

DUSTY AYRES *and his*

SEPTEMBER



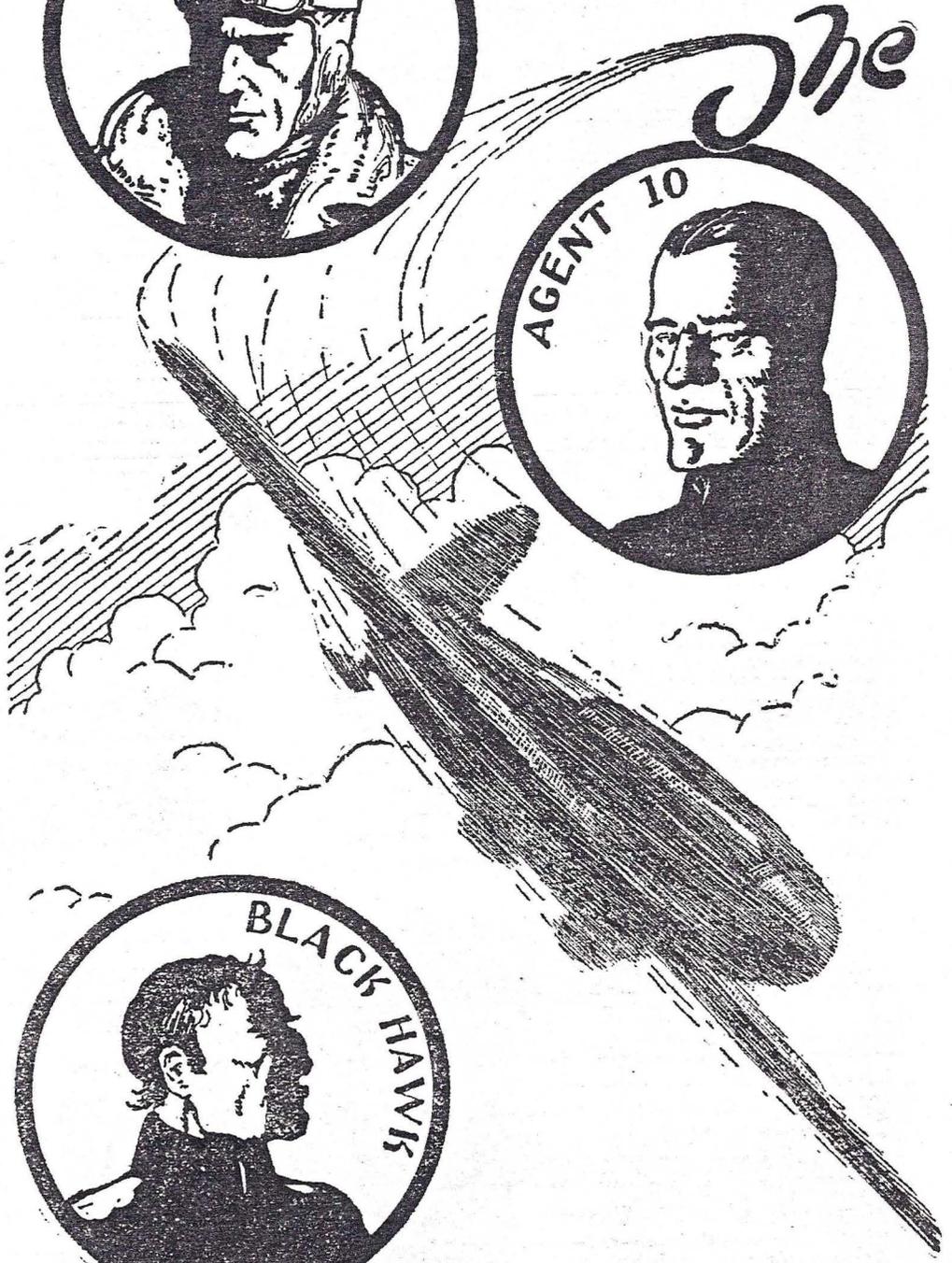
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BATTLE BIRDS

PURPLE TORNADO

by
ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN





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A NOVEL OF THE NEXT GREAT WAR

Thick, deadly, that curtain of purple gas stretched along our border from Maine to the Great Lakes. What did it hide? What gigantic war scheme was the enemy preparing behind it? The fate of America depended upon knowing these answers in time—and grimly Ayres vowed to find out, flying a one-man patrol against the greatest military coup ever planned!

CHAPTER ONE

Black Challenge

“AND in recognition of valuable services rendered, the President and the Congressional War Council hereby appoint you special contact officer to the combined armed forces of the United States Government. In the carrying out of this emergency roving commission, you are hereby permitted to act independently of any branch of the three major services, and report your findings direct to the General Staff at Washington, D. C. Notice of this appointment appears in general order number ZY 679.

“Signed The President, and chairman of the C. W. C.”

Deftly folding the official document, Colonel Marberry, acting chief of staff, dropped it on the desk top and reached out his big right paw.

“Let me be the first to congratulate you, Captain Ayres,” he smiled at the lean, wind-bronzed pilot. “I am sincerely happy that our Government has seen fit to place this trust upon your capable shoulders.”

Saluting stiffly, Dusty Ayres, top eagle of Uncle Sam’s brood, grasped the colonel’s hand and shook it firmly.

“Thank you, sir,” he stammered. “I only hope that I shall always be able to prove myself worthy of this great honor.”

“I’m sure you will, my boy,” smiled the senior officer with genuine pleasure.

And then he turned to the third man in the group office, Major Drake, C. O. of High Speed Group No. 7.

"As Captain Ayres' former commanding officer, you are to be congratulated, too, major. And now, if you'll both excuse me, I'll be getting on back. No, don't bother, my car is right outside. Good day, gentlemen."

When the door closed, Dusty whistled softly, dropped into the nearest chair, and drew a hand across his forehead.

"Gosh!" he ejaculated.

Major Drake chuckled and placed a hand on the pilot's shoulder.

"Wouldn't believe me, would you, eh?" he grunted. "Well, it's just as I predicted. You're a one-man army now, son. You can tell your old C. O. to go fly a kite, and he'll have to take it. General staff is your boss, now."

Dusty swallowed hard, struggled to his feet.

"Listen, major," he blurted out as the red seeped up his neck, "I've been under your command for two years, and—er—well, this—"

The C. O.'s tightening fingers on his shoulder stopped him.

"Hold it, son," said Major Drake. "I understand what you're trying to say. You don't want to cut away from the old gang? Well, you won't be cutting away. Your drome will be any one of the hundred from Duluth to the Atlantic coast. If you want to operate out of this field, then that'll be swell. But you've been given a grave responsibility. In a way, you've been appointed, on the President's order, as Flying Trouble Shooter Number One. You rate it—so don't let any thoughts about the old homestead cramp your style. There isn't one of us who isn't tickled silly that you've received this honor. So do your stuff, and remember that the old candle will be burning in the window for you, any time you drop by."

Dusty grinned and ran the tip of his tongue over his lower lip.

"Don't worry, sir, I won't forget," he said, huskily. "Only—well, I suppose I should do a jig or something, but somehow I feel like a fellow bailing out at midnight. Don't know just where I'm going to land."

"You'll find out soon enough, if past events mean anything," Major Drake chuckled. "Ever since Fire-Eyes and his damn Black Invaders started banging on our front door, action has come to you like steel chips to a magnet. You haven't had to wait for anything."

At that moment, as though in confirmation of the statement, the door opened and the field signal officer came charging inside. He walked quickly over to Dusty and thrust out a radiogram.

"For you, skipper!" he panted. "What the hell do you make of that?"

Dusty took the paper and stared at the typed message.

To Captain Ayres,
High Speed Group Seven.

My congratulations on your new appointment. It would seem that I have underestimated your true worth, or else your country has overestimated it. However, I suggest that we settle the matter by meeting each other at twenty thousand feet over your northeastern area map position M-18. As I have important missions to fulfill later I would like to take care of this affair between ten-thirty and eleven o'clock this morning.

In the event that you do not meet me I will consider my belief to be correct that your government has been misguided by the sheer good fortune that has befallen a blundering fool.

The Black Hawk.

"OH, YEAH?" echoed Dusty in a hard voice as he finished reading. Then to the signal officer, "When the hell did this come through?"

"Not over five minutes ago," was the

prompt answer. "It was sent direct on the station's official wave-length. From Black station KZ in the Ontario Zone, too. The burns even asked for a check-back and reply in half an hour."

Dusty glanced at his watch. The hands showed twenty-four minutes after nine.

"Okay on the check-back," he nodded grimly. "Shoot the flash along to him that I'll be there with bells on!"

"You really mean you're—?"

"Damn tooting!" Dusty cut him off. "I wouldn't miss this for a flock of steak dinners. Scram, Sparky, old kid."

The signal officer shot him a searching look, shrugged and turned on his heel.

"Oke, Skipper," he grunted over his shoulder. "I'll take vanilla, myself!"

The pilot laughed and turned to the C. O.

"Guess you called the turn again, major," he grinned. "Here I'm wondering just how I'm going to start this new job of mine, and *smacko*—the first move drops right into my lap."

Drake snorted, scowled at the floor.

"I don't like it!" he growled.

"Don't like it?" Dusty echoed. "Hell, I love it! Nothing would suit me better than to plant that flying rat down under, once and for all. I've tangled with him so many times, I'm getting sick of the sight of his homely mug. And besides—"

He paused and pointed through the Group office window toward the Silver Flash II resting on the tarmac.

"And besides," he repeated a moment later, "it'll be a swell chance to see how my new bus shapes up in action. Incidentally, I don't think I've thanked you yet, sir, for rushing through the request for my new ship. She's a honey. Never expected to fly anything better than the crate I lost in that Washington scrap—but she's that and then some. Why, only

this morning, I got five-sixty-eight m.p.h. out of her and—"

"I know, I know!" the other cut in gruffly. "It's the last word in planes, and all the rest of it. But listen, Ayres, this Black Hawk is no ~~damn~~ fool."

"That's right," nodded Dusty. "Just conceited. And I'm the fair-haired boy who is going to shoot it out of him. If you knew him like I do, major, you'd—"

"I'd wonder what was behind his challenge," the C. O. finished sharply. "You're a better man than he is. You've beat him to the punch half a dozen times. Watch your step, it may be a trap. You're no match for the whole Black air force, you know."

Dusty shrugged, pulled out a deck of cigarettes, offered the major one and took one himself.

"Right again, sir," he said as he held the match for them both. "But here's a stepping-off place for this new title the President has handed me. The Hawk is the head of the Black air force. We hate each other's guts, and getting him will hand the rest of his vultures a jolt they won't like. Maybe it is a trap, and maybe there's something bigger behind it than just a two-ship scrap. Well, that'll be okay, too. I've at least got a starter, and that's all I want."

The C. O. spewed smoke ceilingward and nodded.

"You don't have to tell me that," he muttered. "Well, remember, you've got a radio and there's eighteen planes here that'll come a-flying if it should turn out to be a trap. Meantime, I'll buzz Washington to start checking on how the hell the Blacks heard about your new appointment before even our own troops did."

For a moment Dusty's face went grave.

"Yeah, that's so, isn't it?" he murmured. "Oh, well, as General Horner of Intelligence once said, there's a Black agent behind every lamp-post in Wash-

ington. But if their finding it out caused the Hawk to get up enough steam to send me this invite, then three cheers for them! Well—so long, sir. I'll be seeing you soon!"

A quick salute and Dusty hard heeled out of the Group office and over to his plane. Two minutes later he was pulling it clear and streaking up for altitude.

NOT once did he look down back at the familiar sight below. Like the knights of old who set out alone to seek their destiny in distant lands, so was this modern warrior of the skies riding his thundering charger into the great unknown. Life and death rode the cockpit with him, and on his broad shoulders rested the responsibility of his own fate, whatever it might be.

For a moment memory of the glorious days and nights spent with High Speed Group number 7 caused the instrument panel to blur before his eyes. Then he laughed and slammed his free fist against the bullet-proof side of his cockpit.

"It's just the dish you ordered, kid!" he shouted aloud. "Responsible only to general staff—if and when! Yip-p-p-y!"

Heart pounding with wild joy, and the blood dancing through his veins, he hand-heeled the throttle wide open, booted the plane around on wing-tip and sent it roaring across the Massachusetts line and straight up the border of Vermont and New Hampshire.

A glance at the magnetic clock on the dash showed the time to be ten-seventeen. Checking his position on the roller map he nosed up through a cloud layer and didn't level off until the altimeter needle quivered at the twenty-one thousand foot mark.

Then he eased back to half throttle, let the ship have its head, and keenly studied the heavens in all directions. To his eagle eye there came not a single sight

of anything except clouds and pale blue emptiness.

Several minutes later he grinned, spun the wave-length dial and unhooked the transmitter tube.

"Calling Ontario Station KZ!" he shouted. "Captain Ayres speaking. Please reply to the commander of your air force that I'm waiting. He is five minutes late all ready. Has black changed to yellow?"

Without waiting to get a check-back on his call, he slipped the transmitter back on the hook, and continued his searching study of the surrounding sky. Minutes dragged by. The hands of the dash clock swung around to ten forty-six—and still he had the heavens all to himself.

At eleven o'clock, exactly, he suddenly hunched forward on the seat and stared hard toward the northern horizon. The silver cloud layer was slowly changing to a murky blue gray in color.

As he watched, the color deepened to a dirty purple and a great billowing curtain of the stuff rose straight up from the cloud layer. Higher and higher it rose until its pluming crest was lost in the sub-stratosphere regions.

"By God, that's a gas curtain!"

Even as Dusty muttered the words aloud, the red signal light on the radio panel blinked, and a voice crackled in the phones clamped to his ears.

"All American planes in northeastern zone, attention! Enemy releasing gas curtain from position N-27 to Z-10. All pilots not equipped with protectors will keep ten miles clear of this area. Winds generally northwest from ground to thirty-five thousand feet. Maximum velocity, eighteen. Minimum, five miles. Stand by for all clear signal if you are flying enemy territory patrols."

As the ground station started to repeat, Dusty tuned down the volume and studied his roller map. The result brought a puzzled frown to his brows. He raised his

eyes toward the massive purple curtain hanging in the sky. It seemed to be slowly moving away from him—away toward the northwest.

"Hell!" he gasped. "The Blacks must be nuts. That damn thing is swinging back over their own lines! By God, this is screwy!"

Sliding the cockpit cowl shut and turning the sealing clamps, he adjusted the air pressure equalizer, and nosed the Silver Flash II toward the purple curtain.

But when he was still a good five miles from it, he suddenly pulled up in a screaming zoom and swung around toward the west.

A jet black monoplane had plunged out of the curtain of gas and was streaking due south. In one flash look, Dusty saw the Black Invader insignia on its fuselage—a black flag edged in white. A shout of battle spilled off his lips.

"Showed up at last, eh?" he shouted. "Hey, over this way, bum! Here I am!"

But the other ship did not alter its course a single inch. Like a winged black arrow it kept right on slicing southward.

Belting the stick and booting the rudder, Dusty spun his plane around and charged toward it.

"Just like that, huh?" he snorted. "Well, maybe this will attract your attention!"

He slid his thumbs up to the electric trigger trips as he spoke, started to jab them forward, then suddenly jerked his thumbs away. From a good ten thousand feet above his altitude, two more Black ships were piling down toward the first, their guns slanting twin streams of jetting flame down across the sky.

Wide-eyed, Dusty watched them streak earthward; saw them close the gap in a period of split seconds and rake the first plane from prop to tail wheel with fire-spitting guns.

AA MOMENT later, action was preceding the thought in his brain. Hardly

realizing what he was doing, he cut around in a screaming half turn, yanked the nose up and hurled the Silver Flash II straight at the attacking planes.

The range was too great, and for the first few moments their pilots ignored him. But as he roared in close, the nearest one slanted off and came rushing right at him.

Eyes hard, lips curled back in a savage grin, Dusty steadied his ship and took deliberate aim. And then, steel fury swirled out from the muzzles of his Brownings and buried itself in the vitals of the Black ship.

For an instant it seemed as though the onrushing plane had stopped dead in its tracks. Then it lurched crazily to the side and hovered almost motionless for a split second before it went corkscrewing upward.

Relentlessly, Dusty followed it up, hammering it from prop to fin with burst after burst of singing steel. No creation of man could have withstood that devastating fire that spewed out from Dusty's guns, and the upward spinning Black monoplane was no exception.

A thousand feet higher and both wings wrenched free and went slip-sliding off like dried leaves. The rest curved over like a spent rocket, and went racing down, over-revving engine howling a song of certain doom.

As it streaked by, Dusty strained his eyes for a glimpse of the figure in the glass-cowled cockpit. But if he expected to see the cruel hatchet face of the Black Hawk, he was disappointed. All he could see were the head and shoulders of a black-uniformed figure slumped forward against the instrument panel.

And then, as he jerked his eyes away, he promptly forgot all about the thing. The second Black plane had fired the fuel tank of the first plane. It was now little more than a ball of flame and oily black

smoke slithering down the skyway.

And the remaining plane was slashing down toward a limp figure in civilian garb who hung suspended at the end of parachute shroud lines.

The same impulse that sent Dusty tearing up toward the two attackers, sent him roaring down on the one that remained.

That he should suddenly risk his life to help an unknown at the controls of an enemy plane, he did not try to understand. Something inside of him had sent him charging into the strange sky battle, and that same strange something, fired by additional rage that a helpless figure in parachute harness was being attacked, sent him gun-blazing downward.

But the pilot of the remaining Black ship must have seen him coming, and had no stomach for a possible end such as had been the fate of his companion. After spewing out one final burst at the dangling figure on the shroud lines, he cut off sharply to the west and went swinging around to the north in a furious curving dive.

Dusty started to follow, then checked his ship and swung around toward the limp figure floating earthward.

Throttling a bit, he eased in close and studied the man intently. Friend or foe, he could not tell, for the wind had whipped the front of the figure's jacket up over his face. But as he circled about, wondering, he saw the man stiffly raise his right arm in what was supposed to be a salute.

Then, as though the effort had been too much, the arm dropped down and hung lifeless from its shoulder socket. A few minutes later the swaying figure floated down out of view in the cloud layer.

As it disappeared, Dusty hesitated and glanced at the dash clock. It was twenty-eight minutes after eleven. He looked toward the towering gas curtain far to the north, and made up his mind.

"We'll see this through first," he grunted, and stuck the nose down.

When he came out of the cloud layer it took him but a few seconds to pick out the mushroom chute against the earth's carpet. It was several thousand feet below him and sinking toward a hilly and rocky section of ground.

When he reached its level he was a bare thousand feet above the ground. Swinging into a wide circle, he watched the figure float down the rest of the way; strike ground stiffly, and topple over like a log.

A ground wind caught the silk folds of the chute, billowed them out like a sail, and dragged the still figure a good twenty yards before the shroud lines snubbed about a tree trunk.

A moment later he saw the man struggle to his knees, try to continue the rest of the way, and go crashing down on his face.

Noting a small clearing a half mile to his right, Dusty swung toward it, cut the throttle and slid into it with less than a dozen feet to spare. Slapping open the cowling, he legged out and ran back toward the flapping silk fouled on some heavy underbrush.

First cutting the man loose from the shroud lines, he then turned him over and stared down at the face. It was not a pretty sight. A bullet crease across the forehead was flowing blood freely, that ran down to mingle with the blood from a hundred ugly scrapes and scratches caused by the "wind-drag" across the rocky soil.

Outside of the cuts and scratches the face was of ordinary structure. Its owner might be a member of most any of the white races.

He was of average height, dark brown hair and between twenty and perhaps thirty years of age. The clothes he wore were

of general style and material, and tailored to his figure.

All those items Dusty noted in a glance as he put his hand over the man's heart. There was a faint beat, and when he pulled his hand away, it was soaked with blood.

Ripping open the shirt, he jammed his handkerchief in a gaping wound. Bullets had torn half the chest away.

"No—use—thanks."

Blood-flecked lips were moving, and pain-filled brown eyes gleamed their gratitude as Dusty looked at the face.

"Take it easy, fellow," he grinned cheerfully. "Just a couple of scratches. I'll get you out. Who are—"

"No use, flyer." The words seemed to drag themselves off the thin lips. "Finished this time. Listen—tell—attack—Z-10—but—they—right shoe—"

The rest trailed off to a choking gurgle. The man trembled and a mad look came into his eyes. Blood sprayed off the foaming lips as he made a desperate effort to put syllables together.

"Hold it," soothed Dusty, crooking an arm about the man's neck. "Try not to waste your strength."

The eyes blazed at him angrily.

"Shut up! I know I'm—finished. Listen, tell—I am—right shoe—my right—shoe—my—right—sh—"

The last word was never finished. Dusty felt a wild tremor shoot through the man's body. The eyelids fluttered closed, and the mouth sagged open.

He lowered the man's head and shoulders gently to the ground.

CHAPTER TWO

Dead Man's Secret

FOR several moments, Dusty gazed down at the still figure. But Death was not to be cheated of its prey. The man was beyond all help on this earth.

Dusty swallowed hard, and began the gruesome task of searching the other's pockets. Each article that he found he placed on the ground beside him.

When he finished, he had two handkerchiefs, a penknife, a length of wrapping twine, seventy cents in Canadian money, a pencil made in Toronto, and two imitation pearl cufflinks. On the inside pocket of the jacket he found a few loose threads where the maker's label had been sewn, but there was no label now.

Further investigation brought to light the fact that even the maker's name on the inside of the shirt neckband had been removed.

Sinking back on his haunches, he fingered the collection of articles.

"If you didn't want anybody to find out," he grunted at the death-chilled face, "you certainly did a damn good job of it!"

