the the general direction of home.

He stripped off his flying suit so he could move faster and left the suit behind. That helped a little. But it was hard to go on. It was painful to put

one foot ahead of the other and harder yet to think.

He came to a road and started across. Then he ducked back in the hedge and reached for his automatic. His automatic wasn't there. It must have fallen out when he jumped from his wrecked plane.

A car was coming up the road, moving slowly. It had some tank contraptions at the side for burning charcoal. He'd seen such things from the air.

He lay in the hedge and waited and the car came on. It slowed to a wheezing stop and a man got out. He was old and he had in old clothes made of heavy cloth, well patched at the elbows and the knees.

"American," he said. "American."

He went on into some French which didn't fit the French that Marty had studied in high school. The old man was opening the back door of the old car and throwing out some pieces of wood, cut to foot lengths, he hurriedly got out the wood and looked toward the hedge. He talked fast French and pointed to the floor of the back seat.

"You can repeat that again," Marty said.

He came out of his hiding place and dived into the car. He lay curled on the floor and the man piled in the wood again and covered him with it. Marty lay still and the car started up again.

For about an hour, the old car chugged along, turning corners and jolting over dirt roads. It stopped. A man spoke French with a German accent and then the car drove on again.

Twice that day the car stopped and there was much talking. The wood was jostled about on top of him until Marty thought his body would cave in from the weight of the wood and the sharp corners.

He didn't know how long they'd been driving when the car finally stopped and there wasn't any arguing. The wood was removed and he tried to get up. But his back felt broken in two, his arms were numb and his legs wouldn't straighten out.

It was dark now. He hadn't been able to see with the pile of wood on top of him. Someone was helping him out. A woman's voice spoke.

"You are all right, no?"

"Yes," Marty said. "I guess so. Little stiff." He worked his arms and legs.

"We have been waiting for you," she said. She was a girl.

It was nice to have someone talking English.

"You've been waiting for me?" he said. His head was whirling and he couldn't see for the darkness and the aching of his head.

"Waiting, yes. Hurry."

"I'd rather lie down—in a bed," he wanted to say. He was all gone. His legs wobbled.

She took his right arm, and the old man, he thought it was the old man with the car, took his left arm.

"I'm all right," he said. "Just a little stiff." He drew himself up straight. His head began to clear. "Now what's this all about?"

He began to see. There was a little farmhouse and a barn. He could just make them out in the darkness. They were leading him to the house. The girl on his right was talking softly.

"We are of the Underground. My grandfather draws wood for charcoal for the German officer's cars. There is no wood here so he brings in from inland."

"Where are we now?"

"On the coast—about a mile," she said. "Can you row a boat?"

"What? Sure. But won't the oars make noise?"

"It is a chance," she said.

They went into the house and down a flight of stairs and a trap door closed over them in the kitchen floor.

It was a small cellar made of stone. At the far end was a pile of wood. She pointed to it. The old man stood smiling and pulling on a long, stringy, wide mustache.

"If the Nazis should come to search the house, you will hide under the pile of wood. See?"

The old man went over and lifted on some of the lower pieces of wood. Part of the pile came up as if they were fastened to a low trap door.

"There is enough room to crawl under for a while," the girl said. "I'll get you something to eat."

She went upstairs and Marty sat down on a chopping block by the wood pile. It was good to sit down. He held his head in his hands. His head was very tired. The old man stood silently watching him.

Pretty soon the girl came down again. She looked almost sixteen but she had a fine, strong body. She brought a tray of black bread and thin soup.

"I am sorry, Monsieur, but this is all we have."

Marty was standing. He thought about

the mutton chop. He was glad he'd made himself eat all his breakfast that morning.

"I had a good breakfast," he said. "You need this food. Can you get me back to England?"

"We can show you how," the girl said. She spoke to her grandfather in French. He nodded his head.

There was a knock on the upstairs door. Marty stood rigid and glanced at the wood pile in the corner. It didn't look big enough to hide under very successfully.

The girl spoke low and fast to her grandfather again, then she ran up the stairs. She said something in French when she opened a door above and the grandfather relaxed. He smiled.

There were footsteps on the stairs and the girl came down and a man came with her. He was a heavy, elderly man with a calm, smiling face. "This is Doctor Marceau," the girl said. "He will explain."

The explanation came in English that was just good enough to grasp. Marceau had a plan of the coastal defenses of that area. They had been waiting for an airman from England to parachute down to them. They had been saving this plan to send back. They told Marty about the plan, and said he could start at once, if he was ready to go. He was.

There was a boat, sturdy, but fairly light, with a flat bottom, and oars. The stream ran to the ocean. He could lie in the boat, drift down the stream to the ocean, and then begin rowing when he reached the tall reeds along the swampy beach. He would have to watch for the nazi patrol along the coast. They patrolled back and forth every hour. If he caught sign of a small searchlight coming, he must wait until the Nazis had passed. . . .

Marty Douglas sat in the end of the boat, after he'd reached the surf, and paddled with one oar, like he'd paddled a canoe in Michigan. It was quieter that way. The oars made too much noise between the pegs.

The channel waters kicked the row-boat around and washed water inside. He sat with his legs in the water and paddled on. His arms felt as if they would fall off.

Up to the north he heard the low sound of a powerful patrol-boat engine and he stopped paddling and got down

flat in the bottom of the boat. The water was like ice but the night was dark. He waited and a thousand hours passed him by as the patrol-boat came on. Now and then a small searchlight swung, winked and went out. It passed him a mile out to sea.

When it was gone, he sat up and began paddling again. He moved his arms fast and in long strokes, trying to take the numbness out of them. His whole body felt frozen. His legs didn't have any sensation.