And then, suddenly, as his eyes roved over the body, he fastened them on the man's feet and recalled to memory a few of the disconnected words. The man had tried to say something about his right shoe.

Dusty looked at it, and saw nothing unusual. It was neither new nor old. Just a low-cut Oxford of ordinary style.

Impulsively, he untied the laces, pulled the shoe off and examined it closely. The heel was solid; a little probing with the penknife proved that.

He stuck fingers inside the shoe, started to pull them out, and stiffened. Jamming the tongue up through the laces, he shoved his fingers clear to the toe and pecked at a small paper wad that was tightly wedged into the crevice where the toe-cap was joined to the sole. He was unable to dislodge it.

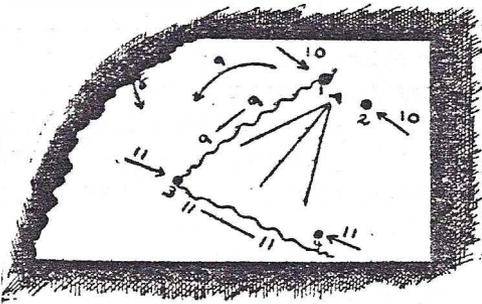
Pulling his hand out, he took the penknife and slashed the toe-cap down the middle. Prying the two sides apart with

one hand, he levered out a dirty pellet of paper with the penknife blade.

It was no bigger than the tip of his little finger, and popped out like a marble.

Picking it up he started to unwad it. When he did, a small green bead rolled out into the palm of his hand. The paper that had been wadded about the bead was so dirty and creased and wrinkled that at first he saw nothing on it. In fact, he was about to toss it away when suddenly he gasped and smoothed it out between his palms.

Eyes narrowed, he stared at it intently:



But the more he studied it, the more befuddled he became as to its meaning. As far as he was concerned, it could mean most anything.

That there had once been more of the cockeyed diagram was evident by the short arrow and the portion of the figure eight at the torn edge of the paper. On the reverse side there was nothing but dirt and sweat marks.

Dusty closed his eyes and tried to remember all that the dying man had said.

The result was partial confirmation of the growing belief that the man was either a Canadian or an American secret agent. He had tried to say something about an attack and Z-10. He—

“By God, Z-10!” Dusty muttered aloud. “That’s the northern end of that damned gas curtain!”

Jumping to his feet, he started to go back to his plane for a look at his roller

map, when suddenly he stopped in his tracks.

Off to his right something was crashing through the tall underbrush. Instinctively he shoved the bead and paper in his pocket, and flicked his other hand to the butt of his service automatic.

But before he could draw it, a beautiful bay horse, with a tall American artillery major astride its back, came charging into the clearing.

The major swept the scene with a quick glance, dismounted and came striding forward.

“What the devil’s happened, captain?” he demanded. “Saw this man float down, and saw you circle after him. Who is he?”

Dusty’s jaw squared at the other’s tone.

“I don’t know, sir,” he said tightly. “That’s what I’ve been trying to find out.”

“So I see,” said the other dryly. “Were you fighting him in the air? Doesn’t look like a Black to me.”

Suspicious eyes bored into Dusty’s. With an effort, the pilot curbed a hot retort. Instead, he said, “Two Blacks attacked him. They fired his ship, and shot at him after he’d jumped. I followed him down, but he died as I reached him.”

Dusty started to speak of the man’s last words, but on sudden impulse, he checked himself. A faint sneer of contempt was curling back the major’s lips.

“And you let him be shot down, eh?” he snapped. “A fine business. I suppose the attackers got away? If he was a pilot, why was he wearing civilian clothes?”

The Yank pilot’s eyes narrowed and the hardness in his voice matched that of the major’s.

“Supposing you answer that?” he grated. “I can’t. He was flying a Black plane. The wreck’s around this area

someplace. So is the wreck of one of the attackers. They got him before I could help. I let the other go because this man was coming down by chute, and I was curious."

The major seemed unimpressed.

"Hum-m-m," he mused. "What's your name?"

The officer's belligerent attitude forced the words off Dusty's tongue before he realized he was speaking them.

"Have you read general order ZY 679, major?" he bit off.

The artilleryman stiffened and his chin came out.

"Yes, and what the devil's that got to do with it?"

"Nothing, except that I happen to be Captain Ayres!"

The major's chin went back into normal position, his eyes widened a trifle, and he pursed his lips.

"Oh, I see," he grunted. "So, you're the Captain Ayres, eh? Then, perhaps, you'll be good enough to tell me in detail about this thing, captain. I'm Major Walker, acting area commander, and—"

He suddenly stopped short and shot a stiff forefinger at the ground.

"That penknife!" he exclaimed. "Where did you get it?"

WITHOUT waiting for Dusty's reply, he scooped up the knife. Then dropping to his knees he bent over and peered hard at the dead man. When, a moment later, he straightened up, rage was twisting his features.

"The complete details!" he barked. "I want the *true* story!"

Dusty walked close to him, and his voice was like steel against steel.

"I told you what happened, Major Walker!" he clipped out. "Now, supposing you tell me—who is he? You recognized him, just now."

"I most certainly did!" gritted the other, tapping the penknife against the palm of his other hand. "He is Charles Strickland, a cousin of mine. I sent him this penknife on his birthday six months ago. And, *five* days ago, I received a letter from him stating that the Army doctor had refused his enlistment because of bad health! *And*, to my knowledge, he never spent a single hour in an airplane, much less pilot one. His heart was bad."

The inference behind the words started the blood up Dusty's neck.

"Meaning just what, major?" he asked evenly.

"Meaning that I doubt your story, and that I have no proof that you're who you say you are!"

Dusty started to raise a hand to the group identification card in his tunic pocket, then let it drop as he remembered he never carried it while in the air. Never carried any means of identification, in fact.

"I'm afraid, major, you'll have to believe both," he said.

The other's eyes flickered down to the slashed shoe.

"You cut that shoe!" he snapped. "Why? Did my cousin say something before he died?"

Dusty hesitated, then nodded.

"Yes, he did," he replied. "But I am making my report direct to general staff. And now, if you'll be kind enough to take care of the body, I'll be on my way. I have something to do that can't wait."

Saluting, the pilot turned and started to walk toward his plane.

"Stop right where you are!"

The voice spun him around, an angry retort on his lips. But he didn't say it. The artillery officer had his automatic out, and its muzzle was trained dead on Dusty's heart.

For a second the pilot's jaw dropped in blank surprise. Then berserk rage

gripped him, and the sense of courtesy to a superior officer went overboard.

"You damn fool, are you crazy?" he roared. "Put down that gun!"

"Keep your hands still!" the other snarled. "We'll find out just who you are when we get back to my headquarters."

With a quick movement, the major stepped forward and jerked Dusty's gun from its holster.

"There, that's better," he grunted, pocketing it. "Now, pick up that body, and walk in front of my horse. One false move and I'll put a bullet in you!"

Dusty curbed his mounting wrath.

"For God's sake, man, listen to me! I've got to fly north and see what the hell that gas curtain is all about. Your cousin said something about an attack. I've got to see the Z-10 C. O."

"Shut up! My cousin wouldn't know anything about an attack. Don't try that on me. If you are Captain Ayres, we'll find out soon enough."

"And G. H. Q. will be down on your neck like a ton of brick, you fathead!" Dusty blazed.

The artillery major smiled scornfully.

"Perhaps!" he snapped. "We'll see about that, later. Now, pick him up, and be careful!"

Dusty hesitated, went rigid, then relaxed completely.

"Very well," he groaned. "Just as you say, sir."

Bending over the dead man, he reached out his hands, started to curl them about the still form, and then in a movement faster than the human eye could follow, he whirled and swung up his clenched right fist with every ounce of his strength.

In the same movement, he flung out his left hand, and knocked the gun down. A bellow of rage spilled off the major's lips, and a split second later it was drowned out as his gun roared flame and

sound. But, as the bullet plowed harmlessly into the ground, Dusty's steel-bunched fist caught him under the jaw.

Teeth clicked sharply, the moon-faced head snapped back, and the man's knees buckled. Stepping quickly to one side, Dusty caught the toppling figure and eased him to the ground.

Retrieving his own automatic, he gave the limp artillery officer one last glance.

"Sorry, fathead," he murmured. "But you asked for it." He turned on his heel and raced back to his plane.

CHAPTER THREE

Sky Duel

WITH the same skill and ease with which he slid into the clearing, he slid out of it again, engine wide open and nose pointed toward the heavens. Holding the ship that way he looked toward the north.

The curtain of gas still hung in the sky. If anything, it was more dense than before. There was also another change.

The planing crest was being doubled back northwestward by a high wind, giving it the appearance of a weird, gigantic sail billowed out taut by a gale.

Its length he judged to be well over three hundred miles; clear from the Great Lakes northeast to the northwestern reaches of Maine. Its thickness he could not tell as yet. But as he thundered toward the strange sight he was unable to see a single thing beyond its murky purpleness.

Impulsively he reached out and spun the wave-length dial.

"Captain Ayres calling Area 27 station!" he shouted into the transmitter tube.

A few seconds later the call-back buzzed in the ear-phones.

"Twenty-seven on your wave-length! Go ahead!"



"That gas curtain!" said Dusty. "It's getting thicker and blowing back over the enemy lines. What's the ground report on it?"

"The same as before," came the answer. "The enemy have blocked out their entire Front. It is impossible for us to see their movements. We are ready for an attack, but do not expect one. There are no enemy aircraft below the clouds, and no artillery action, either. What's the report from your position, Captain Ayres?"

"No aircraft sighted this side of the curtain," called Dusty. "Will let you know developments, if any. Signing off."

Flipping up the wave-length switch, Dusty leaned back against the head rest and stared thoughtfully toward the most northern point of the gas curtain.

"An attack at Z-10, he said, eh?" he mused aloud, turning the roller map. "Now, let's see. Z-10 is where Maine and New Hampshire meet the Canadian line. If they did smash through to the coast they'd bottle up the Fifth and Sixth armies in Maine. And that would shorten their battle front a couple of hundred miles. And—"

He finished the rest with a muttered curse. An attack in the Z-10 zone would be suicide for the Black Invaders. He knew that. America had built up a well-nigh impregnable line of defenses at that point.

Almost at the very beginning of the war, Yank G. H. Q. had realized the possibility of an attempt by the enemy to cut off the finger of Maine that stuck up into Canada between the provinces of Quebec and New Brunswick. And to thwart any such attempt a barrier had been built all along the western border of Maine.

Not only that, a great system of rapid transport had been laid down from that point south, so that within the space of

twelve hours the might of the entire U. S. Army could be rushed to fill up what few gaps the Blacks might make in the lines.

No, it was foolish to consider a Black offensive in Z-10. Yet—

Dusty shrugged and turned the wave-length knob.

"Calling Z-10 area commander!" he barked into the tube. "Calling Z-10 area commander . . . emergency. Captain Ayres coming in to land. Please meet me. Have important matter to talk about. Do you get my message?"

The panel light blinked almost immediately.

"Message received, Captain Ayres," crackled the ear-phones. "Do not try to land at Z-10. Area covered by gas. Keep wave-length open for all-clear signal."

As the message stopped, Dusty turned on full transmitter volume.

"Z-10 . . . wait!" he bellowed. "I've got a protector. I can get down all right. Turn on your radio beacon beam and I'll follow it in."

Anxiously he waited for the needle on the graduated dial on the dash to move, telling him that Z-10 had turned on the beam. But it remained motionless.

With a grunt he snapped his fingers against the glass, but still the needle did not move.

Puzzled, he called Z-10 for a check-back on his request. But as he did, there came a faint hum in the phones, and an eerie tingle rippled up and down his spine.

Either Z-10 was refusing to receive his wave-length signals, or else some other station was "jamming" the area.

Heeling the throttle all the way open, he climbed up to twenty-five thousand, leveled off and flew by compass to a point where his wind-speed-and-drift-indicator told him he was directly over the Z-10 area.

Less than half a mile off his left wings

was the huge, billowing gas curtain, its crest still curving more and more towards the northwest.

Turning on full radio power, he set the wave adjuster for vertical plane-to-ground-station transmission and called Z-10 again.

Tense seconds went by, and then suddenly he heard faint sounds in the ear-phones. It was like a weak voice trying to yell through a solid brick wall.

Full reception volume brought the voice up a little, but it was too muffled for Dusty to make it out. It was followed by a sharp clicking, and then words that Dusty could understand.

"... and the area commander suggests that you reconnoiter northwest of the gas curtain, if possible. It is believed that preparations are being made for an attack at this point. Please give us a report as soon as possible. Signing off."

Dusty swore and slapped the tube back on the hook.

"Was going to do that anyway!" he snorted. "Okay. If you suspect an attack, there's no need of my wasting fuel to land and tell you what little I know."

MAKING sure that the cowl was sealed, and the air pressure equalizer was set, he swung the Silver Flash II toward the top of the curving gas curtain.

Then, holding the ship steady, he pulled the strange diagram from his pocket and stared at it thoughtfully. None of the markings had changed, and it did not signify anything more to him than it had in the beginning.

"Charles Strickland, eh?" he grunted to himself. "And his cousin, that cluck major, said he wasn't a pilot. I wonder if there were two in that single seater. But hell, this guy told me about his shoe. And—"

He cut off the rest, and started to swing

the plane about, and head back for Intelligence H. Q. at Washington. Then with a savage shake of his head he changed his mind again and swung back north.

"You've got enough to work on, kid, without running home to papa. Take a look around here, first."

As his grated words died to an echo in the cowled pit he shoved the nose down and tore into the murky purple.

When it closed over him he snapped on the dashlight, glued his eyes to the instrument panel and held the ship in its wild plunge.

Down, down he went—a silver bird cutting through a dark thunderhead. The altimeter needle slid around the graduated dial peg by peg, until at last it was close to the five-thousand foot mark.

The air in the sealed cockpit fogged up a bit, and he was forced to keep his oxygen tube clamped over his nose and mouth.

And then at four thousand, when he was about ready to level off and climb back out of the purple sea that swirled about him, the gas changed to dull gray, and then to faint yellow as he roared down into clear air.

Checking his dive he swung southwest, rubbed a swab rag on the fogged-up cowl glass and stared through it at a panorama of war that made him suck in his breath in sharp gasps.

The ground in every direction was fairly crawling with troops, tanks, motor artillery and heavy siege guns. Bomb-proof pillboxes dotted the ground, and behind them was a crisscross maze of cement and steel-girder re-enforced trenches, with their heavily armored dugouts evenly spaced at intervals of fifty feet.

Behind them thousands of tanks were lined up, their knife-like snouts pointing toward the American defenses.

At a dozen military rail terminals, long

streamlined trains were landing hordes of black, steel-helmeted troops.

And supporting it all were great batteries of naval guns, their muzzles elevated for high trajectory bombardment.

In truth, it was like a world of war all its own, completely hidden beneath the great curtain of purple gas.

One look and Dusty knew beyond all possible doubt that the greatest offensive of all time was about to be launched against Z-10 area. Yet even with all this great array of weapons, the Blacks would never be able to crush the American defenses. Not in a hundred million years. The Yanks in Z-10 were too well prepared. They would be able to hole up and repel any kind of an attack.

"You're crazy, you damn fools!" he muttered as he went sweeping over the countless upturned faces below. "We'll beat hell out of you any day in the week. We'll—"

He heard nothing, and saw nothing, yet that certain thing in every human, that science calls a sixth sense, suddenly flashed him an inner warning. He knew, even as he choked off his word and turned in the seat, that he was no longer alone in the air.

And he wasn't.

Racing down out of the drifting canopy of purple gas were a dozen sleek Dart monoplanes of the Black Air Force.

In line formation they came, the two end planes swinging out for broadside, cross-fire attack. An instant later, Dusty saw the middle ship wobble its wings, and a harsh voice rasped in his ear-phones.

"Sorry, that I was delayed, Captain Ayres. However, the pleasure is all mine, now!"

The last word was punctuated by a savage burst of jetting flame that leaped out from the pointed snout of the plane. But it was a waste of perfectly good am-

munition, for Dusty had instantly recognized the voice of his hated enemy, the Black Hawk, and had flung the Silver Flash up and over in a screaming half roll.

The Hawk's burst of fire was the signal for the others, and like so many flame-spitting demons from Mars, they came tearing in on three sides.

The Silver Flash seemed to almost flinch visibly as the shower of singing steel slashed and tore at its armor plating from prop boss to tail wheel.

Eyes agate, Dusty hurled his plane about in devil-may-care abandonment, and held both trigger trips jammed all the way forward.

There was no time to pick out any one Black plane and charge it. There were too many against him. It was simply a case of making himself as difficult a target as possible, and hope that his twin streams of smoking steel would find their end in something flashing across his sights.

A moment later something did flash across his sights; became a ball of flame and went swirling earthward. He got only a quick glimpse of it, but it fired him with savage joy. First blood for him, anyway!

"Come on!" he roared. "I've got plenty more like it!"

A harsh chuckle in the ear-phones brought realization that his wave-length was open.

"And a double dose for you, *Yellow Hawk!*" he thundered. "Wouldn't try it alone, would you?"

"Unless you care to surrender, captain," rasped the ear-phones, "I am afraid I shall never be able to explain my tardiness."

AND at that moment, a burst of steel smacked through the forward edge of the glass cowl and buried itself in the radio panel.

Dusty's ear-phones snapped sharply, then went dead. Blind rage gripped him.

He spun around on wing-tip and tore into the nearest Black like a berserk tiger at bay. Whoever the pilot was, he probably never saw Dusty coming. One second the Black ship was curving away, and the next it was plunging straight downward, minus one wing.

But the satisfaction his second victory brought Dusty was short lived. At the beginning of the fight there had been one loophole of escape for him in case he was hemmed in too close. He could always lose himself in the gas curtain and beat a strategic retreat.

But the gapping hole in the forward part of the glass cowl mocked that idea now. Once he entered the gas curtain, the deadly stuff would pour in through that jagged hole and put him out like a light.

His only hope was to fly north to the end of its downward curving crest and then either skirt the eastern edge or else stake his life on the possibility of the Silver Flash being able to climb over it.

But as he feinted a charge at a zooming Black plane and then cut to the side and around toward the north, his heart sank.

The Blacks must have seen the damage that one of their number had inflicted, and calculated the results. For, in half circle formation, they charged in, guns blazing and throwing a wall of whining steel across the northern exit of the area.

The Silver Flash trembled and shivered under the savage hail. It bucked and sawed, and acted as though it were really something alive and conscious of the death ring closing in on it.

A dozen times it went swirling over in a crazy mad spin toward the ground. And a dozen times its cursing master

jerked it out and sent it plunging to the north.

One after another the Blacks smashed in to block the way, and one after another they went skidding out and away from the relentless fire that poured like two continuous streams from Dusty's guns.

How many Blacks he got he did not know. There was no time to watch any balls of fire go hurtling downward. All sense of time became lost to him.

Suddenly, when it seemed that the Silver Flash could hold together no longer, an over-eager Black gave him his one great opportunity. Mad for the kill, the Black came screaming down from the right. Below it was another Black swinging up for a prop to prop charge.

Out of the corner of his eye Dusty saw them, and realization and action became one. With every ounce of his strength he slammed the stick over against the cockpit side. And at the same instant he booted the rudder.

Around he spun, a blur of silver light, then up toward the diving Black. His guns yammered madly and sprayed the diving plane from wing to wing.

Even a blood-maddened Black was not fool enough to hold his position in such a hail of steel. The diving pilot instantly steepened his plunge in a furious effort to slide down under.

And that was the fatal move.

Too late, the Black saw his comrade roaring up. He lurched to the side, but the combined speed of both ships was too great. Their wings locked, a great sheet of flame leaped high up into the canopy of purple gas, and a thunderous roar shook the heavens.

Dusty didn't see them fall. He only saw the hole their finish left in the attacking ring. Like a shot he went through it.

The remaining Blacks tore after him,

guns spitting. But Dusty gave the Silver Flash its head. And the plane, like a race horse answering the jockey's whip, leaped forward and out from under the billowing canopy of gas.

"Did it, old girl!" he shouted as he pulled the nose up in a thundering climb toward the east.

But though he had clear air ahead of him, death still rode his wings. Like pack wolves the Blacks came racing after him. And as he tore for the northeastern end of the gas curtain, he suddenly saw a whole squadron of Black attack ships zoom up out of the murky purple.

"Oh, yeah!" he laughed harshly. "Still want my hide, eh? Well, just try to stop me!"

Hauling back on the stick, he sent the Silver Flash clawing heavenward. With his free hand he adjusted the oxygen tube to his lips, and turned the valve knob. Now, let them come. Any ship that could out-climb the Silver Flash could have a free shot!

But as he muttered the challenge to himself, he suddenly stiffened in the seat. With feverish fingers he turned the valve knob wide open. Then he groaned aloud as he saw it—saw the jagged bullet hole in the oxygen tank. The burst that had shattered his glass cowl and smashed his radio panel, had also knocked the oxygen tank haywire.

Free fist clenched helplessly, he swept the surrounding skies through narrowed lids. The sight made little fingers of ice clutch at his heart.

Above him was clear air—and suffocation without his oxygen tank. To the front, to the left, and behind was half the Black air force. As though by magic the heavens had suddenly become black with enemy wings.

And to his right was the great towering curtain of deadly gas.

A choice to be made, with death wait-

ing no matter what the choice might be!

In the few moments left before the Blacks would be upon him again, he battled furiously to make up his mind. Either course he might take was a thousand to one chance for success.

To charge the Blacks that blocked his path to the northeast was but asking for a chest full of singing steel. It was the same thing to his left and behind.

With a grim smile he realized that the Blacks were out to get him. He had penetrated their gas screen, and learned of their offensive preparations. And now, his escape would knock all their efforts into a cocked hat. As a result a general alarm had been sounded along the entire enemy front—get the American plane! Get it at all costs!

Letting go of the stick for a second, he bent forward, ripped off his tunic, and bundling it into a wad, he jammed it into the jagged hole in the glass cowl.

Then skidding the Silver Flash clear of a close burst from one of the Black planes, he heeled sharply over on wing and roared straight into the gas curtain, free hand clamped over his nose and mouth, and breath locked in his lungs!

CHAPTER FOUR

Wanted for Murder

AN OCEAN of purple swirled about him. Through smarting, slitted eyes he saw it tug and whip at the tunic, jammed in the hole.

His face suddenly began to burn, as though he'd plunged it into a seething flame. The joints of his arms and legs went stiff, and the roar of a thousand mighty engines smashed against his eardrums. His lungs ached, and the blood pounded against his temples. But he dared not suck in one tiny drop of air.

The prop wash had jerked free the tu-

nic and with an inward groan he saw it go swirling off into purple space.

Like water gushing through a dam leak, the deadly purple gas poured in through the hole and engulfed him. The skin of his hands and face became raw with pain, and it was impossible to keep his eyes open any longer. Spears of purple flame pierced the eyeballs, and seemed to literally set his brain afire.

Instinctive self-preservation and nothing else, forced him to keep one hand clamped over his mouth and nose, and the air in his lungs securely locked. His only comfort was realization that the gas was not of the skin and flesh eroding type. Its first contact with him had proved that.

Each passing second seemed to be the last. He had to breathe—he must gulp in just one small lungful. His chest was ready to explode, and the surging blood in his veins ready to burst through their tissue walls. Yet the fighter in him would not let go. The hand clamped over his nose and mouth seemed almost to melt into it and become a solid part.

Steeling himself against the horrible pain, he opened his eyes a crack and peered ahead. Five times he did that, and saw only a whirling purple vortex in front of him.

And then, when the compressed air in his lungs was forcing itself up his throat he opened his eyes for the sixth and last time. Through a red blur he saw the dim outlines of trees and hills, and valleys below. The ocean of purple was behind him.

Still keeping his hand clamped to his mouth, he let go the stick and raised the hand up to the cowl-sealing lugs, released them and slammed the cowl wide open. Glorious cool air rushed in at him.

The burning sensation fled and new life surged through his body. Choking,

sobbing and gasping, he gushed out the dead air in his lungs and gulped in blessed coolness. The reaction made his head swim, and a giddy feeling to take charge of his entire body. But he simply relaxed and pumped air into his aching lungs.

Eventually the dizziness passed away, his eyes stopped smarting altogether, and blurred objects came into clear focus. It was then he located his position. He was less than two thousand feet above the pill-box outpost defenses of the American lines. Ahead and several miles to his left was the headquarters of the Z-10 area commander.

Almost unable to realize his good fortune, he turned in the seat and glanced back at the gas curtain. As he did, he saw a flight of Black planes come charging out of it.

"Yup, it's me!" he roared into the propwash rushing past him. "Still on deck, and still going to town!"

Swinging around toward the area H. Q., he stuck the nose down and fed the twenty-eight hundred horses cowed in the nose all the hop they could take.

For a distance of perhaps ten miles the Blacks followed him, and then suddenly they cut sharply away and lost themselves to the west. Dusty curved around, slammed a parting, defiant burst after them, and then throttled and went sliding down toward the area H. Q.

As he landed a hundred yards from the main office, a dozen soldiers ran out and grabbed his wings. One of them, a non-com, saluted him as he legged out stiffly.

"Captain Ayres?" he asked in what seemed to be an astonished tone.

"Yes," he nodded.

The non-com swallowed, and fingered his rifle nervously.

"You—you will come with me at once, please, sir," he stammered.

Dusty shot him a sharp look, and glanced at the others. They were watching him as though he were some kind of a freak from another world that had suddenly popped down out of the clouds.

"What's the matter with you chaps?" he snapped. "Haven't you ever seen an airplane?"

"Oh, yes, sure, sir!" gulped the non-com. "But, well, we didn't figure on seeing you land here, captain."

Then, as though he had spoken too much, the soldier stiffened and pointed to the main office shack.

"My orders are to take you to General Billings, the area commander, sir. Please come with me."

"That's what I landed for," he grunted. "Let's go. No, wait a minute."

He turned to the rest grouped about his plane.

"Get mechanics from the nearest repair depot," he ordered. "I want the radio, the glass cowl and the oxygen tank fixed up as soon as possible."

They blinked at him, then looked at the non-com. Dusty whirled on him, eyes hard.

"Well!" he barked, "what are these men, a lot of dummies? Don't they know an order when they hear one?"

"Our orders were to bring you in, sir," stammered the non-com. "I guess you'll have to speak to General Billings about fixing up your plane, sir."

Dusty hesitated, then nodded.

"Come on, then!" he rapped at the non-com. "Take me to the general."

WITH a look of puzzled surprise still on his face, the non-com kept step with him, ushered him up to the shack door and rapped on it. When a gruff summons to enter came from the inside, he saluted smartly and opened the door.

Dusty went in, clicked his heels and

glared at the big, be-medaled man seated behind the desk.

"You want Captain Ayres, sir?" he snapped.

The general, who was bending over some papers, jerked his head up, started to speak, then let his jaw drop.

"You—Captain Ayres?" he gasped incredulously. "Well, by God, I must say I admire your nerve."

"Nerve had nothing to do with it, sir," Dusty cracked right back at him. "You asked me to do a job for you, and I did it. The Blacks are—"

"Do a job for me?" the commanding officer thundered. "What in hell are you talking about?"

"Talking about?" he echoed slowly. "You remember our radio conversation a couple of hours ago, don't you? You said this place was covered with gas, and I mustn't land. And later you asked me to reconnoiter back of the gas curtain. Well, I did, and I want to report that—"

"Wait a minute!"

The general got up from the desk and walked around and over to Dusty.

"Let me have your gun, captain," he said, holding his hand out.

The pilot hesitated, then drew his gun and handed it to the senior officer, butt first. The general took it, half turned to lay it on the desk top, then faced Dusty again.

"And now, captain," he grunted, "just what is this cock and bull story you're trying to tell me?"

Dusty gaped at him in angry astonishment.

"You're the Z-10 area commander, sir, aren't you?" he blurted out.

The other nodded his head patiently.

"I am, captain," he said softly. "As a matter of fact, I have been for the last three weeks."

"Well," frowned Dusty. "Two hours ago you asked me to reconnoiter the area

back of the Blacks' gas curtain. You said that you believed preparations for an attack were being made."

"Rubbish!" the other cut him off sharply. "The Blacks aren't fools enough to attack at this point. And I certainly didn't ask you any such thing. Frankly, captain, I just don't understand your landing at my headquarters. Did you think that we hadn't found out, yet?"

Dusty's head swam. He stared hard at the senior officer, struggling for words. They finally came out like a torrent of falling water.

"What in hell are you talking about?" he demanded.

General Billings didn't answer directly. Instead, he turned and picked up Dusty's gun. Slipping the cartridge magazine out, he examined it closely, slid the loading chamber back and examined that, too. Then he put the muzzle to his nose and sniffed.

"Hum-m-m!" he mused, arching his eyebrows. "That's rather strange. You certainly couldn't have used this gun. You have another, captain?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Dusty grated, "but I still don't know what this is all about. What's my gun got to do with it?"

The general's eyes narrowed, and the muscles about his jaw tightened.

"You have heard of Major Walker, captain?" he rapped out harshly.

Dusty nodded.

"Yes, sir," he said. "I guess he's reported our little meeting. Well, I'm sorry but considering the circumstances I could not afford to waste any more time convincing him. I told him to contact Washington G. H. Q., but he seemed to believe that I was personally responsible for the death of his cousin, and held a gun on me.

"I didn't feel that it was necessary for me to make detailed explanations to him. I wanted to get a good look at Z-10 area, and then contact your H. Q. I had rea-

son to believe that an attack was to be made here. That much I did tell him. But—well, I hit him. I admit it, sir."

The general's eyes narrowed even more.

"Hit him, eh?" he grunted. "And then shot him?"

Dusty's jaw dropped.

"And then what?" he repeated slowly.

"I said, shot him!" thundered the general. "A patrol found Major Walker shot through the chest. He lived long enough to say that a pilot who claimed he was Captain Ayres, hit him when he tried to take him to H. Q. for identification, and then shot him. Captain Ayres, Major Walker is dead, and you—on his word—stand accused of murdering him!"

The general paused a moment, and a faint trace of marked disappointment came into his eyes.

"Knowing your record," he went on, "I had hoped that it was someone masquerading as you. A Black agent. A G. H. Q. order for your arrest has been issued. And so, it is my unhappy duty to—"

"Wait!" Dusty shouted at him. "Do you think if I had killed him, I'd be fool enough to land here? I've just damned near lost my neck doing a job for you. Go out and look at my ship. It's all shot to hell. Except for a car-load of luck, I'd be dead an hour ago."

Some of the hardness went out of the general's eyes.

"You do not need to say anything until your trial, captain," he said. "But I'd certainly like to hear your side of the story. There was a dead man found with Major Walker. He had been thoroughly searched. For one thing, his right shoe taken off, and ripped down the center. Did you do that?"

Dusty hesitated, eyed the general for a moment, then nodded.

"Yes, sir. And here's the whole story as far as I know it."

The pilot recounted his experiences from the time of receiving the Black Hawk's challenge right up to the present moment.

"And that, sir," he finished, "is God's truth! It was my intention to turn over that bead and torn paper, you have there, to Washington Intelligence just as soon as I'd reconnoitered the gas curtain area. But circumstances have forced me to tell you everything I know."

A HEAVY silence settled over the room as Dusty stopped. Brows furrowed in puzzled thought, General Billings bent over the green bead and queer diagram Dusty had placed on the desk.

For several moments, neither of them spoke. Then the senior officer shot out his right hand and jabbed one of a row of bell buttons that lined the right side of his desk.

A moment later an orderly corporal entered and saluted.

"You rang, sir?"

"Yes, corporal," nodded the general without looking up. "Ask the radio signal sergeant to report to me at once with today's log."

The orderly saluted and retreated outside. As the door closed, General Billings raised his eyes to Dusty's face.

"A damn queer mess, captain," he said. "I don't understand it at all. What the devil this bead and crazy diagram can mean, is beyond me. But I want to first check on your conversation with our station. I know nothing of it. And I'll be damned if the signal sergeant issued any such request on his own initiative. We'll see what he has to say, and then contact Washington for further orders."

Dusty nodded absently, and stared hard at the opposite wall. A tiny, elusive thought was spinning around in the back of his brain. Suddenly, he stiffened.

"By God, I wonder!" he breathed fiercely.

General Billings shot him a quizzical glance.

"You wonder what?" he questioned.

Dusty shrugged.

"Don't know just how to put in in words, sir," he got out slowly. "But that bead and the paper—they're dynamite. The man who had them first, this Charles Strickland, died before he could explain. Later, Major Walker died. In the meantime—"

He suddenly stopped.

"By God, I think I've got it!" he continued a few seconds later. "I'll bet I didn't talk with this station at all. I'll bet the Blacks cut in on my wave-length, blanketed out my signals to you, and lured me over to their side of the lines for a killing. They did every damn thing possible to prevent my returning. Because I'd seen their preparations for an attack? Hell, no. Because they were afraid that dead Strickland had told me something.

"Yes, sir, that bead and that paper mean something damn big, or—or else I'm crazy. They've killed, or tried to kill, every one who has been near it. Maybe I may annoy the Blacks every now and then, but they've never sent a couple of hundred ships after me yet! And the Hawk failed to meet me as arranged. Sure, Strickland was a Yank agent. He got hold of something important and tried to get through to the American side."

In silence General Billings drummed his fingers on the desk.

"There are still a few holes to be filled in," he murmured. "According to you, Major Walker claimed that Strickland was refused enlistment, and didn't know how to fly. Incidentally, your telling me that, is a point in your favor. I mean, the very fact that you told some-

thing that could be used against you at the trial."

"Good God, do you still think—"

"It's not for me to make a final decision, captain," the other cut him off. "That's up to a military court. My orders are simply to place you under arrest, if I find you. At your trial, you can—"

"Trial, hell!" Dusty exploded. "That may not be for weeks. And in the meantime, there's plenty for me to do."

"Do what, captain?"

The pilot leaned over the desk, his eyes were agate and the hands gripping the edge were white at the knuckles.

"Find out the answer to that bead and paper!" he got out through tight lips. "I know where the answer is, and I'm the one who can get it!"

The general arched his eyebrows.

"Really?" he murmured patiently. "And just where is this answer, captain?"

"The Black Hawk has the answer. And I'll hammer it out of him with my two hands, if it's the last thing I do!"

The general seemed unimpressed by the savage outburst.

"Perhaps, captain," he smiled. "From all I've heard of you I'm sure you'll tackle any kind of a task. But it so happens that the matter is not entirely in your hands. For the moment, the murder of a distinguished artillery officer is the paramount item."

"But the Black Hawk!" cut in Dusty excitedly. "He—!"

"Has only to do with your deductions, captain!" General Billings snapped him up. "Just whether this bead and paper mean anything, remains to be seen. If Strickland said that an attack was planned in this area, he was certainly mistaken. The Blacks know of our defenses, and realize that any attempt could not possibly meet with success. So we need not worry about that."

Dusty gritted his teeth and groaned.

"Then I'm *non compos mentis* until a military court gets around to deciding one way or the other, is that it?"

The senior officer hunched his shoulders, and nodded.

"That's about it. I'm sorry, captain. Section Fourteen, paragraph twelve of the revised Army Rules and Regulations will tell you that a soldier or officer charged with a major offense cannot be reinstated to active duty until the charges against him are dismissed by a governing military court."

"But I tell you—"

Dusty bit off the rest as the general raised a silencing hand. Burning with rage, he walked over and glared blindly out the window. Silence, heavy and tense, again settled over the room.

And then the door burst open and the orderly corporal came panting inside. His eyes were wide, and he fought for breath a few seconds before he was able to get the words out.

"Sir!" he choked. "Crabtree—Sergeant Crabtree—the radio sergeant! He's been murdered, shot through the heart. In the radio shack!"

General Billings knocked over the chair as he leaped to his feet.

"What?" he thundered.

The orderly bobbed his head up and down.

"Y-y-yes, sir!" he gulped out. "Sergeant Crabtree's been shot through the heart. And all the radio equipment has been smashed to hell—to pieces, sir!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Death Drome

IT SEEMED to take General Billings several seconds to grasp the full meaning of the orderly's words. Dusty, who had spun around from the window at the

sudden entrance, stood poised on the balls of his feet, eyes glued to the general's face.

Suddenly the senior officer started toward the door.

"Come along, corporal," he snapped. "Show me!"

Why he did it, Dusty couldn't explain to himself at the moment. But, as the general started through the door, he shot out a hand, scooped up his automatic, the green bead and the torn diagram, and jammed them all in his breeches pocket. Then spinning around, he raced out of the office and after the others.

The radio shack was a good two hundred yards from the main area office, and all three men were panting hard when they reached the door. General Billings entered first, with Dusty and the orderly corporal at his heels.

The interior of the place looked as though an H. E. battery had scored a direct salvo hit. Every piece of equipment from the delicate transmitting and receiving tubes to the heavy rubber batteries had been smashed beyond all hope of repair. So much so, in fact, Dusty realized instantly that an entirely new station would have to be installed.

But the thing that caught and held the eyes of all three was the limp figure sprawled face up on the steel and copper floor just under the speaker units.

He wore the uniform of a radio signal sergeant, and was probably no more than twenty, if that. The eyes were open and in their death-glazed depths there was a glint of horrified surprise. The out-flung hands were doubled into hard fists, and one leg was twisted under him. The part of the man's fatigue tunic that covered the heart region was stained a dull glistering red.

"Good God!" gulped General Billings, as he stood staring down at the still figure. "It's—it's impossible!"

Brushing past him, Dusty knelt down and opened the man's tunic front and shirt. Just a shade to the left of the breast bone was an ugly quarter inch hole that was oozing sluggish blood.

Controlling the shudder the sight sent through him, he pulled the man's tunic together and stood up.

"I'm afraid that you'll have to believe it, sir," he said quietly, facing the general. "He got it right through the heart. I'd say a regulation Army .45 was used. Not so long ago, either!"

The pilot's words seemed to rouse the general from his stupor. He let his eyes rove about the room.

"Every blasted thing's smashed!" he grunted angrily. "Have to replace it all. But why?"

"I think that someone wanted to make sure you couldn't contact any other units," replied Dusty. And then as an afterthought, "Particularly, Washington H. Q."

The general stared at him.

"You mean, because of that crazy theory of yours?" he demanded.

Dusty silenced him with a warning glance.

"Yes sir," he said simply. "Because of my theory. I connect up the three deaths with it. This last, just as a precautionary measure. A Black agent right here at your H. Q. did this job—and then contacted one of his own stations!"

The senior officer snorted.

"How the devil do you figure out that, captain?"

Dusty stepped over the dead man and pointed at the in-coming and out-going message recorder. It was shaped something like a stock ticker tape machine, only now the glass dome was broken and the delicate gears and cog-checks mashed hopelessly out of line.

"See this, sir?" he said, tapping a strip of the tape. "Voice transmission hasn't

been recorded for the last four hours. That means that my call signals were not picked up. The Blacks blanketed them out. But see here—this torn piece? It recorded dot-dash signals sent out less than an hour ago.”

General Billings came over and peered hard at the dangling ribbon of tape covered with dot and dash marks.

“Well, what about it?” he got out gruffly. “We use wireless as well as radio. I often send out orders in coded Merse.”

“Quite right, sir,” nodded Dusty patiently. “But this is not International Morse! Take this one symbol here—two dots, two dashes and three dots. There isn’t a signal letter or figure like that in International Morse. Now I can’t say for sure, but I think this is part of a message sent out in the secret speed code that the Blacks developed in Europe.”

The pilot suddenly stopped talking, went quickly across the debris littered room and picked up a massive radio log lying on the top of a table. Spinning the pages to the last entry, he studied it a second, and nodded his head.

“Looks like I’m right,” he said holding up the log. “The last entry was made at ten fifty-six—a request for miscellaneous stores for the 20th infantry, this area. But there’s no entry for those code signals on the tape.”

AS THOUGH reluctant to believe him, General Billings went over to Dusty, practically snatched the radio log from his hands and glared at it, brows furrowed. Presently he slapped the log shut and tossed it on the desk.

“By God, I still can’t believe it!” he growled with a stubborn movement of his lower lip. “A Black agent in my headquarters? Bah! It’s probably someone who had a grudge against Sergeant Crabtree.”

“And a grudge against all this expensive equipment too, sir?” murmured Dusty.

The other whirled on him angrily.

“See here, Ayres!” he barked, “you’re forgetting that you’re—”

“No, I’m not!” Dusty cracked down on him. “I’m only asking you to believe that I did see the signs of a big Black offensive against this area! What happens to me, is out of it. I’m only asking you to let me carry on with the job of trying to unravel this mess. It’s big, general—something damn big. The very fact that the Blacks are preparing for a mighty blow at this sector, proves that there’s something else behind it. As you say, they’re no fools. They’re not going to bang their heads against a steel wall, and just pray. That dia—”

Dusty cut himself off as out the corner of his eye he saw the orderly sliding toward the door. He swung around in a flash and took a step forward.

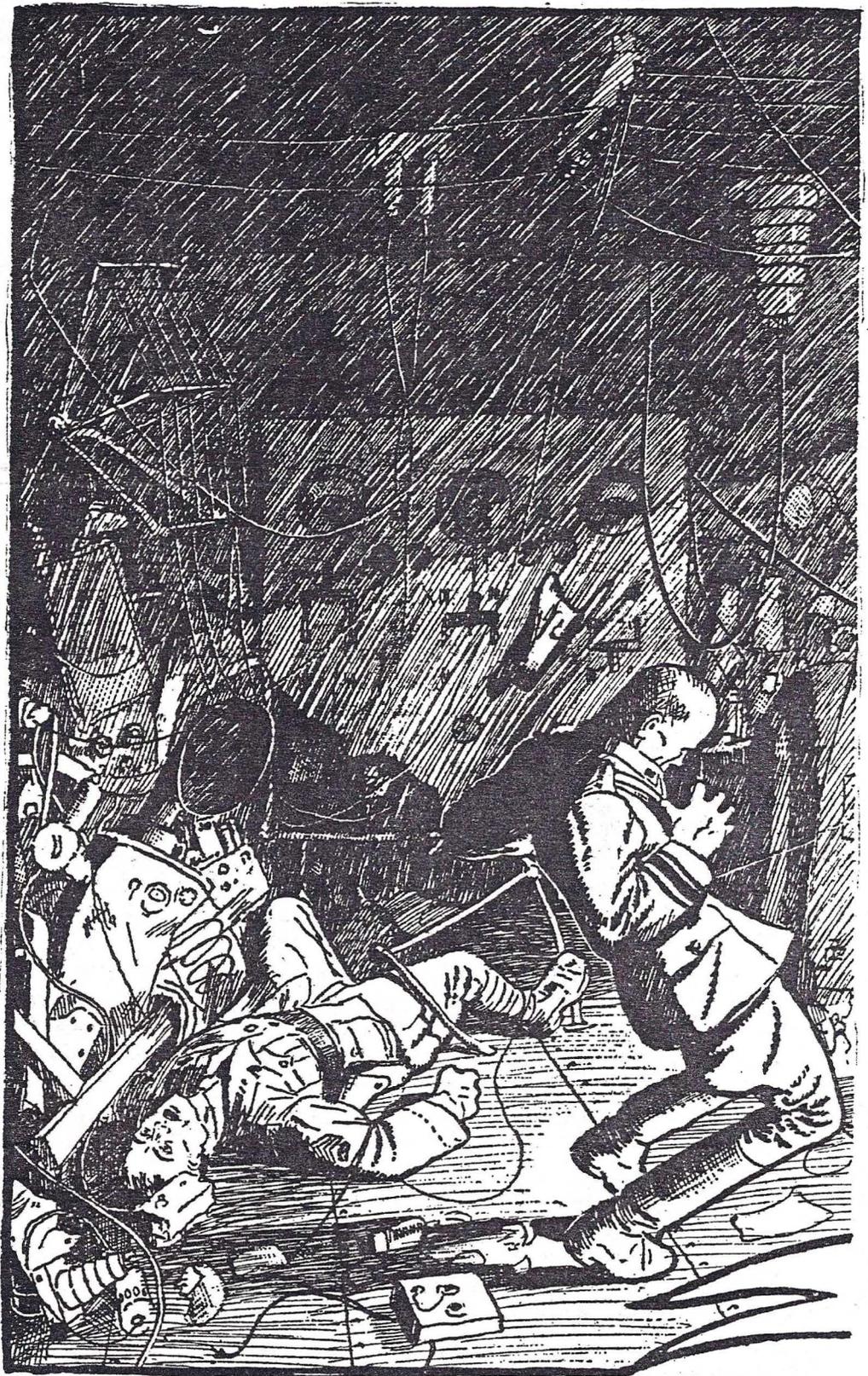
“You! Where’re you going?”