Another patrol-boat was coming. This time he didn't care so much as he had before, but he got down in the icy water that the rowboat had shipped, and lay still. He was too cold to feel any pain now. He lay there and the boat went by between him and the coast of Europe and, somehow, he got up and went on paddling without much power in his strokes.

There wasn't any way of knowing how much longer he paddled. For hours the rowboat had been awash with the chill waves breaking over him. The reason he kept paddling was because his subconscious mind told him to. That was the only way he could keep from falling into the water and drowning.

The first streaks of dawn came and he was still paddling. There wasn't any sign of land in any direction and then,

as full daylight came, he had no sense of anything any more and the world of sky and water was only a blanket of dark gray slowly covering him. It was nice to have no pain and no cold and not to know anything.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You're all right now and we have the drawings that you brought, Captain Douglas," a woman was saying. She was speaking in good old American English.

He opened his eyes and it was a nurse with an Air Corps uniform on and he managed to smile at her.

Gosh, he was tired!

He didn't know how long it was before he opened his eyes again, but when he did, Lieutenant Colonel Cochran was smiling down at him.

"We have a surprise for you in a few days when you're feeling fit, Douglas," Cochran said.

Who cared about surprises? He went back to sleep again.

He stayed in the hospital as long as the chief surgeon and his conscience would let him. Then he went back to Hunterdon 6.

At mess, Lieutenant Colonel Cochran got up and made a speech. It was a very silly thing. He told about how Captain Martin Douglas had shot down Der Schwarz—how he had landed by para-

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chute himself and brought back, through perilous seas, some information that was vital to Intelligence. Cochran laid on the hero stuff all over the place. He made Marty squirm in his seat at the head of the table. He made a fool of him before the flying men of the entire combat group. When he had finished with his tale of hardship and bravery, he pinned the Distinguished Flying Cross on him and made him stand up so all the group could see him.

Marty stood there feeling sillier than ever. They called for a speech and he opened his mouth and closed it again. He wanted most of all to tell them how afraid to die he was. Then he wanted to tell them how he'd trade all the medals in the world to be pitching hay in the back lot on the little farm that was home. And he wanted to tell them how he'd trade all the hero stuff for just one ten-second glimpse of Janie and maybe to hear her sing the first few bars of "Lead Kindly Light."

Anyway, he'd learned that he wasn't psychic. That was something. That was a big relief. Maybe, after this, he wouldn't

be so afraid to die or at least maybe he wouldn't be so darned sure he was going to die, as he had been before the last mission.

So he put on a slow smile, and he stood very calm and sure of himself, like writers made heroes do.

"Well, gentlemen, it's nice to be back," he said.

That seemed to be just what Lieutenant Colonel Cochran had hoped he'd say. At least the Group Commander looked delighted. He looked like he was going to say, "Spoken like a real hero," but, of course, he didn't.

Cochran shook his hand and then all the men of the group came, one at a time, and shook Marty's hand and offered their congratulations.

Last of all came Mike Tarchak. But his soft, expressionless fish eyes were moist.

"Captain, it's an honor, sir, to shake your hand," he said.

Mike's big paw was as cold and clammy as a ghost's mitten. It also looked as if Marty had Mike Tarchak fooled, too.

## THE GOOSE FLIES SOUTH

*(Continued from page 17)*

to, we can sit down on the water and last awhile. This is a boat, you know. We could probably last long enough in this sea so that the ship could come up with us. We'll radio as soon as we get this bomber out far enough."

They were over two hundred miles out, and still herding the bomber before Runnels let out a yell. But Turk had seen the bomber jump, and had seen the bomb fall away.

He whipped the ship over into a steep climbing turn and went away from there fast. Even so, the concussion struck them with a terrific blow, and the plane staggered, and then he looked back at the huge column of water mounting into the sky, and then the awful roar as thousands upon thousands of tons of water geysered up and tumbled back into the sea.

Turk banked again, searching for the bomber. It was there, still further out to sea, and Turk turned again and started after him.

"All right, Panola," he said. "In code,

call our own ship. I hope they survived the tidal wave caused by that bomb."

The bomber was farther out now, and they moved after him, and in a moment, Panola leaned over.

"She's all right. About two hundred miles north and west."

Turk turned the amphibian, keeping the bomber in view, but angling away. "He may reach land," he said over his shoulder. "But if he does he'll crash on the coast of Chile. He'll never make it back to the Argentine!"

Runnels leaned back and ran his finger around inside of his collar.

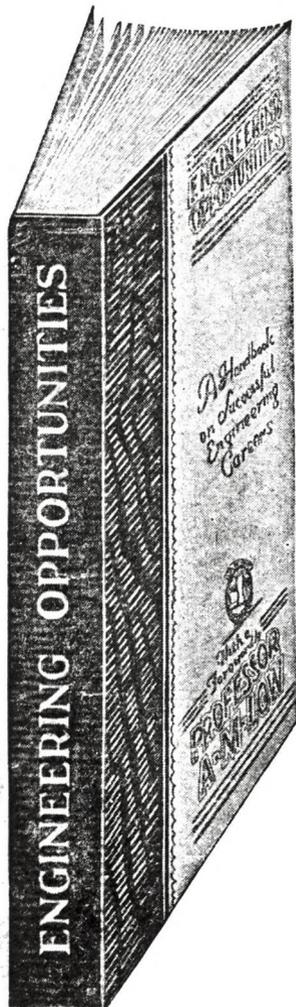
"For awhile you had me worried," he said grimly. "I thought you were going to tangle with that bomb!"

Turk chuckled. "Not me, buddy! I'm saving this lily white body of mine for the one and only girl!"

"Yeah?" Runnels was skeptical. "And you've got a girl in every port!"

"Not me. I haven't been in every Port!"

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