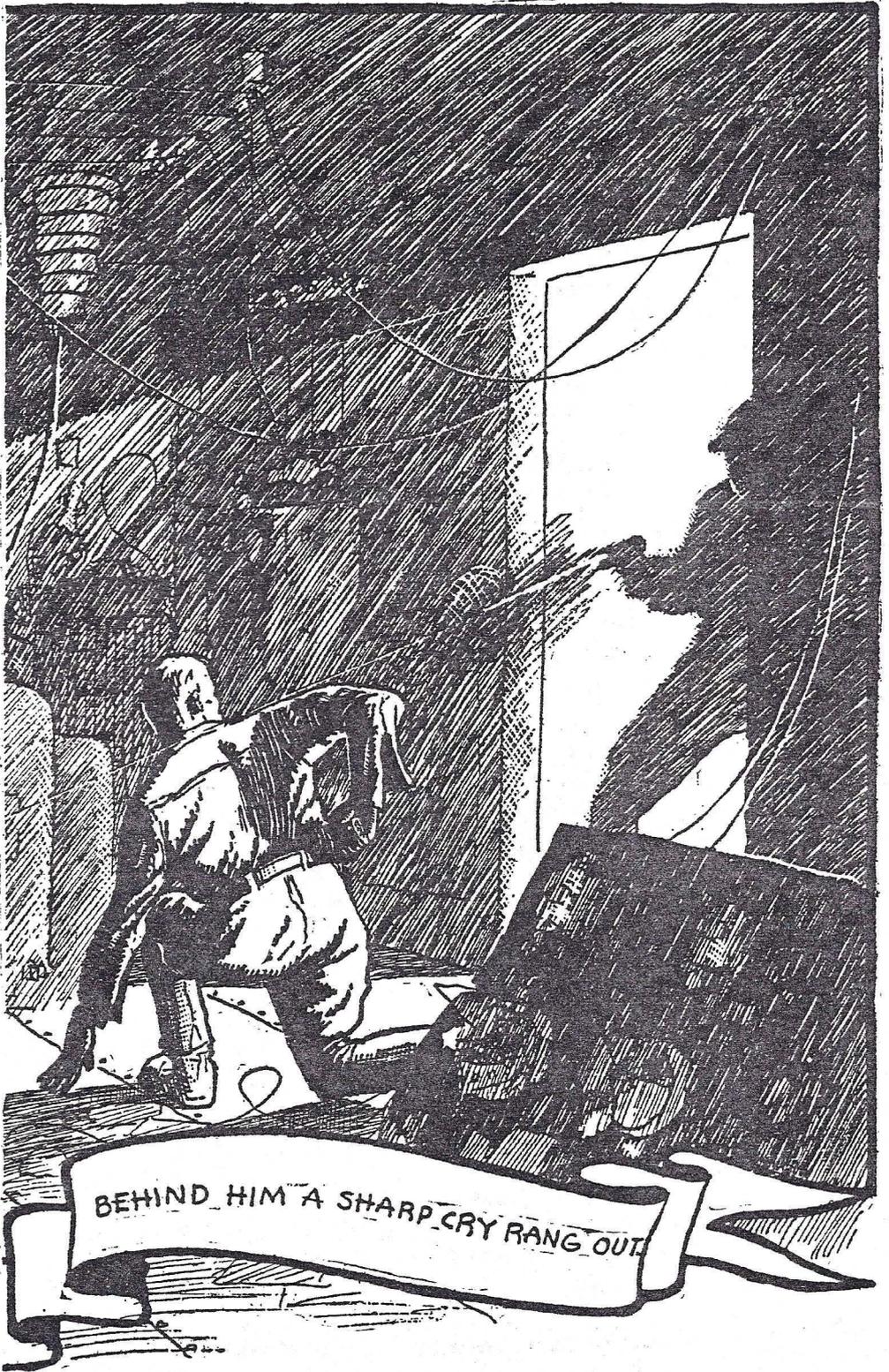
As he spoke, his foot caught on the table leg and he stumbled to his knees. Instantly something glittered in the orderly’s hand. A white-hot bullet slid across Dusty’s left shoulder. Behind him a sharp cry rang out.

One hand and knee still on the floor, he jerked his automatic free, swung it up and fired at a blur in the doorway. The blur disappeared and he saw the gouge mark his bullet made in the metal jamb.

Hurtling to his feet he leaped forward, flung himself through and down onto the ground. There was a sharp *crack* and dirt flew up into his eyes. As he rolled furiously to the left he saw the orderly, crouched behind a field phone pole, steady himself and take careful aim. Still in motion, Dusty threw out his gun hand and pulled the trigger.

The two shots were so close together that they seemed like one. Something





stung Dusty's hand and sent his gun flying. As he cursed and grabbed for it, he saw the orderly collapse on his back. A wild scream beat against the air.

Scooping up his gun with numbed fingers, he raced over to him and bent down. A second shot was not necessary. There was a small blue hole square between the man's close-set eyes.

Looking down at the face, Dusty noticed, with a glow of satisfaction, something that he had not seen before. The features, save for the lightness of the skin—possible to obtain with certain chemicals—were distinctly cruel looking and hawkish in appearance.

"You tried to work too fast!" he grated softly. "A nice bit of acting, all that excited stuff—but when you heard me guessing things that clicked, you got just a bit nervous."

By now the whole H. Q. was in an uproar. Soldiers and officers of all ranks came pouring out of the buildings. In a matter of seconds there was a mob gathered about Dusty. As he started to shoulder his way through, a staff major grabbed him.

Dusty shook himself free.

"Get a medico!" he snapped. "That spy just missed me and got General Billings. I think the general is hurt."

Without waiting for any more questions, he put his head down, plowed through the ring of officers and soldiers and ran back to the radio building. The others followed.

Slumped down on the floor, legs crossed under him, General Billings was clutching blood-smeared fingers to his stomach, and bracing himself against the desk with his other hand.

"A medico's coming, sir," said Dusty gently as he crouched down beside the moaning man. "Better lay down, sir."

"Damned—if you—weren't right—captain. It's four—killings now. Meant for

you—but you—tripped. Lucky, lad. Did—did you?"

"Don't try to talk," cautioned Dusty. "Yes, I got him. He's dead. He meant to get us both, I think. Probably heard us talking in your office. Now take it easy, sir."

The general glared, and coughed blood.

"Hell, know when I'm done! Major Shelton—Shelton—damn, do you hear me?"

The staff major who had grabbed Dusty stepped quickly forward and kneeled down.

"Yes sir? What can I do for you, general?"

The wounded man let go of the desk long enough to point a shaking finger at Dusty.

"This officer is—Captain Ayres," he choked out. "My orders—give him all—the—cooperation—he wants. Understand?"

The major shot Dusty a piercing look.

"Yes sir," he said to General Billings. "Certainly!"

The fast greying lips of the senior officer twitched back in a faint smile as he turned his head to Dusty.

"Believe you, now—captain," he gurgled. "You must be right. I'm—giving you your freedom on—your word! Find out—your way. And give them—hell—for me! Will you—ca—cap—"

THE last was too much for the man. His eyes went wide, and blood sprayed from his lips. Then he seemed to catch his breath in a wheezing gasp and slumped forward.

"One side, gentlemen! One side, please!"

A short, mustached medico came shouldering through the mob that had crowded into the radio shack. But he stopped short as he saw the look on Dusty's face.

"I think so," said Dusty, shaking his head. "Better make sure, though."

It took the medico about twenty seconds to do that.

"He's gone," he said quietly. "Internal hemorrhage, and a rib deflected the bullet to the spine. How'd it happen? I saw a dead orderly lying near the pole outside."

In as few words as possible Dusty told of the double killing, but did not mention any of the events that had passed before.

When he finished they all stood looking at him with speculative eyes. It was the staff major who finally put the question uppermost in every mind.

"Just a minute, Captain Ayres," he began hesitantly. "If you don't mind, we'd like to hear more of the facts. Of course we know of your little—er—affair. And although General Billings ordered me to—"

He stopped short as Dusty shook his head.

"You mean you won't tell us, captain?" he got out harshly.

"I'm afraid I do, sir," said Dusty slowly. "But I will say this much. The enemy is planning an attack against this area, although I have reason to believe that it will not be launched as long as I'm alive. So far, four Americans and one Black agent have died because of a certain scrap of paper. Knowledge of the contents of that paper means death. No, I'm not trying to be dramatic—"

Dusty hesitated, and gave Major Shelton an appraising glance.

"May I speak with you alone, outside?" he asked suddenly.

The other nodded, turned on his heel and shouldered his way through the crowd. Once he was out of earshot of the group in the radio building, he turned and fixed Dusty with steady eyes.

"Well, what's it all about?" he snapped.

The pilot gave him look for look.

"I want you to carry out General Bill-

ings' last order, major," he said. "How far is the nearest radio station from here?"

"Second infantry, twenty miles east of here. Why?"

Dusty spoke slowly, carefully choosing his words.

"I want you to call the Second infantry," he said. "Explain to them that your station was wrecked, and tell them to notify Washington H. Q. that your radio operator, a Black agent, General Billings, and myself, have been killed. Say that the reason for the deaths is not known, and that you are awaiting further orders."

The staff major stared at him as though he had suddenly gone crazy.

"That you were killed?" he echoed. "What the devil's the idea?"

Dusty grinned.

"Just part of a little plan," he said. "I'm sorry, but I'd rather keep it to myself. If I flop, there'll be no come-back on you, I assure you."

Major Shelton scowled at the ground, and marked a crazy pattern in the dirt with the toe of one shoe. Presently he muttered a curse of annoyance under his breath, and jerked his head up.

"I know of your special appointment, captain," he said evenly. "And of the G. H. Q. request that assistance be given you when demanded. But I consider that the general order for your arrest has changed that somewhat. Incidentally, this does not happen to be a one-man war. I think, instead, that I'll notify Washington H. Q. of what has happened and ask for orders from them direct."

"If you do major," Dusty grated at him, "you may be signing your own death warrant."

The other arched, gave Dusty a contemptuous look.

"I guess I can chance that," he said lightly.

For a minute or so they both stood there, eyes locked and bodies tensed. It was Dusty who eventually broke the spell.

"Believe me, major," he said earnestly, "I know what I'm talking about. The broadcast of my death will be sure to be picked up by the Blacks. It will give me the chance to carry out the rest of my plan. I ask you as one American soldier to another, please carry out my request. It—hell, it may mean everything!"

Perhaps it was the sincerity in Dusty's tone, or the grim anxiety on his face. But, at any rate, after a moment's pause, Major Shelton smiled slowly and nodded his head.

"All right," he said quietly. "This is the first time in sixteen years of army life that a junior officer has talked me into going against my better judgment. I'll do as you ask."

In spite of himself, Dusty heaved a great sigh of relief.

"Thanks, sir! Now, one more favor. About my ship—it needs repairs, and—"

"I know," the other cut in. "One of the men said you ordered repairs. We have the necessary parts here in Stores. We carry the stuff for staff ships."

Dusty beamed.

"Swell!" he exclaimed. "That's what I call luck. Get the men at it right away, will you sir? Won't take them more than an hour. And I'll be ready then."

"All right," shrugged Major Shelton. "But I certainly wish that you'd tell—Oh let it go. Guess I always did have a soft spot for crazy Indians."

The staff officer turned on his heel and walked away. Dusty smiled at his back a moment, then looked toward the gas curtain still hanging in the northern heavens. The smile faded from his lips; jaw muscles tightened, and his hands slowly doubled into steel knotted fists.

"Now, you dirty skunks!" he gritted

out between clenched teeth, "it's my turn to deal a hand!"

He walked quickly over to the area H. Q. shack and shouldered inside.

CHAPTER SIX

The Hanging Doom

CHIN cupped in his hands, elbows propped on the edge of the desk, Dusty stared silently down at the torn diagram. For over half an hour, he had not taken his eyes off the paper. Its meaning, if any, still eluded him. But that was not the purpose uppermost in his mind. He had been slowly and methodically memorizing the strange diagram, until at last every crease, every line, and every figure was stamped indelibly upon his brain.

Presently, he leaned back, blinked his tired eyes, then dropped the torn sheet into an ash receiver and applied a match. A minute later it was a crinkled, charred strip that became so much black dust under his tamping finger.

"Just in case Lady Luck gives me the go-by," he grunted, and spilled the dust into the wastepaper basket.

Picking up the green bead, he scowled thoughtfully at it a moment then jammed it into the seam of his right breeches pocket. Hardly had he finished that, than a noise outside the door made him stiffen and shoot out a hand for his automatic close by on the desk. Its muzzle was trained dead on the door as it opened.

At the sight of Major Shelton's head he relaxed and lowered the gun.

"Your plane's ready, Ayres," grunted the staff officer, eyes riveted on the gun. "What's next?"

Dusty grinned and shrugged.

"The next is up to me, sir," he said. "But I want to thank you for everything."

"Cut it!" snapped the other. "I'm half

inclined to change my mind. God knows I'll be in a pretty pickle when Washington H. Q. starts checking back on everything. Sure you want to play this mysterious plan of yours alone?"

The pilot nodded his head firmly.

"Dead sure," he said shortly. "You've equipment here for smoke screening enemy air raiders, haven't you?"

"That's right," Major Shelton clipped out. "Good God, that, too?"

Dusty gestured.

"Naturally, sir! I can't take off in broad daylight, and simply hope that enemy pilots on patrol will look the other way. A smoke screen will cover me perfectly. I can be in the cloud layer before it fades out. And any Blacks that see the screen will just think that this H. Q. has got the wind-up over a possible raid."

"You think of everything, don't you?" the other snorted. "Very well, I'll give you your smoke screen. But listen, young fellow. If I do get into hot water, I'm going to raise heaven and hell to pull you in with me. That's a warning!"

"Check, sir," grinned Dusty. "And thank—"

"Shut up! And good luck on whatever the hell's in that head of yours!"

Darting through the door the staff officer slammed it shut. Five minutes later Dusty followed him outside.

It was like stepping out into a swirling sand storm, minus the sand. At first he could see nothing. Great waves of oily gray smoke swished and swirled about him. Buildings less than fifty yards away looked like dull blotches in a heavy rolling grey mist. Beyond them nothing was visible.

Pausing a second to get his bearings, he turned half right and plunged into the billowing shroud.

He stopped only when he almost ran into the Silver Flash, and a shadowy figure grabbed him.

"Right here, Ayres!" sounded Major Shelton's sharp voice in his ears. "Hope its thick enough for you. In case you're wondering, you've got a clear run of about a hundred yards straight in front of you. The top of this stuff should reach fifteen thousand. That O. K.?"

"Couldn't be better," Dusty called over his shoulder, as he legged into the pit. "Give me two minutes, and then you can shut the stuff off."

As an afterthought, just before he slid the cowling closed, he called back.

"And send the laundry bill to me, major!"

"Don't worry, I will!" echoed back to him. "The damn stuff, it—"

The rest was lost to Dusty as he heeled open the throttle and released the wheel brakes.

As though eager to get into the air again, the Silver Flash leaped forward, clung to the ground for a bare twenty yards, and then went zooming up blindly into the smoke screen.

Holding the nose up and to the south, Dusty gave the ship all it could take, and swept the cockpit's fittings with a practiced eye.

Everything was as it should be. New glass replaced the shattered strip; a new radio panel adorned the dash board, and a replacement oxygen tank was clamped to the cockpit side. The rest of the instruments, including the guns, had been checked and put in perfect working order.

Dusty grinned and snapped one hand up in complimentary salute.

"Nice work, lads," he grunted aloud. "I'll remember you next time something goes wrong."

THE inspection over with, and everything found to be O. K., his face went grave and a look of half anxiousness and half savage determination came into his eyes.

Up to now a definite plan had been crystallized in his mind. And it all revolved about the Black Hawk. That that sky vulture knew the answers to all the questions which baffled him, he believed beyond all possible doubt.

Next to Fire-Eyes, himself, in importance, the Hawk undoubtedly knew every major plan of the Black Invaders. And a major plan was slowly but surely coming to a head—to a thundering, roaring climax.

But the nature of that plan the Yank did not know. He was only certain that there was some great scheme about to be sprung by the Blacks. Call it a hunch, or premonition, or just plain guesswork—it didn't matter which. Past events hooked up too closely to be put down to coincidence.

"Damn it, there must be!" he argued aloud to himself. "And that torn diagram is the key. Strickland, Walker, the radio sergeant, and General Billings—all killed because of it. And they tried their damndest to get me. God, if I could only figure it out!"

He stopped talking long enough to smash a clenched fist against the cockpit side.

"But you, Black Hawk!" he blazed. "You're going to tell me about it, even if I have to break your damn—"

As a heart-chilling thought came to him, he cut off the rest. Was the Hawk still alive? Had the Hawk been in one of those Black ships he'd sent hurtling downward a couple of hours ago?

The sudden thought deadened the fire of determination that burned in his chest. He'd shot off his face to General Billings, vowed that he'd get the answers from the Hawk—and had pleaded for the chance.

Well, murder had given him that chance. Now, he was in the air to hunt down the Black Ace—but was he alive? For a moment the bottom seemed to

fall out of everything. The small quiet voice inside of him called him a fool and flayed his confidence for its assumed belief that he alone could succeed in following one of the tiny strands of the mystery web to the center, and disrupt the whole thing.

Certainly he was a crazy fool. He should have reported to Washington H. Q. hours ago. If he had, these other murders probably would never have happened.

If the bead and the torn diagram meant anything it was up to Intelligence to figure it out, not an over-zealous eagle like himself.

He reached out his free hand to the wave-length knob to notify Washington H. Q. that he was coming in to report.

Then with a savage curse he jerked back.

"Like hell I will!" he roared out. "I started this, and I'll finish it. If the Hawk's dead, I'll get the answers some other way!"

As the last ripped off his lips, the nose of the Silver Flash poked itself up through the top of the smoke screen. Leveling off, Dusty hugged close to its crest and searched the surrounding air through narrowed lids.

Between him and the cloud layer was a space a bit less than a thousand feet deep. Half a minute was all he needed to bury himself in the cloud layer. But first, before roaring up into the thousand foot channel of clear air, he had to make sure that no patrolling Black planes were about.

One sweeping look to the east, south, and west resulted in nothing but clear air; not even a tiny dot in the distance. But as he looked to the north, toward the gas curtain he stiffened in the seat. A flight of Black ships was weaving in and out of the billowing mass.

But a few moments later, he gave a shout of joy and jerked the nose of the Silver Flash upward. As though tired of

their fruitless patrol all of the Black planes had suddenly plunged in to the gas curtain and become lost to view.

Eyes glued to the spot where they had disappeared, Dusty cursed his own ship on to greater speed. And when at last the misty tentacles of the cloud layer gathered him into their blind depths, his heart was looping over with triumphant relief.

So far, so good. He had gained his first objective. Now to fly compass in the cloud layer to a point far behind the Black defenses.

Swinging around to the northwest, he glued his eye to the instrument board, and sent the Silver Flash charging forward.

Little tingles of excitement and worry rippled up and down his spine. Flying blind didn't bother him in the least. He'd had too much experience in that phase of the game. Besides, his instruments never lied.

But still and all there was one danger that might be lurking near at hand—a danger that he might be forced to meet and overcome in the bat of an eyelash. And that danger was the possibility of a collision with some enemy plane drifting about in the cloud layer.

But as he toyed with the thought, he shrugged. It was a chance that had to be taken—and that was all there was to it.

A FEW moments later, though, a black shadow came rushing through the cloud layer toward him. His heart stood still, and he started to hurl the Silver Flash off to the right and up. Almost instantly he checked the movement, and a shaky laugh spilled off his lips. He was simply flying through the section where the gas curtain passed up through the cloud layer.

Instinctively he glanced up to make sure that the cowl-sealing lugs were locked in place. They were. He ruddered the

ship back onto its original course. Seconds ticked by and became minutes—five of them, ten—fifteen—

Gr-r-rump!

Sound, like the heavy bark of a mighty Saint Bernard came to him through the cowling. Off to the left a dull ball of flame appeared in the cloud layer, hung motionless for an instant and then fused out.

Hardly had it disappeared than there was sound and flame off to the right. Groaning with rage, he banked and deliberately flew toward it.

Seconds later he zigzagged sharply back in the opposite direction. Behind him he heard a third archie shell explosion.

"Dummy!" he blazed at himself as he savagely zigzagged this way and that. "Did you think the Blacks would leave their sound detectors home?"

Blindly cursing his own stupidity for not having taken the very natural existence of enemy sound detectors and amplifiers into consideration, he slowly eased the Silver Flash up toward the top of the cloud layers.

About him, in the shroud mist, archie shells were spewing out their balls of fused red fire, "bracketing" his ever changing position, and warning patrolling pilots of the presence of an enemy airman.

To go down now, was out of the question. For the moment, at least, his wild plan was knocked into a cocked hat. His only hope lay in climbing up to peak ceiling, cutting his engine and gliding down to a point at least a hundred miles north of the Black lines.

Then, at half throttle, and keeping just inside the cloud layer, he could drift back and pick out a spot to land in close by the Hawk's drome. That he'd find it he had no doubts. Only the Hawk's unit flew the speedy arrow-shaped Dart monoplanes. And once he found their nest,

there would he find the man he sought—or would he?

He cursed the question out of his mind. Time to worry about that later. Right now it was up to the Silver Flash to claw air upward and claw it fast. The Blacks knew that an enemy plane was hidden in the cloud layer, but they didn't know the identity of its pilot.

A minute later he roared into clear air—Less than two thousand feet above him was a whole unit of Black attack planes. And in the split second it took him to whip the Silver Flash down into the cloud layer again he caught a glimpse to the south of an enemy bomber flight lumbering toward his position in strung out line position.

Had he had more time he would have noticed something else. As it was, with a gasping sigh of relief he buried himself in the cloud layer, totally unaware of the shroud of doom that was relentlessly closing in on him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Silver Fire

KEEPING the Silver Flash throttled all the way back, he held it in a shallow glide toward the northwest. With escape by altitude lost, he could only stake his hopes on being able to stay in the cloud layer long enough to get out of range of the sound detectors.

But as the seconds ticked by and the airspeed indicator needle hovered dangerously close to the stalling mark his heart sank. Bitter desperation seized him. It was either down or up for him now. To open up and continue through the cloud layer would be but a waste of time. He was still within the range of the detectors, and already archie gunners were poking around for his new position.

"All right, miracle man!" he groaned

sadly. "This washes up your pet plan! So take a look-see, and get the hell back to your own side of the fence!"

Oblivious to the pain that shot through his hand, he banged the throttle wide open, and stuck the nose down.

The sudden, furious thunder of the roaring twenty-eight hundred horses cowed into the nose deafened him for an instant. But a few seconds later, as he shot down into clear air, he forgot all about his vibrating ear-drums.

Below him, on the ground, was a scene that sent his heart pounding with excitement. The earth seemed to be virtually covered with countless streamlined tractor troop trains, tank units, and armored field guns on tread-trucks.

But it was not the sight of them that startled him, so much as it was the fact that they were all crawling along behind the gas curtain in a southwesterly direction. In fact they were just inside the northern lip of the downward curving curtain.

Without taking the trouble to glance at his roller map for confirmation, Dusty realized instantly that the gigantic caravan of war was at least one hundred and fifty miles behind the Blacks' main defenses—and headed southwest, away from the Z-10 area!

Yet, as he thundered through the back flap of the curving gas curtain and into the clear again, he saw far to the southeast the same panorama of offensive warfare that he'd seen a few hours before.

A mighty army, guns, tanks and everything else, was converging on the frontier of the Z-10 area. Yet one hundred and fifty miles behind it, an even greater steel clad horde was moving slowly southwest along the northern borders of New Hampshire and Vermont.

Two great sledge hammers of war—one moving southeast, and the other southwest. And shielding both movements

from the American side of the lines was a towering curtain of thick, heavy and deadly gas.

Wide-eyed, Dusty stared at the weird yet blood chilling sight. He was certain that a great offensive would soon be launched against the Z-10 area. This second view of the obvious preparation was just so much confirmation.

But that second and even greater army crawling southwest, was like a big question mark burning in his brain.

Could the Blacks be planning offensives at two points? If so, what was the other point? To the southwest lay the Great Lakes, Yanks on one side, Blacks on the other, and miles and miles of vigilantly patrolled waters between them.

And then, like a spear of light a thought flashed through Dusty's spinning brain. It jerked him up straight in the seat.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "Is that it?"

Trembling with excitement, he ignored the archie shells that started barking in his wake, snapped out his hand and spun the wave-length dial.

"Emergency, Washington H. Q.!" he bellowed into the transmitter tube, turning up full volume. "Emergency . . . stand by!"

Breathlessly he glued his eyes to the red signal light on the panel and strained his ears for the familiar crackle in the phones. One second . . . two seconds . . . three.

His body went clammy with eerie dread, and sweat oozed out on his forehead and trickled off in drops.

"Washington H. Q., emergency!" he called again. "Emergency . . . emergency, Captain Ayres calling Washington H. Q."

A split second later the signal light blinked, and the phones hummed.

"Go ahead, Captain Ayres. What would you like to tell your commanders?"

A harsh laugh followed the rasping

words. Dusty sat rigid as the hated voice of the Black Hawk continued.

"Did you suppose your little death broadcast and smoke-screen trick would blind us? Did you think we have only *one* secret agent working for us. . . ?"

Dusty was no longer listening. He was searching the air for a glimpse of a sleek, jet-black monoplane. But there was none to be seen. Subconsciously, he realized that the archie gunners below had stopped firing at him.

"—and, I might add, captain, that the staff major has now joined that very stupid General Billings. So that leaves only you."

"Damn it!" Dusty blurted out. "Show yourself, and I'll do the rest!"

The chuckle in the ear-phones mocked him.

"Bravo, captain! My compliments on your courage. But my fancy holds me in check, at the moment."

Dusty began hurling his ship around in mad, questing circles. But though he searched until his eyeballs ached, not one single sign of a Black ship did he see. And all the time the rasping voice of the Black Hawk maintained taunting chatter in the ear-phones.

SUDDENLY he swung the Silver Flash toward the south, fed the engine all the hop it could take.

"Some other time!" he howled into the transmitter tube. "I've got other things to do right now."

Easing the nose down a bit, he waited expectantly for the Hawk to stop his hide and seek game and come plunging down out of the cloud layer to give battle.

But as the seconds whipped by, even that hope vanished. Wherever he was, the Black pilot seemed bent on remaining there.

And then, suddenly, there was a sound

like the booming of a naval gun in the Yank's ear-phones.

He jumped violently in spite of himself, and the Silver Flash skidded crazily off to the side under the sudden and uncontrollable jerk of his hand.

Ears ringing, he checked the wild movement of the plane, hauled it back onto even keel and sent it screaming up toward the cloud layer.

An instinctive warning had shot through his body. The Hawk was not playing this game of hide and seek for nothing. And it was plumb foolishness to wait down in clear air for the Black to finally show himself.

In the back of his brain he was putting the pieces of the puzzle together bit by bit. And although the picture was not entirely clear as yet, he had more than enough to work on. In fact, enough to cause his heart to pound furiously against his ribs, and cold sweat to splash off his forehead.

Outlined in fire against the screen of memory in his head was the torn diagram he had taken from Strickland. The more he studied it with his mind's eye the more clear it became.

Gone was the mystery that had surrounded it a few hours ago. He knew now—knew the truth! And realization set the blood in his veins to boiling, and fired him with a determination to get through to the American lines before it was too late.

He pounded his free fist against the throttle.

"Come on, old girl, get going!" he yelled hoarsely. "We've got to make it. Got to make it now!"

And then suddenly it happened—happened so quickly that his brain was unable to scream an order to his hands before it was too late.

Right in front of him, a curtain of

dangling cable wires shot down out of the cloud layer.

Like so many thin, grey snakes they twisted and screwed about in the air. A wild cry of alarm clogged in his throat as he frantically belted the stick over against the cockpit side, and slammed all his weight on the rudder pedal.

The Silver Flash seemed to groan aloud as it tried to respond instantly to the vicious movement of the controls. It lurched off to the side, seemed to hover motionless as its prop clawed madly.

And then it plunged downward.

But too late.

The terrific forward speed of the plane was too great, and the curtain of dangling grey wires too close.

In the split second left him, Dusty saw the network of connecting strands that held the vertical cable wires in place—saw the interlocking mesh barrier come sweeping toward him.

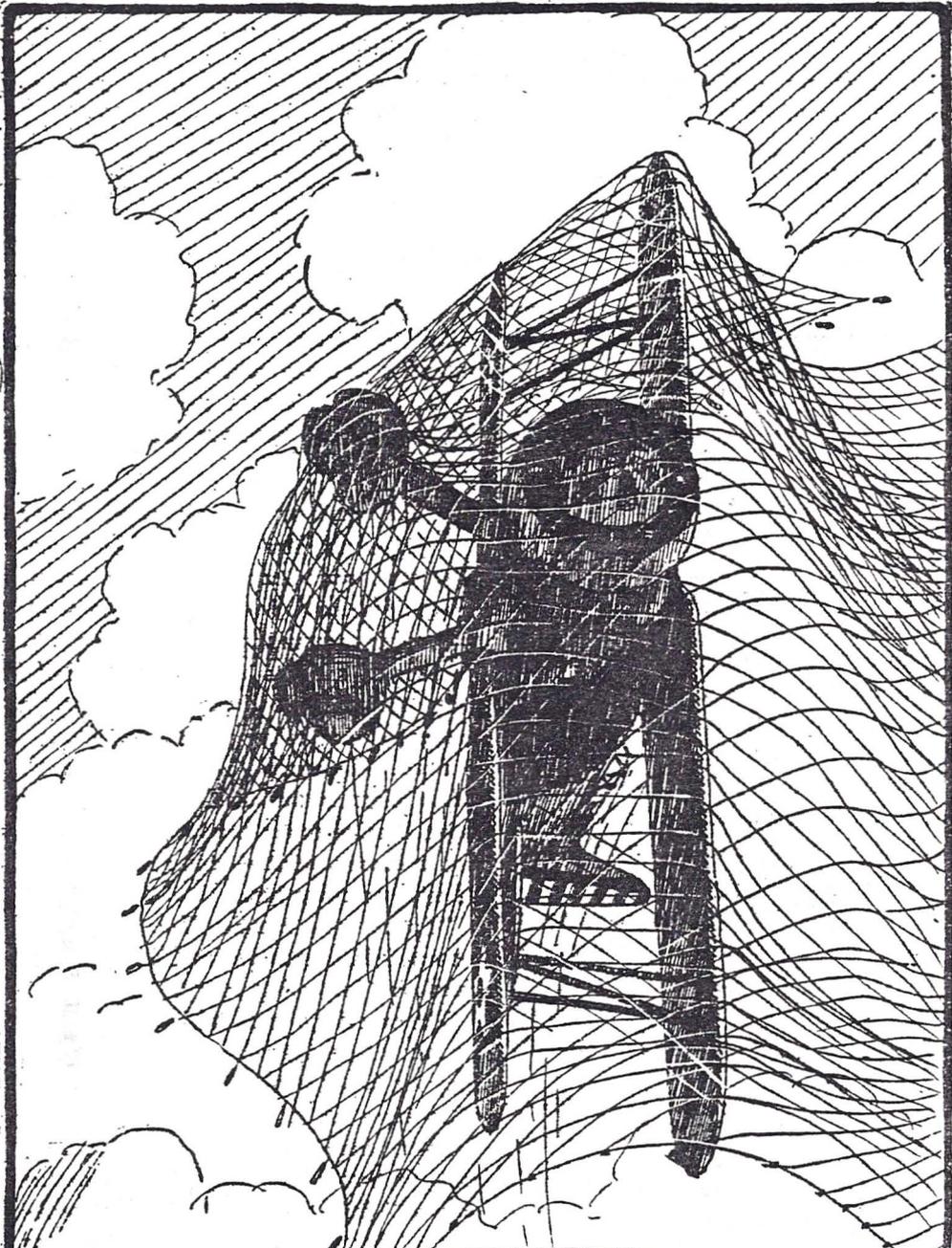
And then, helpless to do anything, he went plowing right into it.

As though made of rubber instead of fine cable wire, the sky net seemed to give way to the force of the impact. But only for a matter of split seconds, and then the cables went taut, and Dusty was flung up against the instrument board with crushing force.

Half conscious, he reeled back into the seat. Through blurred eyes he saw his prop clashing and ripping at the maze of twisting and whipping cable wires. They snapped with the report of pistol shots, but their loose ends slapped back and wound themselves about the prop shaft.

Others curled back over the wings and gouged long grooves in the metal covering.

And yet, as though it were something human—like a Bengal tiger caught in the hunters' stout rope net—the Silver Flash bucked and yawned and strained mightily to break through the countless thin, grey



AND THEN, HELPLESS TO DO ANYTHING, HE WENT PLOWING RIGHT INTO IT.

fingers that curled themselves about it from prop to tailskid.

And slamming the stick about, and sawing rudder, Dusty added every bit of his flying skill in a mad effort to help the plane break through.

But it was useless.

The sky net wound its steel fingers about the shaft of the thrashing propeller. Presently the engine sputtered, broke itself free for an instant with a mighty roar, and then sputtered and backfired some more.

Black smoke spewed out from its exhaust vents and smeared great streaks of soot oil along the glass cowling. Vibration shook the plane like a leaf in a tornado, and a second later one of the wing internal bracing wires let go with a singing *twang* that echoed against Dusty's ear-drums like the bells of doom.

One eye blinded by the blood that flowed down from an ugly gash on his forehead, Dusty somehow managed to haul back the throttle and snap off the ignition switch.

Its power gone, the prop snapped to an instant stop. And then, as though unable to hold out any longer, the variable pitch gears flew off in pieces, and the blades of the prop itself followed them into oblivion a moment later.

Dully conscious that he was still able to work the controls after a fashion, Dusty virtually lifted the ship over on one wing, slammed on top rudder and let the tail swing down to the vertical.

It was his only hope—and it worked. The mesh curtain, that had immediately been released from above at the moment of impact, went swishing forward and jerked the remainder of its dangling strands free from the nose of the plane.

But it had all ready done its work and the fact that its twisted and tangled remains dropped clear of him brought no sense of joy to Dusty's heart.

He was through—and in due time the Silver Flash II would be no more.

As his mind rushed backward and he remembered those bombers in strung-out line formation, he groaned aloud in bitter agony.

Like mine sweepers sweeping their great steel nets through the waters those Black bombers had swept the skies. And watchers on the ground had signaled when to let the nets out to their full length. That signal had been the booming sound in the ear-phones.

HALF mad with blind rage, Dusty jerked the plane out of its lumbering dive and stared at the ground below. There, less than five miles to the west, was an enemy airdrome, and in front of its row of hangars a long line of Black Dart monoplanes. The Black Hawk's drome—the objective of his crazy plan!

Plan? He laughed harshly. Plan, hell! What plan did he have? He, a helpless eagle floating down to a hit or miss landing in enemy country—and a million pair of eyes watching him.

"To the west, captain. You are to land on my field. And after we land you can thank me for saving your life."

The crackling voice of the Black Hawk in the ear-phones, startled Dusty. Snapping his head back he saw a Black bomber slide down out of the cloud layer.

From snap-releases fitted to the spar ends of both lower wings, shreds of the sky net flapped backward in the prop-wash. Though he could not see the figures in the pilots' compartment, Dusty knew instinctively that the Hawk was there. Too yellow to risk his precious neck, the man had hidden himself in the clouds until his trap had been sprung.

Like a beam of brilliant light cutting through impenetrable darkness, the last words of the Hawk touched a note of sudden realization in his brain. The Hawk wanted him alive, yet a few hours ago

they had moved heaven and hell in a desperate effort to kill him.

Why? As Dusty told himself the answer, his lips curled back in a hard smile.

"You're worried," he murmured softly. "and you want to make sure. Well, stew in your own juice awhile!"

And then in loud tones.

"Hey, tramp! Signal down to clear your field. My ship won't hold out much longer and I'll have to land fast!"

The ear-phones chuckled.

"Unfortunate, isn't it captain? Very well, I'll signal to them. Land at the north end. And be careful, captain. Should you—"

Dusty didn't hear the rest. With a flick of his free hand he cut off the radio. At the same time he stuck the nose of the propless Silver Flash straight downward.

The damaged wings shook dangerously, but he gave them but a glance, and then fixed his eyes on the ground below.

Down he went, wings whining in the terrific rush of air, and the stick shaking under his steel grip. But, though acutely conscious of the excess strain of the battered plane, he grimly held it in its dive toward the Black Hawk's drome.

And then, when he was less than five thousand feet above the field, and a swarm of figures were gazing at him with upturned faces, he twisted sharply around in the seat and looked back.

High above him, swinging down in lazy gliding circles was the bomber. Further south five more were nosing down out of the cloud layer.

Snapping his eyes to the front again, he tensed every muscle and fiber of his entire being.

"Okay, fellow," he grated. "Let's go now!"

As the last word spilled off his lips he hauled back on the stick with every ounce of his strength, and stepped hard on right rudder.

For one split moment of hell the nose refused to come up. Then like a gale-bent limb whipping back into place, the nose shot up to level keel and went screaming around to the right. Before it had made three-quarters of the turn, Dusty checked it and sent it rocketing earthward again, straight for a range of rocky, scrub-growth covered hills.

Behind him the savage yammer of machine-gun fire blasted out. But he did not once turn his head to look.

He held the Silver Flash in its wire screaming plunge for the hill range.

Out the corner of his eye he saw armored cars rushing along the roads toward the hill range, and little tongues of jetting flame spat up at him from their dull glistening sides. But his speed was too great and the range too far, with the result that the Black gunners simply wasted hundreds of rounds of perfectly good ammunition.

Now the crest of the hill range was less than a hundred feet below him. Hands rock steady, he eased the nose up and banked southwest along the range.

Foot by foot the Silver Flash lost flying speed. It was a matter of seconds now.

Spinning around in the seat he took one last look behind him. A mile away the armored cars were raising great clouds of dust on the dirt roads. Above them, twin engines roaring a mighty tune, the bomber was sweeping down.

Dusty grinned.

Then with a flash movement of the stick and rudder he whipped the plane up on right wing-tip, let it sideslip down the far side of the hill range. Its wheels grazed the tips of the scrub trees. And then, as a small clearing shot underneath him, he pulled the nose up to a sharp stall, braced himself and buried his head in his arms.

ONE, two—three seconds ticked by. Then, as though suspending wires had been cut, the Silver Flash munched down wing first into the clearing.

Split seconds later Dusty's head was filled with the crash and ripping of twisting, crumpling metal. An unseen giant hurled him against the side of the cockpit, jerked him back and hurled him against the other side. Something smashed through the glass cowling and brushed painfully across the bullet crease on his shoulder.

Black oblivion speckled with a million stars of colored light swirled about him, and heaven and earth seemed to explode in one terrific crescendo of thunderous sound.

A few moments later a great heavy silence settled over everything.

Stunned, pains shooting through him from head to foot, he slowly lowered his arms. About him was nothing but an interlocking mass of branches, twigs and brownish green leaves.

Gasping with pain he slowly crawled through the smashed cowling and slid down a crumpled wing to the ground.

For a few seconds he was forced to lay there, fighting for breath and struggling to rid his spinning brain of the great black cloud engulfing it.

But presently, as distant sounds came to him, he staggered to his feet, lurched over to the shattered cockpit and thrust his right hand down in through the jagged hole in the cowling.

Numbed fingers groped along the side of the cockpit, fastened over the signal pistol and pulled it free from its clamps.

Examining it a second to make sure it was loaded, he reeled back a couple of paces, and pointed the thing at the split and leaking fuel tank just back of the engine.

"So long, old gal!" he grunted thickly.

He pulled the trigger. The big muzzle spat out a ball of green fire. The ball smacked into the leaking fuel tank. For a second it made a sharp hissing sound, then a sheet of flame leaped out and spread rapidly along the fuel-drenched fuselage.

Tossing the signal pistol into the flames, Dusty turned and went stumbling and sliding down the side of the hill, body crouched low and well under the overhanging branches of the scrub trees.

Not until he was across the valley and scrambling over the crest of an opposite hill did he slacken his pace. Sinking slowly to the ground, he wiggled under some bushes and looked back.

The small clearing on the opposite hillside was now a raging inferno that was spreading out like spilled oil, and consuming everything within reach of its licking red tongues.

So great was the intensity of the flames that the Silver Flash was completely hidden from view.

As he watched, a lump rose in his throat. He clenched his teeth, and dug his fingers into the soft ground.

"A hell of an end for it!" he groaned.

Suddenly, the roar of a plane overhead made him roll over on his back. Circling down as low as its pilot dared, was the Black bomber. And as Dusty squinted his eyes and peered hard he saw a tall black-uniformed figure shove back the cockpit cowling, lean out of it and fix powerful binoculars on the raging flames below. The Black Hawk.

Absently swabbing the blood from his face, he watched the giant plane swing slowly around the spot. Then a few moments later he heard a great clattering sound at the eastern end of the valley.

Even as he rolled over on his side and peered through the maze of underbrush, he knew exactly what he would see. And he was right. Churning up the valley in

follow the leader formation were three of the Blacks' speedy armored cars.

But they were not so very speedy just now. In fact, the ground was so rough and brush-clogged that they were barely able to move through it.

Eventually, though, they reached a point below the blazing hillside, and came to a stop. Steel doors swung open and soldiers piled out. They scrambled up toward the flames.

But they were only able to get just so far before the terrific heat sent them scurrying down again. Going over to their cars they pulled out extinguisher tanks, strapped them to their backs and started climbing again.

But the thin stream of fire-extinguishing chemicals was useless against the raging fire. Relentlessly it crept down the hillside, forcing them steadily back, until at last they broke and ran for their cars.

A moment later engines roared, gears clashed, and all three of the cars careened around.

At the end of the valley, Dusty saw them stop. A soldier got out of the first one and climbed to the roof. Unfurling two small orange flags he started signaling to the bomber circling over head. After a few minutes he tucked the flags under his arm and climbed down into the car.

Engines making enough racket to match the thunder of the plane overhead, the cars rolled onward and lost themselves to Dusty's view.

Still hugging the ground, and not daring to move, he watched the bomber make one last circle of the flaming spot and then veer around to the south.

Heaving a weary sigh, he rolled over on his back, and closed his smarting eyes.

"And when you rats come back to make sure, he breathed softly, "Mrs. Ayres' little boy, Dusty, will be where you'd never figure him to be—and how!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Black Tarmac

NOT daring to keep his eyes closed for long, lest he fall into an exhausted sleep, he soon opened them and rolled over on his stomach. His head ached horribly, and he suddenly remembered that he had not eaten for hours.

But with a grim shrug he dismissed all that from his thoughts. There was nothing he could do about it now. As a matter of fact, there wasn't anything he could do, except wait for the shadows of evening to creep across the countryside.

To move now, was to beg the Blacks to take him prisoner. And above all he had to avoid that final catastrophe.

For perhaps two hours he stayed right where he was. And then, when the shadows of night closed over the landscape, he slowly got to his feet, flexed his stiff muscles, and went jog-trotting down the hill.

Continually checking his course with the aid of a small pocket compass, he held his tireless pace southward for well over an hour. When he caught the glimpse of flickering lights in the distance, he slowed down to a walk and veered his course toward the west.

He was on flat country now; the hill range was far behind him. A small village loomed up in the darkness off to his left. He skirted it stealthily and kept on going to the southwest.

Finally, when he had crept up to the crest of the slight rise in the ground, he sank down on hands and knees and studied the scene ahead through narrowed eyes.

Less than two hundred yards in front of him was the dimly-lighted drome of the Black Hawk. By straining his eyes he could just make out the shadowy blur of planes lined up on the tarmac. And at intervals he saw the silhouettes of guards against the dim background.

Longingly he stared at the planes. So near they were, yet so far. If he could only get one of them. Once he was in the air it wouldn't matter. Let them bums try to catch him.

He shook his head. He was straining his luck as it was. Before he could get within fifty feet of the nearest plane, a dozen Black guards would have their rifles trained on him. Nope, his only chance lay in the radio shack. Just two minutes in there and he'd be able to flash his warning back to G. H. Q.—warning of the most gigantic military maneuver ever attempted in the history of the world.

The very thought of it made him pause and consider the crazy diagram stamped on his brain. Had he figured it right? Was its significance really clear to him? After all, it was only guesswork on his part.

"I know I'm right!" he gritted savagely. "Hell, it can't be anything else!"

Jerking his automatic from his breeches pocket, he curled a finger about the trigger and started to slowly circle the southern rim of the drome.

A thousand times his tensed nerves seemed ready to snap and send him haywire. And a thousand times it was all he could do to stop himself from breaking into a mad dash for the small, stone-walled radio hut on the east side of the field.

Twice he thought he saw the tall form of the Black Hawk go striding by one of the open and lighted hangar doorways. Instinctively he snapped up his gun and trained it on the figure. But sane reason prevented him from pulling the trigger.

The Hawk was no longer important to him now. Five hours ago he would have pounced upon the man and beaten the truth from his ugly lips with the butt of his automatic. But now that wasn't necessary. A few words of the Hawk in the ear-phones, and some furious thinking on Dusty's part had given him the answer

he had been seeking ever since he pried the torn diagram out of the toe of the dead Strickland's shoe.

Virtually pressing his body into the ground, he edged toward the radio shack inch by inch and foot by foot. When it was less than fifty yards away, a motionless blur to his right suddenly whirled into action.

For one split second Dusty caught the dull glint of blue steel. The crack of a rifle bolt snapping back was like the sound of Doomsday in his ears.

ACTION preceded thought. Like a shot Dusty hurled his body sidewise, gun arm upraised. There was a grunt, and a gurgle. He saw big lips open to let out a bellowing shout; saw a rifle muzzle swinging around toward him.

But at the same instant, even while still clear of the ground, he brought down his gun hand with every ounce of his strength.

Metal smashed into solid bone beneath the coarse skull cap. A faint sigh escaped through the parted lips of the Black sentry. Then the rifle slipped from his fingers, and his tall figure melted to the ground.

Grabbing the rifle with one hand Dusty snaked his gun arm around the toppling Black, held him a second then eased him down to the ground.

Placing the rifle beside him he bent over the sentry, gun raised for another blow. But a close look at the ugly face made him lower the gun. No second tap on the head was needed. It would be many hours before the limp sentry would open his eyes again.

Dusty hugged the ground beside the Black for a few moments. Then, as nothing else moved, he got to his feet and crept on toward the rear of the radio hut.

Five minutes later he was hugging the deep darkness of the rear wall. A faint shaft of light cut through a small window

into the darkness. When he reached it, he slowly peered around the edge of the sill.

At first he saw only a room full of radio and wireless instruments. But a split second later he saw the back of a Black radio sergeant.

The man was perched on a stool in the far corner, phones clamped to his ears, and the upper part of his body hunched forward over the transmitter and receiving panels.

Dusty smiled grimly and took a tighter grip on the butt of his automatic. For several seconds he stood motionless and peered intently toward the group of buildings just back of the hangar line. Several indistinct figures were moving about, but not one of them came toward his side of the drome.

"Okay, fellow!" he grunted under his breath. "It's now or never!"

Crouching down, he scurried past the window, and around the corner to the door. Gun ready, he curled the fingers of his other hand about the knob and turned it gently.

Then, so slow that it seemed he wasn't even moving, he pushed the door open and snaked his body inside. Once the door was behind him he darted forward one quick step, and leaped the rest of the way.

Too late, the radio sergeant heard the scuffing of shoes on the floor behind him. As he twisted around on his stool Dusty's gun barrel caught him square behind the right ear. Eyes wide open, and a silly expression spreading over his hatchet face, the Black keeled over backward like a wet sack of meal.

As he fell, Dusty snatched the ear-phones from his head, adjusted them on himself and bent over the transmission panel. Even as the sergeant's unconscious body hit the floor, Dusty was spinning

the wave-length dial. With his other hand he tuned up maximum volume.

That other Black stations would pick him up, he knew full well. But, if only he could get through to Washington H. Q. first, it didn't matter what happened later.

A green signal light on the panel blinked rapidly. He snatched up the transmitter tube.

"Washington . . . Washington H. Q." he called breathlessly. "This is Captain Ayres. Listen, the . . ."

A click in the phones cut him off. His heart plunged down to his boots. With trembling fingers he re-adjusted the dial reading. God be praised . . . the green light was blinking again.

"Washington H. Q.!" he called wildly. "Ayres speaking . . . send out a general alarm. The Blacks are planning to attack at. . ."

Crack!

A metallic wasp zipped past Dusty's head and smacked into the radio panel. Instantly there were three faint pops as three tubes exploded.

Crack!

The radio panel split straight through the middle and a thread of thick yellow smoke oozed upward. Dusty froze motionless, his hand halfway to his automatic.

"Stop!"

CHOKING back a groan, he slowly pivoted—to glare into the eyes of the Black Hawk. He stood in the open doorway, a gun clutched in his right fist.

For a second there was dead silence as the pair locked eyes. Then with a grating chuckle the Hawk snaked forward and snatched up Dusty's gun with his free hand. Dropping it in his pocket he pulled a chair around with his foot and sat down. Not for one instant did his gun move away from the Yank's chest.

"And so we meet again, Captain Ayres," he purred softly.

Dusty didn't say anything. Face a mask, eyes glaring, he stood like a statue of stone. The Black Hawk patted his gun with his free hand and widened his smirk.

"It was clever, crashing and firing your plane, captain," he said. "But it did not mislead me. I knew you are not the type to give up so easily, so, I simply waited for you."

Dusty licked his lips.

"Yeah?" he asked. "How'd you know I'd seek you out? Hell, you're not that important to me!"

The other wagged his head tauntingly.

"Didn't you tell General Billings that you wanted to find me?"

Dusty's face darkened as he thought of the spy he'd shot.

"Oh, your spy told you in his last message, eh?" he snapped. "Well, he won't be telling you anything more."

"It doesn't matter," shrugged the Hawk. "We have other agents. The loss of one does not worry me. In a way, he deserved to die. He would have made things more difficult if he had killed you."

The Yank frowned in spite of himself.

"Yes," continued the Black Hawk, as though he hadn't paused. "With you dead it would have been hard to find out the exact truth."

Dusty laughed.

"I like riddles," he snapped. "But I'll have to give up on that one. What's the answer?"

"The answer is that you are going to give me a little information, Captain Ayres," replied the Black quietly. "At eleven o'clock this morning, or shortly thereafter, you aided an American spy in making his escape. He died in your arms. Of that I am positive, although I believed him dead as he went down by parachute. But—"

"So you were the rat that tried to shoot

him after he bailed out!" blazed Dusty, swaying forward on the balls of his feet. "Why you dirty, low—!"

The gun was jabbed toward him.

"Move and you'll regret it. Yes, I was that other pilot. Unfortunately I could not remain to engage you. But that spy died in your arms. A report I received from an agent, who later examined the body—and incidentally put that artillery officer out of our way—convinces me that the spy talked before he died. What did he say, captain—and what did you cut out of the toe of his right shoe?"

The last was spoken slowly, and with measured emphasis. Feigning a puzzled expression, the Yank shrugged.

"I'm still punk at guessing the answers to riddles!" he snapped.

Rage smoldered in the Hawk's eyes, and his forefinger tightened about the trigger of the gun.

"Perhaps you forget, captain," he purred harshly, "that it would be very simple for me to put a bullet in your heart."

Dusty grinned inwardly. He knew damn well that if the Hawk wasn't worried about something, he would have shot him minutes ago.

"I'm not forgetting," he said evenly. "But I still can't answer your riddle."

The Hawk gave him a long, shrewd glance. Dusty fought to keep the puzzled expression on his face, and prayed fervently that the truth was not showing in his eyes. Presently the Black spoke again.

"I'm giving you your choice of life or death. And I promise you that death will not be by a bullet. It will be the most terrible death you could possibly imagine. Now, tell me—did that American spy talk, and what did you take from his right shoe?"

Dusty looked him straight in the eye.

"I'm scared stiff about dying," he said. "So I guess I'd better tell you."

The other's eyes widened and he leaned forward eagerly.

"Yes, yes?" he got out harshly. "Tell me!"

The Yank hesitated, and curled his lips back in a slow grin.

"Well, he said to me that if I wanted a drink I'd find a quart in his right shoe. So I cut open the shoe and finished the bottle. Not bad stuff, either!"

A roaring curse spilled off the Hawk's lips. He leaped forward and swung the gun. Dusty blocked part of the blow, but it nevertheless sent him reeling back against the opposite wall.

For an instant he poised to hurl himself at the snarling Black. But the unwavering gun muzzle fixed dead upon him, cooled his passion. Instead, he grinned defiantly.

"That's your style!" he grated. "You haven't the guts to try anything man to man. Go ahead and shoot—and I'll see you in hell!"

For one horrible second, Dusty's heart went cold from the sudden realization that his taunting rage was sealing his doom. Insane with anger, the Black Hawk was going to shoot, regardless.

Body instinctively braced for the expected bullet, Dusty watched through glaring eyes as the Black battled with his own emotions. And then suddenly the Hawk's tensed figure relaxed and the gleam of savage hatred died from his eyes.

In spite of himself, Dusty could not check the tiny sigh of relief that rippled off his lips. For a moment his knees went water weak, and the room swam. But almost instantly, he got a grip on himself.

"Well?" he asked easily, "are you going to shoot?"

The other shook his head.

"No, it will not be by a bullet."

Keeping his gun trained on Dusty, the

Black edged over to the wall and jabbed his thumb against a bell button. He held it pressed until there were the sounds of running feet outside, in the darkness.

Presently the two apelike Black mechanics entered and saluted the Hawk with the peculiar Invader salute—right forearm raised up and the outward facing palm of the hand on a line with the shoulder.

The Hawk returned the salute and then barked an order that Dusty did not understand. But he did a moment later as the mechanics pinned him against the wall and searched him systematically.

Holding his breath for fear that they might find the green bead jammed in the seam in his breeches pocket, he offered no resistance whatsoever. And finally when they backed away from him scowling, and shook their heads at the Black Hawk, his heart leaped with joy. They had not found the bead.

After a moment or two of silence the Hawk snarled some more orders. Again the mechanics grabbed Dusty. But this time they did not pin him against the wall.

Steel fingers curled about his upper arms, they virtually yanked him off his feet and propelled him through the door, into the darkness outside. Looking to neither the left nor the right they hurried him across the drome to a bomb dug-out on the opposite side. Jerking him to a stop, one of them released his hold and lifted open the heavy steel, re-enforced bulkhead door.

"I leave you to your thoughts for a while," came the Hawk's chuckling voice from in back of Dusty. "And, also, to a little surprise!"

As the last word died to the echo, a battering ram crashed into the small of Dusty's back. With a cry of alarm, he flung out his hands for a grip on some-

thing. But they were instantly paralyzed by crushing blows from the two Black mechanics, and he went spinning and bumping down the dugout stairs. And as he crashed against a rough wood floor, the bulkhead door banged shut, and a heavy bolt clanked into place.

CHAPTER NINE

The Green Bead

STUNNED, Dusty lay gasping for breath in that pit of enveloping darkness. A dozen times unconsciousness reached out to spread its shroud over his pain-wracked body. But each time the fighting instinct within him beat it back.

And then, finally, he crawled up onto his hands and knees, hunched over against the steps and stared about him.

It was then that he realized that the dugout was not as black as it had at first seemed. As a matter of fact, it was flooded with a faint light that seeped down through a cross-shaped window high up in the domed ceiling.

For a moment, he wondered dully about that fact. How the hell should there be light, when it was night outside? And then as the faint light seemed to flicker, he knew and understood. The dugout was close to the hangar line, and the light coming through the dome window was the faint reflection of the lights in the hangars.

That settled in his throbbing brain, he began a slow tour of the walls. Half-way around, he bumped into the only piece of furniture in the place—a low plank bench.

Too exhausted to continue around the bare interior, he sank down on the bench, leaned his head back against the wall, and stared moodily up toward the cross window.

For the want of something better to

do, he toyed with the possibility of trying to make his escape through the window. But, really serious consideration of the idea forced him to abandon it completely.

In the first place, it was a good twelve feet beyond his reach. And in the second place, it was made up of thick glass and many crisscross steel bars. Hell, naturally it would be like that! What good would a bomb dugout be if a bomb could come down through a flimsy window?

With an unhappy sigh, he allowed his eyes to close. Better to relax and rest while he may. He probably wouldn't be there long. He guessed that much from the Hawk's parting remark. But the Hawk had also said something about a surprise. Surprise?

He opened his eyes and stared absently at the opposite wall. He couldn't guess the answer. Hell, what a sweet jam he was in, now! One more minute and he would have been able to send the truth back to Washington H. Q.—the true meaning of that torn diagram.

At that moment, he sat up straight. The bolt had been jerked free in the bulkhead door. The door was being opened!

A sharp cry rang out. Almost immediately it was followed by a scuffle of feet, and a clawing of hands as a figure came hurtling down the steps.

Not making a move, Dusty watched it literally bounce on the floor, and roll over. The figure was clad in the uniform of a Black soldier.

Straining his eyes, he stared at the man who was now groaning and rubbing his big hands about his head. Presently the Black sat up slowly. He turned his head toward Dusty. Dark eyes blinked and squinted, then widened in dumbfounded amazement.

Dusty gasped. The Black soldier was not a Black soldier at all. He was an American—a man with whom Dusty had

gone through the fires of hell on two different occasions—Agent 10 of the U. S. Intelligence Department!

At first Dusty refused to believe his own eyes. But as the other grinned, he knew beyond all possible doubt that he was looking at the man known as Agent 10, and whom he secretly knew to be the only son of General Horner, Chief of U. S. Intelligence.

He shot off the bench and knelt down beside the man.

"You!" he gasped. "Hell, I thought you were still in Washington! What?"

"A long story, Ayres," the other grunted. "I should be in the States, but I figured that I could fool the Blacks and come back here again. Well, I was wrong. Guess they've had their eye on me ever since you flew me out of that last jam. I got hold of something big, and—they nabbed me two hours later."

Dusty put his hand over the other's mouth.

"Not so loud," he snapped. "We don't know if this place has ears."

The other shook off Dusty's hand.

"It hasn't," he said. "I spent most of the day here. It's just a parking place for their prisoners, until they take them over to their torture chamber. They don't go in for simple dictaphone stuff, if that's what you mean. They've got other ways to— But, say! What in God's name are you doing here?"

DUSTY grimaced. "Oh, I was just checking up on a hunch, and I stuck my head into a noose. But you said something about getting hold of something big. What was it?"

The Yank agent hesitated, and scowled down at the floor.

"Damn right, it was big!" he muttered. "And our boys are going to beat the Black Army tomorrow and the day after."

Dusty nodded.

"Maybe," he said softly. "If they find out in time."

The other jerked his head around and stared at him.

"What the hell do you mean?"

The pilot hesitated a second, then bent his head close.

"The green bead and the torn map didn't get through!" he said.

The effect of the words made the Intelligence man stiffen as though he had been suddenly pierced by a bullet.

"How—good God!"

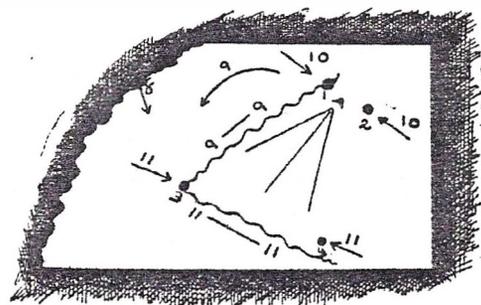
"Strickland died in my arms," Dusty went on.

Then he told Agent 10 of his experiences in a few short sentences.

"I didn't catch on to the real meaning of the thing until a few hours ago," he finished up. "It was the figures that stumped me. But as soon as the thought came to me that they were dates, the rest was simple!"

"Simple?" cut in the other with a groan. "God, it's hellish. Tomorrow they spring the trap!"

"Maybe!" grunted Dusty. "But let me check with you to make sure I got it all. The map is like this—" He drew a hasty sketch of the design which he had burned into his memory that morning.



"The wavy line, 99, is the gas curtain they sent up today. Right? Figure 1 is the northern point where Maine joins New Hampshire. In other words Z-10 area. Figure 2 is the Bath, Maine, area. Three is the Buffalo area, and 4 is New

York. On the tenth, tomorrow, the Blacks will hit against Z-10 by land, and Bath area by sea.

"By doing that they plan to pull our reserves up north. And when they do that their surprise army will smash through Buffalo and head for New York. And New York will be attacked from the sea also. That'll be on the eleventh—day after tomorrow. The number 8 on that diagram represented the date reserves would be started toward the Buffalo area. And the curved 9 line represented the main reserve army that I saw today, moving behind the gas curtain screen toward the Buffalo area.

"In other words the Z-10 and Bath attacks are only gigantic fakes to pull our armies and sea power up north. Then they'll cut across from Buffalo to New York, and try to bottle up the whole works. There—am I right?"

Dusty asked the last question eagerly. The secret agent, who had been listening in a dazed sort of way, slowly nodded his head.

"You are—and neat work," he grunted. "I drew that diagram myself. But—"

The man paused and a shaky hopeless laugh rattled in his throat.

"What the hell's the good of checking with me?" he groaned. "It won't help, knowing that you figured it out right."

The pilot smiled grimly, and slowly bunched both hands into steel-knotted fists.

"I'll at least know I'm telling the truth, when I finally get word through to G. H. Q.," he breathed softly.

"Get word through?" echoed the other in a defeated tone that sent a little pang of pity through Dusty's heart. "Even if a miracle happens, and you do—it'll be too late!"

For a moment Dusty made no comment. The other's resigned attitude surprised him more than a little. In the past, Agent

10 had never been like this. He had been the sparkplug of their adventures—a man totally devoid of nerves.

Dusty gripped the man's shoulder.

"Chin up, fellow!" he said earnestly. "We're far from licked yet!"

The other heaved a sigh.

"I'm not thinking of us!" he grunted. "I know we're sunk. I'm thinking of the others. God. I was only able to stand what they did to me this morning, because I thought that Strickland had gotten through."

"ABOUT this Strickland," cut in Dusty quickly. "As I told you, his cousin said that he wasn't a pilot. And what about that green bead? That's the one thing I can't figure."

Agent 10 pursed his lips.

"I didn't know much about Strickland," he said. "None of us know much about each other in this service. Only learned his name last night. The green bead is the way one agent identifies himself to another in case of emergency. We are never captured with it on our person.

"That's the one order we can never disobey—to destroy it if we're captured. In that way the Blacks have never been able to catch on to the idea. They've never seen one of the things. And, as far as I know, they don't even know of the idea. They—"

The man suddenly stopped and grabbed Dusty's arm.

"My God!" he cried excitedly. "You said you destroyed that diagram map, but—what about the bead? Did they get it?"

Dusty had to shake off the trembling fingers in order to dig the bead out of the breeches pocket seam.

"Nope," he said, and dropped it in the other's hand.

Agent 10 uttered a low moan of relief as he fondled the bead. Dusty frowned.

"I don't think so much of the idea," he

said. "I'd say you're taking chances on whether or not the other chap with a bead really is one of your gang. A common, ordinary green bead isn't so hard to—"

"But it isn't a common, ordinary bead," the secret agent cut in. "Look!"

Placing the bead between his two thumbs he twisted sharply. Then he separated his thumbs and two halves of the bead dropped into the palm of his left hand. With his right forefinger he poked them over so that the flat sides showed. Stamped in each flat surface was a tiny white figure 8.

"Strickland's number," murmured Agent 10 as Dusty squinted at the numerals. "As an extra precaution there is a secret question that each of us can ask about the other's number. The answer we get will tell us the truth. But no one will ever ask the question of this number again!"

As he spoke, Agent 10 quickly placed the two halves on the floor and ground them to green dust beneath his heel. A puff from his lips and the green dust disappeared.

"I did that to mine this morning," he grunted.

"So Strickland really was an agent?" muttered Dusty, as though still unable to believe it. "Funny, though, his cousin getting that letter—and about his flying, too!"

"Nothing funny at all," the other replied. "You don't advertise enlistment in the Intelligence Department—even to your cousin. But Strickland was a pilot, right enough. His cousin just didn't know what he was talking about, that's all."

For a moment or two they both sat there in brooding silence.

"Tell me more about that diagram," said Dusty after awhile. "I want the whole story so I can convince G. H. Q."

Again Agent 10's face took on the ex-

pression of utter defeat and hopelessness.

"No sense in hoping this time, Ayres," he said dully. "The Blacks will probably change their plans, knowing that you got hold of the map."

"But that's the idea!" interrupted Dusty. "They don't know. That's what's got them worried. I'll bet my shirt on it. Hell, I'd be dead now, if they knew the truth. So tell me the rest, and we can figure from there."

Dusty's words seemed to cheer Agent 10 a little.

"Not much to tell," he said. "By a chance meeting I contacted Strickland soon after I got through. He'd been on this side for a week as one of their civilian air mechanics. Said that something was in the wind. Didn't know just what, but said the answer was in the area H. Q.

"As a civilian mechanic he couldn't get near the place. As an ordinary soldier, I could—and did. One look at a marked up wall map was all I needed. The whole plan was pin-pointed out."

THE man smiled bitterly. "It was bait!" he grated after awhile. "Live bait—and I took it hook, line and sinker. The rats had put their secret right in plain view, hoping I'd walk into their trap. I did, but I damn near beat them at their own game.

"I made that diagram. Just as I finished they closed in on me. I tore off a blank piece of the paper and scaled it through a window. Like I was tossing it to an accomplice. That made them hesitate long enough for me to dive through an opposite window and run for it.

"A bit of luck put Strickland in my path. He faked a charge at me, and I dropped the wadded diagram, and dodged around him. In the excitement to get me, which they did about two minutes later, Strickland scooped up the wad and started his get-away by air. God, if only he could have crashed through!"

Jack-knifing his knees the man rested his elbows on them and cupped his hands about his chin. Eyes narrowed, he stared dully ahead. Dusty studied him keenly, a faint perplexed frown knitting his brows together.

"A funny question," he suddenly blurted out. "But, just how-come, that you're still alive? I thought that—"

"A spy was shot on sight?" the other finished without turning his head. "They usually are, unless it's believed that he'll spill information. And that's what the rats figured about me, curse their rotten hides. I wish to hell they had shot me!"

"Nonsense," Dusty snapped angrily. "You're not that type. Licking these bums is a pushover job for us. We've done it before, haven't we? Well, we'll do it again!"

The other turned his head just enough to stare into Dusty's face.

"Thanks, Ayres, thanks a lot," he said thickly. "I pray to God you can get through somehow. But—you'll see what I mean, very soon. But hell, let's talk about something else!"

A strange undertone in the man's voice made fingers of ice clutch at Dusty's heart. He shook them off with a mutered curse and started to speak again, but checked himself quickly. The bulkhead bolt had clanked back, and the door was being lifted open.

A brilliant beam of light shot down the dugout steps. Three pairs of heavy boots thumped behind it. And presently, preceded by two armed guards, the Black Hawk came down the steps.

Holding the light so that its beam ricocheted off the dome ceiling and lighted up the whole place, the Black pilot grinned mockingly and bowed stiffly from the waist.

"And now this pleasant little reunion must come to an end," he purred. Then

looking straight at Dusty, "Did I not promise you a surprise, captain?"

The Yank pilot matched the other's look and grinned also.

"Thanks," he said. "And you've got a little surprise coming to you, too!"

For a second the Black's eyes narrowed questioningly. Then he shrugged, and laughed aloud.

"An extreme pleasure," he said easily. Then bending his cruel, ugly face close to Agent 10, "A double pleasure, eh, swine? Even more than I enjoyed this morning!"

"Damn you!" howled the other, and flung himself forward.

Dusty yelled a warning, but it was too late. One of the Black guards swung his rifle and the barrel smashed against Agent 10's head with a sickening sound. Hands outstretched for the Hawk's neck, the Yank secret agent seemed to suddenly relax in midair. Then he crumpled to a heap on the floor.

Dusty started to leap himself, but the other guard jabbed him savagely in the pit of the stomach, and he went reeling back choking for breath.

The Hawk barked an order at the guards. One of them picked up Agent 10, as though he were a babe, and slung him across his massive shoulders. The other prodded Dusty in the back. And with the Black Hawk bringing up the rear, they all trudged up the dugout steps.

CHAPTER TEN

Satan's Armchair

UPON reaching the drome level the guards turned sharp right and proceeded along the edge of the field toward a group of buildings at the eastern end of the hangar line. Biting his lip against the pain of the gun muzzle jammed cruelly in the small of his back, Dusty cast his eyes about.

Lined up in front of the hangars was

an array of enemy ships, from the fleet Darts of the Hawk's unit, to giant flying-wing germ and gas bombers. In fact, there were so many different types that they extended past the hangar line itself and occupied most of the western border of the drome.

Mechanics in black jumpers were swarming all over them. Others were doling out germ and gas tanks out to the bigger ships. And still more were gingerly easing deadly aerial torpedoes into underslung wing cradles. A great sky armada of death was being groomed for its hell-raid!

Where would it strike—at Z-10, or the Buffalo area? Or would it strike from the sea at Bath, or New York?

The questions burned through Dusty's brain as he stared at the nest of death-dealing, black-winged vultures. And his heart ached as he thought of the thousands upon thousands of unsuspecting Yanks who were to be the victims.

"The Blacks would not be fools enough to attack the Z-10 area!"

Dusty groaned as General Billings' words came back to him. That was exactly the idea of the plan.

Realizing that an attack against the Z-10 area was military suicide the Blacks were going to fake one, draw the American armies up into New England for a crushing counter attack, and then bottle them up by smashing through the Buffalo area and across New York State and Pennsylvania to New York City.

A bold, almost insane plan for any attacking force. Yet, fantastic and crazy as it seemed to Dusty's military mind, he realized that its chances of success were well within the realm of possibility.

Once the fake Z-10 sucked the American forces up into New England, and the Atlantic battle fleet was drawn up to the defense of the Bath area, it would be a military race by sea, land and air to the greatest prize of all—the City of New

York. New York—the throbbing center of the financial, industrial and business arteries of the entire United States!

Dusty raised his eyes toward the southern heavens. An eerie chill went through him.

The gas curtain still billowed upward. He could see it beyond the dull red glare of heavy H. E. guns in action far to the south.

Almost simultaneously he became conscious of the fact that the rumbling in his ears, he had believed to be an aftermath of the terrific blow in the stomach, was the rolling sound of heavy cannonading. The fake attack against Z-10 was already under way!

"Yes, the attack has started."

Dusty turned his head to find the Hawk at his side. The intensity of his stare made Dusty's heart jump. How long had the Hawk been there? Had he read anything in the expression on the Yank's face?

With an effort he steeled himself.

"Just wasting ammunition," he countered. "You couldn't even dent our lines there."

"Ah!"

The sharp exclamation caused the blood in Dusty's veins to run cold.

"Ah!" repeated the Hawk, his smiling lips curling back over fang teeth. "So, that spy did tell you something?"

"Still talking riddles, eh?" Dusty snapped back at him.

"No," purred the other softly. "Our agent that you killed told me of your conversation with General Billings. Didn't you realize that?"

"Yeah? Then why this old home-week gathering, if you know everything?"

"When I captured you, I did not know," said the Hawk. "As a result of an error, by a man who has paid for it with his life, I did not get all of my agent's message until just a few moments ago. So

now, you will not have to tell me as much as I had planned."

"That'll be nice, won't it?" snorted Dusty.

"And simple, too," murmured the Hawk as he dropped back a few paces.

HIS guard grabbed the Yank by the shoulder and jerked him to a halt.

They were in front of a low-roofed, single story building, that, so far as Dusty could see, contained only one door and no windows. It was a log cabin structure, the logs being fastened together with iron ribs. Yet, strangely enough, the door instead of being made of wood was made of solid copper with riveted hinges.

Stepping around the guards and their charges, the Hawk pulled a bunch of keys from his pocket, selected one and fitted it into a narrow keyhole that Dusty had not noticed until that moment. After a sharp twist of the key, the Black shoved open the door, and motioned the guards inside.

With the gun muzzle digging into his back deeper than ever, Dusty stepped into a dark room. He heard the door close behind him, heard the click of a switch, and instantly there was brilliant light.

It was so brilliant that it blinded Dusty, and for several moments he was unable to see a single thing. Eventually, his eyes re-focused and he looked about him.

His first impression was that he was standing in the main room of a power generating plant. The walls seemed covered with every conceivable instrument known to electrical science. Then suddenly, as his eyes picked out several relay boxes, transformers and speaker units, he realized that the place was a main signal station.

But he was wrong.

The Hawk who had been watching his face, and had evidently read his thoughts, told him so in his next words.

"No, captain, you couldn't guess. This happens to be one of our portable experimental plants. A place where we experiment on various ideas that require either electrical or mechanical power. For instance, see that object in the far corner?"

The man paused long enough to point at what looked to Dusty like a bed spring bent into the shape of a chair.

"My own idea," continued the Hawk with unconcealed pride in his tone. "A few perfections required, to be true. Nevertheless, quite practical for immediate purposes. Though I haven't given it a name, the success of my experiments induce me to name it, the 'Talking Chair.' Here, I will demonstrate the connection."

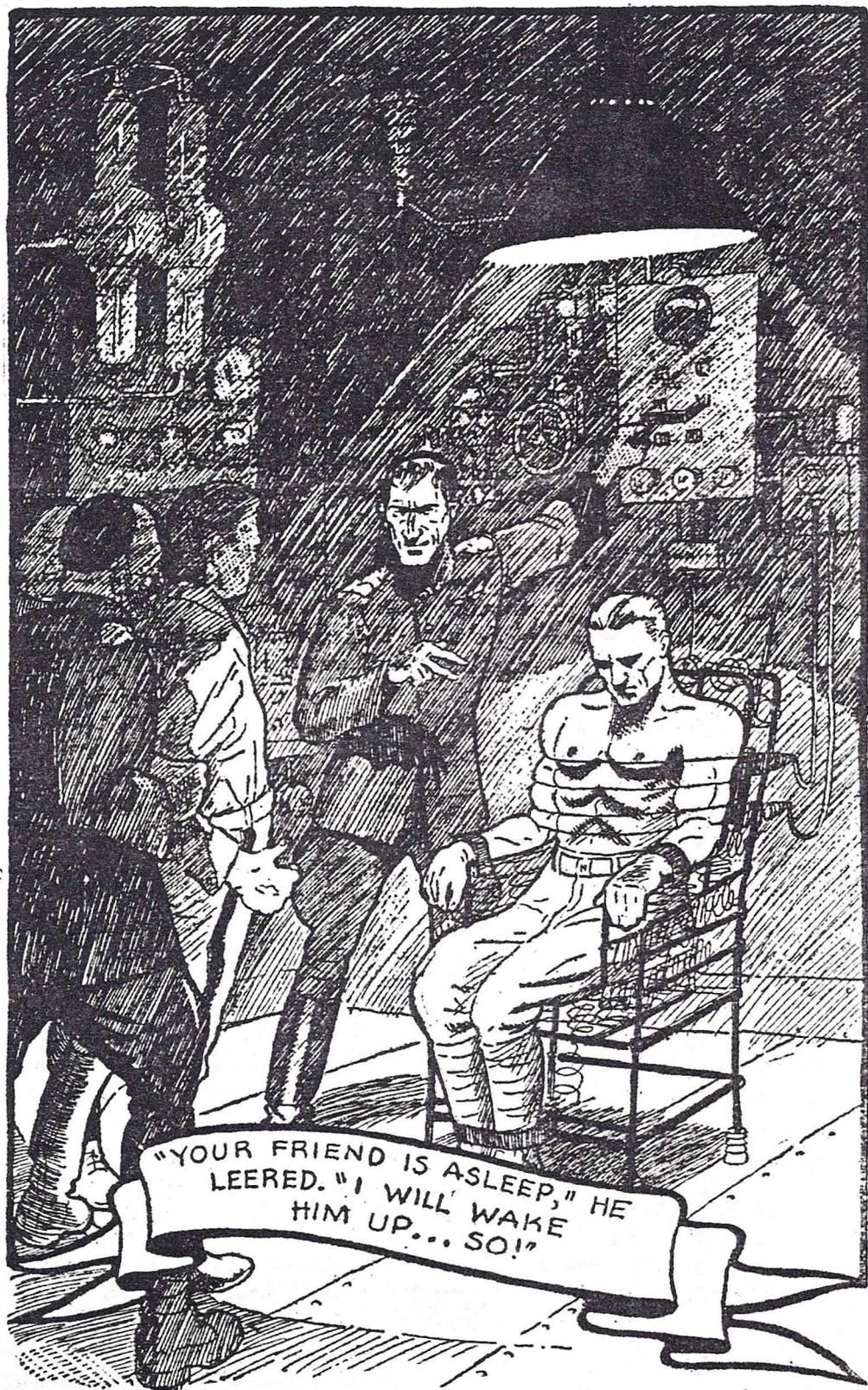
He barked something at the guard who still held the unconscious Agent 10 slung across his shoulders. With a nod, the guard carried his burden over to the queer looking thing and dumped him into it in sitting position. Then with brutal force the guard ripped off the man's tunic and shirt, exposing him bare to the waistline.

It was then that Dusty saw parallel rows of raw and bleeding welts across the man's chest. For a moment he saw red, and started to lurch forward, but the guard grabbed him and held him in a grip of steel. Helpless, he stood there quivering with rage, as the other guard calmly went on with his work.

First he lashed Agent 10's wrists to the arms of the chair with steel mesh straps. In the same manner he secured the ankles to the lower part of the framework. And the third and last movement was to circle the man's neck with a strip of the steel mesh and draw the head tight against the back of the frame.

That done, he saluted the Hawk and took up a position at Dusty's side.

Without so much as even looking at Dusty, the Hawk went over to a nearby table and picked up an oblong frame, the two ends of which were connected by sev-



eral fine-drawn, steel wires. Hooking one end over clamps of the right side of the queer chair back, he pressed the frame across Agent 10's bleeding chest and fastened it down with the clamp hooks on the left side of the chair back. The result was that now Agent 10's bare torso was completely encased in wire!

INSPECTING his work a second, the Hawk nodded his satisfaction, and walked over to a dial and rheostat panel on the side wall. His hand resting on a lever switch, he paused and grinned at Dusty.

"Your friend is asleep," he leered. "I will wake him up—so!"

With a quick motion the Black slapped down the switch handle. Instantly a low-keyed humming sound reverberated through the room. Higher and higher it rose in pitch until it seemed to become a part of its own echo.

"Watch, captain!" shouted the Hawk. "Watch your friend. See—he is waking up!"

With an effort Dusty tore his eyes from the Hawk's face and looked toward the wire chair. As he did, his blood froze in horror.

The wire frame pressed across Agent 10's chest was glowing red, the wires sinking into the yielding flesh like a hot iron sinking into snow. A moment later faint threads of smoke curled upward, and the man's body twitched and trembled convulsively. Then his whitened lips parted and a cry of mortal pain gushed from his throat.

As the cry died to the echo, there came to Dusty's ears the click of a switch and the wires ceased to glow red. But where they had burned into raw flesh they still smoked faintly, and the nauseating stench in Dusty's nostrils made everything become a swirling blurred mass before his eyes.

So this was what Agent 10 had meant when he'd said, "I know that we're sunk—and you'll see what I mean very soon!" This was the torture chamber the man had been taken to that morning!

God, no wonder his usual indomitable spirit had been broken and crushed. With hope in his heart that his comrade operator, Strickland, had got through to the American side, Agent 10 had faced this horrible torture. And then, his body undoubtedly screaming with pain—he had learned the bitter truth from Dusty. Learned that all his sacrifices and all his suffering had gone for naught.

Through a swimming red haze Dusty heard his own roaring voice.

"You rotten killer! Leave him alone. He can tell you nothing! He knows nothing!"

The smirk of a gloating maniac was on the Hawk's ugly face.

"It touches you, eh, captain?" he sneered. "The dog is a very stubborn type. He refuses to reveal the identity of other secret agents we believe to be in our midst. And so, regrettable as it seems, I must continue persuading him to talk."

Turning his back to Dusty the Hawk walked over to the wire chair.

"And now, Agent 10," he sneered at the chalk-faced, blazing-eyed man, "perhaps your tongue has loosened since this morning? Perhaps you will tell me of other spies who roam among us?"

The helpless agent strained against his mesh bonds, and the voice that seemed to come from way down deep inside of him, shook with defiance.

"Do your damndest—and go straight to hell!"

The Hawk stiffened, half raised a fist as though he were going to smash it into the man's face, then suddenly relaxed and lowered his hand.

"Still stubborn, eh?" he purred softly. "Well, I have said I would demonstrate

my talking chair to Captain Ayres. And I consider it a promise."

Agent 10 roared a blistering curse at him and went limp from pain and exhaustion. The Hawk stood chuckling a moment then turned toward the control panel.

Held fast in the steel grip of his guards, Dusty nevertheless fought like an enraged tiger to break free. But it was but a waste of his own fast waning strength.

The gash on his head burned like a live coal, and his breath came in jerky, whistling gasps. Through glazed eyes he saw the Hawk raise his claw hand for the switch lever. It was more than he could stand.

"Wait—wait!" he choked out. "The man can tell you nothing. None of them know each other!"

"The hell with him, Ayres!" Agent 10's trembling voice called across the room. "Don't worry about me."

DUSTY didn't even look toward him. His eyes were riveted on the Hawk's hand. If that switch handle went down again—

The Hawk let go of the switch handle and came over to him. So great was Dusty's sense of momentary relief, that he missed the gleam of evil cunning in the Hawk's deep-sunken jet-black eyes.

"So, your friend can tell me nothing, eh?" the man mused aloud, eyes boring into Dusty's face. "Perhaps you are right, captain. As a matter of fact, I am not particularly interested in what he might tell me. It is what you have to tell me!"

The last was spat out like machine-gun fire. Claw fingers were hooked in the loose front of Dusty's shirt, and he was half jerked off his feet as the Hawk bent his hatchet face close.

"Yes, what you have to tell me!" the

man snarled. "Speak, and perhaps your friend will live!"

Dusty steeled himself, and looked at the man unblinking.

"Tell you what?" he grated. "I thought you said you knew everything?"

He held his breath, while the other paused.

"The truth?" went on the man suddenly. "You learned about our secret attack—of how we plan to cut off America's armies. But, of one thing I must be sure—there was a period of thirty minutes this afternoon when we were unable to blanket out your wave-length. It was while you were climbing up through that smoke screen, which you thought would mislead us. Did you use your radio during that time? Did you warn your American G. H. Q.?"

"Keep your mouth shut, Ayres!"

Dusty hardly heard Agent 10's voice. He was too occupied with his own reactions to the Hawk's words. He had guessed correctly! His life had been spared because the Blacks wondered if he had given a warning to his comrades. Thirty minutes when they had been unable to blanket out his wave-length.

Hell, during that time he hadn't even used the radio for fear of betraying his presence in the air. What a twist of fate. Thirty minutes of unsuspecting silence upon which now hung the life of Agent 10 and his own.

He grinned up into the leering, narrow-eyed face.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" he snorted.

The Hawk surprised him with a vigorous nod.

"Yes!" he snarled. "Your life is in my hands, captain. You mean nothing to me. But too much is at stake, now. Tell me the truth, or you shall watch your friend die before your eyes."

Keeping the mocking grin on his face, Dusty battled madly with his problem.

Should he lie and say that the Yanks had been informed? Should he tell the truth and admit that word had not been sent through? Or should he seal his lips and let the Hawk go on wondering? Which course to follow?

If he lied, what then? The fake attack was already underway. The Blacks would probably go through with their plan, and double the force of the blow at the Buffalo area—or at some other point. And the Yanks, still ignorant of the double attack, would meet the same fate.

Or if he told the truth? It might save Agent 10's life, and his own. But he doubted that. The Hawk would never let them leave this room alive, once he was sure of the truth.

Besides, their lives didn't matter, now. It was a case of thousands upon thousands of lives, not just two. The Blacks would be sure to strike, knowing that their terrible secret was safe.

Or should he keep them guessing—tell them nothing?

THAT last thought made his heart beat rapidly. Perhaps it might delay them long enough so that some kind of a miracle could happen, and the Yank forces be warned of the impending disaster hovering about them.

Delay, at least, meant postponement of a crushing death. And the element of time in the waging of war had often proved itself to be the difference between victory and defeat.

On impulse he made up his mind.

"That's another answer you'll have to guess!" he flung into the Black's teeth.

Stark murder flared up in the Hawk's eyes. With savage words that Dusty did not understand, he hurled him back against the guards and went over to the control panel.

"All right!" he screamed. "Watch him die!"

Down clicked the switch handle. Agent 10's body twitched and quivered. Yellow smoke rose up from the bleeding flesh on his chest. A sickening, sizzling sound filled the room. And above it came the harsh, rasping order of the Hawk.

"The truth! For the last time, the truth!"

For an instant Dusty's whirling brain seemed to go blank. From way off he heard the groaning cries of Agent 10. And as though he was looking into the pit of Hell, itself, he saw the blood-drenched, smoking figure in the wire chair, quiver and jerk about in mortal agony. Then something seemed to snap inside of him, and he forgot all else except that a brave man was slowly burning to death before his eyes.

"Stop—for God's sake stop! "I'll—"

Shrill, rage-filled words from Agent 10 stopped him.

"Ayres—don't tell them—for—my sake—don't tell—them!"

The tortured man's plea ringing in Dusty's throbbing ears seemed to suddenly engulf him in an ocean of seething flame. In that moment he ceased to be a human being. He became a bellowing, raging animal possessed of unlimited strength.

His blazing brain hardly registering the fact that his body was in motion, he lurched and twisted and kicked out with his right foot.

A voice screamed with pain, and steel fingers slipped off his right arm. Around he pivoted, his clenched fist coming like a flash of light. Knuckles crashed against jaw bone, and a white hot spear ripped up his forearm. Through blood-reddened eyes he saw a gun go spinning from the hands of one of the guards.

He lunged for it, caught it in mid-flight, jammed it against the black form which smashed into him and jerked the trigger.

The roar deafened him, and the downward crashing Black threw him off bal-

ance. Stumbling clear he swung toward the moving blur of the Hawk, racing for the door.

"No you don't!" he howled.

But as he tried to make his numbed fingers raise the gun up, and pull the trigger, he four walls seemed to cave in on him with a thunderous roar.

Through the red film he saw the other guard start swinging his gun for a second blow. Paralyzed muscles refused to obey—and then the whole world blew up inside his head.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Talk or Die!

DULL, incessant rumbling coming from a great way off finally caused Dusty to open his eyes. Brain still stunned, he stared up into a shadowy void. In a detached way he realized that he was still alive. The pain that seemed to pierce his body in a thousand different places proved that.

With a moan he closed his eyes and struggled to make his brain function properly. It was all he could do to stop himself from slipping off into unconsciousness. But he fought against it.

When he again opened his eyes his brain had cleared. He was lying flat on his back and staring up at a dark, grey-painted ceiling. He started to sit up, groaned from the pain and flopped back. On the third try he succeeded in propping himself up to a sitting position and wiggling his body back so that he could brace it against a wall. But the effort set his head ringing with four alarm intensity, and everything became a swirling blur in front of him.

"Ayres! Thank God—thought you were dead!"

The whispered words on his right made him turn that way and strive desperately

to pierce the swimming blur. Presently he was able to see the blood-drenched figure of Agent 10 crumpled in the far corner of the room.

The man was lying on his right side, one arm pillowed under his head, and the other dangling down in a pool of blood on the floor. Glazed eyes met Dusty's, and bloodless lips twitched in a grin.

The pilot summoned his strength, and crawled over on his hands and knees. But as he got close his heart seemed to stop beating. It seemed as if death was slowly reaching out its hand for Agent 10. The man's chest was a mass of raw, bleeding flesh. And in the depths of his eyes was the glassy look of a man living beyond his time.

Dusty tore off a piece of his own shirt and started to wipe the wounds. But Agent 10 winced and shook his head.

"Don't!" he got out faintly. "No use—I can't stand the pain. Listen—"

He choked and blood flecked the corners of his mouth. Dusty clenched his fists helplessly. There was absolutely nothing he could do.

"Listen, Ayres," the other gasped. "Don't tell—him. He's coming—back. Don't—tell the—swine!"

"I won't, fellow," Dusty promised by way of soothing him. "Now, take it easy—we're going to both need our strength."

The other stared at him vacantly, then slowly raised one hand.

"Hear that?" he murmured. "It's been going on for hours. I wonder—I wonder whether—"

Dusty didn't notice that he had stopped talking, for his ears had suddenly become pitched to a heavy rumble in the distance. He turned his head, saw light streaming through a window, and gasped aloud. He looked questioningly at Agent 10. The other's eyes, which had never left him, gleamed the answer. Then the bloodless lips moved to confirm it.

"The first attack. Over twelve hours ahead of time. It must be noon, now. Noon of the tenth. I heard their planes leave—when it was still dark. Too bad—we did our best—tough luck!"

The eyes flickered closed.

"Hold it, fellow!" Dusty called out in alarm. "There must be a way. I'll get you out."

DUSTY screwed around on his knees and looked wildly about the room. It contained only one window and one door. The window was high up, and well barred. And the door was of iron re-enforced oak. Even as he crawled over to it and grabbed the handle he knew what to expect. The door was securely bolted on the other side.

Stumbling back, he slumped down beside the dying man, and stirred him gently.

"The Hawk, how long has he been gone?"

It seemed an eternity before the eyelids fluttered open.

"The Hawk?" faintly. "He didn't go with the others. He's still here. Heard him say—he was going to take you—with him—later. Heard him tell the guard—outside!"

"But, where are we?" asked Dusty in desperation as the man's eyes started to close again.

"In—prison block—behind the hangars. Tough—Ayres—tough! But—it's been aces—knowing you. So long. They'll never—lick—America. Never!"

To get the last word out the man arched his bleeding chest and used up the last ounce of strength in his torn body. Then as Dusty reached out comforting arms, he collapsed and lay still. With a choking sob, Dusty grabbed him.

"Agent 10—Horner—come back fellow!"

But the eyes did not open this time.

Strickland, Major Walker, Sergeant Crabtree, General Billings, Major Shelton

—and now Agent 10. All dead because of a green bead and a torn diagram map. There was only one left now—himself!

A wild laugh fell off his lips. Hell, he might as well be dead, too. He had failed, failed miserably. The attack was over twelve hours underway. Right now the Yanks were being sucked up into the gigantic trap. Perhaps even the crash through in the Buffalo area had been started. And he was a helpless prisoner.

Putting his hands against the door for a brace he slowly pushed himself up onto his feet. Teeth clenched, he turned toward the still American, and saluted stiffly.

"It should have been me, instead of you, Yank," he said. "But I pledge you my word, fellow—I'll kill him myself."

And then as an ocean of misery swept over him, he stumbled over beside his silent friend and slumped down on the floor.

Suddenly, the smack of the door bolt snapping back penetrated his senses. Then a moment later he saw the door swinging inward, cautiously.

A gun muzzle was poked around the edge, and then above it the cruel face of a guard. Thick lips grinned and the door was flung wide. Beyond the burly form of the guard, Dusty saw the man he hated with all the intensity of his entire being—the Black Hawk.

Motioning the guard to step aside and let him pass, the Hawk advanced toward Dusty and stood staring down at him. A second later his eyes flickered toward Agent 10, and his smile broadened.

"He had his choice, to talk or die."

The rasping voice made Dusty's blood boil, but a strange silent warning that rippled through him forced him to remain motionless. He slumped back against the wall and relaxed completely.

"That's something your breed could never understand!" he said evenly. "But get this, Black Hawk. That man was my

friend. I've promised him your life, and I never go back on a promise!"

Perhaps it was the utter lack of boastfulness in the Yank's tone, or perhaps it was the determination that gleamed deep in his eyes—but at any rate the Hawk's ugly face paled for the fraction of a second. Then he threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"A THREAT and a promise, eh?" he snorted. Then bending close, "And how do you plan to keep your promise when in the matter of a few hours you, too, will be dead? Did you think that because you talked, I'm going to let you go free? You, who has annoyed me so much?"

In spite of himself, Dusty sat up straight.

"What the hell do you mean. I talked?" he thundered.

The other pointed toward the dead man.

"Did he not tell you?" he asked. Then answered his own question. "But no, he had not regained consciousness then. Of course you talked, captain. There is no longer anything for you to tell me."

Dusty grinned at him scornfully.

"That line won't work!" he bit off. "I wouldn't even tell you the time, and neither you nor your whole rotten gang could ever make me."

The Hawk smiled. "Did you not know that a man in a semi-conscious, delirious state of mind quite often babbles out things that under normal conditions he would keep to himself?"

"Well, captain, that is exactly what you did. Yes, that guard who struck you with his gun will be well rewarded."

Dusty struggled to his feet and half fell against the wall. Fighting to keep himself up, he glared at the man.

"You lie!" he bellowed.

The Hawk, the gloating expression on his face proving that he was thoroughly

enjoying himself, watched the Yank's determined efforts to remain on his feet.

"No!" he suddenly spat out. "You told me what I wanted to know. You wildly cursed yourself for not having sent word to your G. H. Q. when you had the chance!"

Like the thunder of doom the man's words beat against Dusty's whirling brain.

The Hawk saw the bitter chagrin on the Yank's face, and his own became almost inhuman in its expression of insane triumph.

"For your efforts," he said, "you deserve a reward. You are the only American who knows of our great plan to crush your country. All others who knew are now dead.

"And so, captain, I shall let you live long enough to watch our final and lasting triumph. As my reluctant guest you will fly with me and witness the doom of your country. Come!"

For an instant Dusty hesitated. Desire to go down fighting right then and there swept over him. He swayed crazily on his feet. And then, as the Hawk's gun suddenly popped into view, he went deadly calm and grinned inwardly as a crazy idea flashed through his brain. A moment later he nodded, and put one bracing hand against the wall.

"Okay," he mumbled. "Okay. But, don't rush me—I'm—all in. I give up—you win. Hell!"

Hating himself for it, he forced a whimpering groan off his lips. The Hawk sneered and took hold of his arm.

"When it is too late," he mocked as they went through the door, "the fool gets a little sense into his head!"

Dusty made no answer. Eyes narrowed against the brilliant sunshine that greeted him, and lungs sucking in cool fresh air, he stumbled forward like a drunken man, letting his weight sag on the other's arm.

Guiding his charge to the right, the

Hawk started along behind the line of hangars. Still faking a state of near collapse, Dusty cast his eyes furtively about. An instant later his heart leaped as he saw the guard, who had entered the prison block with the Hawk, salute stiffly and run on ahead toward the tail of a Black attack plane that was just visible beyond the corner of the end hangar.

And a few moments later Dusty had a feeling of exultation as he saw that the field was practically deserted. At least, there were no mechanics within a hundred yards of them.

One last final play in this game of death. The odds were all against him. But, hell, he couldn't lose anything except his own life, now. And his life wouldn't be worth living, if he muffed this last shot.

Breathing hoarsely, he tripped over his own feet, fell down on one knee, then struggled up with a sobbing moan.

"Wait—wait, please!" he choked out, letting his body pivot slowly around. "Let me—get my breath—a second!"

The Hawk stopped and sneered at him.

"So the courageous one has broken at last!" he grated.

"Sorry," mumbled Dusty as he shot a quick look toward the attack plane. "God—my chest hurts so!"

HE raised a hand to his chest and groaned. The Black's eyes left his face and looked down. And in that instant Dusty staked his last bet against the Grim Reaper.

Every ounce of strength left in him, he put into his right hand that shot out and grasped the Hawk's gun wrist. In the same instant he whipped up his right knee to the man's stomach.

The Black snarled and tried to jerk back, but the snarl was lost in a grunt of pain as Dusty's knee found its mark, and his other hand twisted the gun free. The

next instant he had the gun jammed against the Hawk's ribs.

"Now, you dance," he husked savagely. "I'm itching to do this—for Agent 10. I promised him, you know. A nice little slug ripping through your rotten hide. They tell me that a bullet in the stomach hurts like hell. Want to find out?"

"You'll die for this!"

The words were hissed off cruel lips that were now trembling in stark fear. And fear shone in the sunken, black eyes.

"Maybe I will," said Dusty crowding close, so it would look as though the other still supported him. "But you'll go first! Nothing can stop me from slapping a slug into your guts.

"Now, listen, we're going over to that ship. Keep close to me—like this. Feel the gun right smack against you? And when we get close to the ship, order that guard of yours to the other end of the hangar line. And, do it in English, get me? In English! So help me—one dizzy word or sign, and you get it. And, that is a promise!"

The Hawk tried desperately to sneer. But the look in Dusty's eyes checked the attempt. The Black was looking into eyes of death, and he knew it. For one second more he hesitated, then he wilted as he seemed to sense Dusty's finger tightening on the trigger. Slowly he started toward the end hangar.

"You will die for this!" he got out from between grinding teeth.

"Then I'll be seeing you," Dusty grunted, sticking close to him.

Eyes alert for any untoward movement, the Yank forced the Hawk down to the end of the hangar line. His heart was thumping madly, and his hand gripping the gun was clammy.

Each split second was an eternity of hellish waiting for an expectant voice to cry out in back of him, or Black soldiers to come running around the corner of the

hangar. If either happened, he had no idea what he would do. He only knew that no matter what might happen to him, the Black Hawk would breathe his last breath this side of hell.

Fifty feet from the plane—forty feet! Dusty felt the Hawk's body stiffen. He dug the gun muzzle into the man's ribs.

"Remember!" he breathed out the corner of his mouth. "You get it first. A hot slug where it will hurt the most!"

Faking a slight stumble Dusty lurched against the Hawk and made him walk around the tail of the plane, so that the fuselage came between them and the guard. Through slitted eyes he saw the guard watching them intently. There was a puzzled expression on the man's face. Dusty jabbed the gun muzzle deeper, and half turned so that the guard could not see his lips.

"Order him away!" he breathed softly, eyes riveted on the Hawk's face. "Order him away—in English!"

For a split second heaven and earth seemed to stand still. And Dusty held his breath. If the Hawk refused—

"Go to my quarters, and wait for me!"

THE Hawk had spoken! Dusty stood rigid, gun jammed in the Black's ribs, and eyes glued to his ugly face. Behind him he heard heels click, then footsteps on the concrete tarmac.

For one second Dusty took a quick look out the corner of his eye. The guard was thirty yards down the tarmac, walking sidewise face turned toward them.

"Stand still!" he grated as the Hawk's body trembled with helpless rage. "For your sake, I hope the boy-friend doesn't get curious. Guess the English order surprised him. Well, don't let him come back. I could get you both—easy!"

The Hawk muttered something under his breath, and his arms pinned helpless by Dusty's fake collapse position jerked

spasmodically. But the Yank only grinned and pulled him over to where the cockpit domed up and hid them both from the guard.

Then Dusty released his hold, stepped back but kept the gun trained on the Hawk. Then shooting a quick side glance at the double cockpit he shook his head and grunted.

"Nope," he said, as though talking to himself. "Can't waste the time. I was going to let you be my guest. But I can't chance it. So open that door. I said, open that cockpit door!"

Face twisted with rage the Black reached out and jerked open the door. Dusty took a step toward it, then stopped and fixed agate eyes on the man. His hand gripping the gun went white at the knuckles.

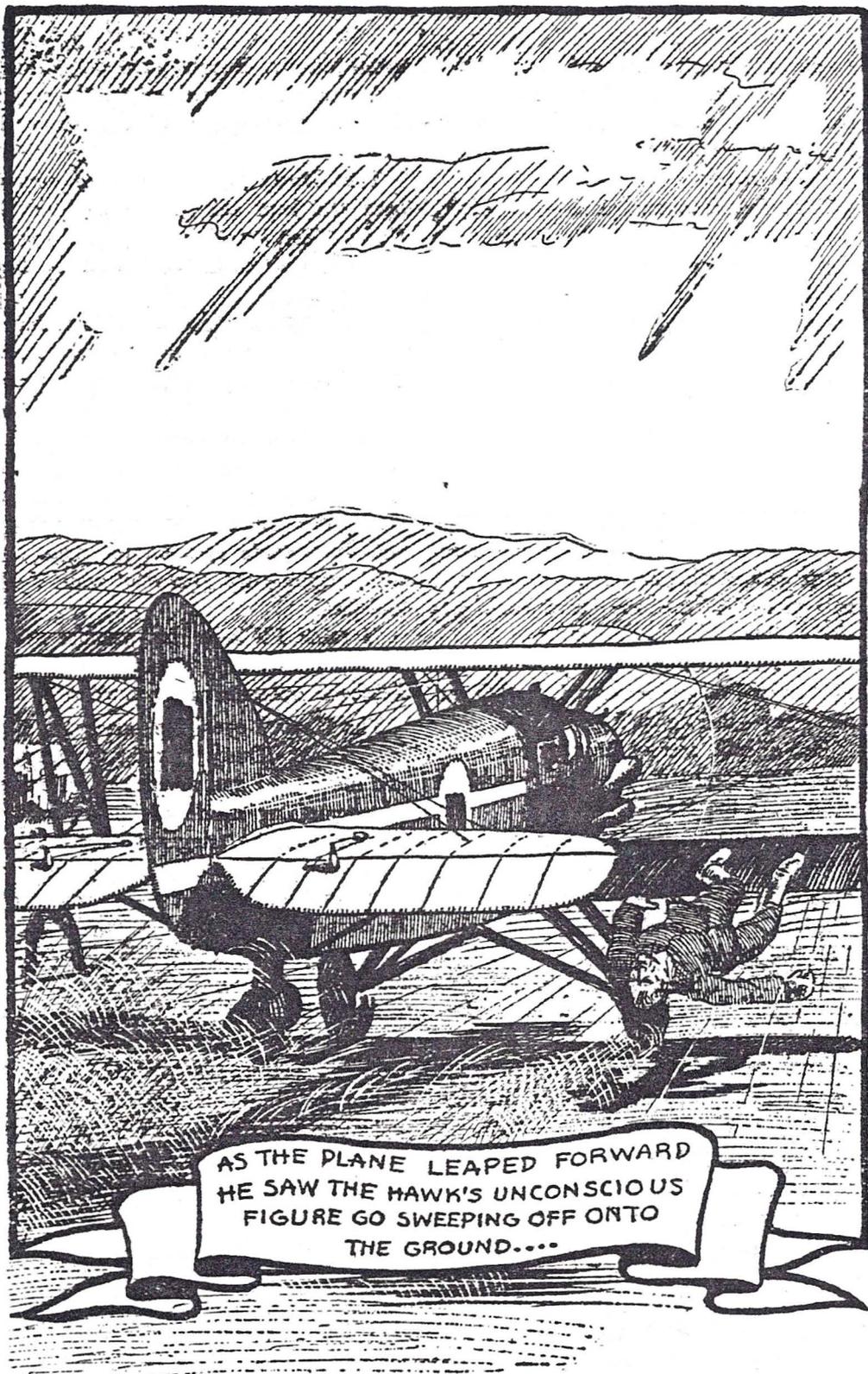
"I think I'll keep that promise now!" he said tightly. "It wouldn't be murder. Killing a rotten rat isn't murder."

The Hawk's eyes went glassy, and his jaw sagged. Dusty eyed him scornfully, and moved the gun an inch or so nearer. But something inside of him refused to let him pull the trigger. Besides a shot might bring others over on the run—and he couldn't risk a general fight right now. He cursed softly.

"Nope, I think I'll give you a break this time!" he snapped. "You can live awhile and tell that guard who socked me, just what a clout on the head feels like!"

As the last rushed off his tongue, he swung the gun up and put every bit of his weight behind the blow. The Hawk, who was heaving a sigh of relief, saw the gun slicing up too late. It caught him just behind the right ear.

Stiff as a ramrod he started over backwards, but Dusty grabbed him and let him fall across the lower wing of the ship. Then making sure that the man's feet and legs would look as though he were lounging against a strut, he slipped into



AS THE PLANE LEAPED FORWARD
HE SAW THE HAWK'S UNCONSCIOUS
FIGURE GO SWEEPING OFF ONTO
THE GROUND....

the cabin cockpit and closed the door. His trained eyes swept over the mass of strangely marked instruments, and for an instant he frowned in perplexity. But almost immediately he found the gadgets he wanted; opened the throttle, snapped up the ignition switch and jammed his foot down on the electric starter.

A second or two of hellish tension dragged by, then the foreign engine, cowed in the nose, caught and roared into full-throated life. Slapping off the wheel brakes, Dusty breathed a prayer and heeled the throttle all the way open. As the plane leaped forward he saw the Hawk's unconscious figure go sweeping off onto the ground, and then it was lost to view.

"Don't worry!" he thundered into the howl of the engine. "I'll be back to keep my promise!"

Fifty yards out on the field the wheels cleared, sank back onto the ground, and then cleared again. Faintly he heard the savage bark of ground-pit guns, and the sharp twang as unseen wasps ricocheted off the metal fuselage.

The Hawk's body had been seen, and the field crew was trying to cut the Yank off. Eyes agate, body hunched over the stick, he poked the ship skyward and held his breath as he went charging through a hail of whining death.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Hell Trap

UP, UP, up he went, the hollow steel prop clawing frantically at the air, and the engine straining every nut and bolt to drive to even greater speed. He did not level off until he was lost in a cloud bank. And only then, so that he could get his compass bearings and veer around toward the south.

'Til now the joy of escape had been uppermost in his mind, but as he oozed up

through the cloud bank and into clear air again, fingers of ice clutched at his heart anew, and his mouth went dry and burning.

His way was free, yes. And there was a stout ship under him. But between him and home was a smoking, flaming wall of war. The southern horizon was completely blanketed out by gas and smoke-screen curtains.

And darting and twisting through them were countless ships of both Black and American forces. Through them he would be forced to fly. The Blacks first, and then through a swarm of his own countrymen.

Even as he debated the chances of flying around them to the east or the west, he saw three Black Darts cut away from a dog-fight and swing around toward him.

His guess was as good as the truth. He knew it, and his heart sank. The field staff on the Hawk's drome had already radioed his escape. And now the Hawk's brood were closing in to cut down the conqueror of their leader.

"What did you expect—a free ride home?"

The sudden sound of his voice startled him, then steadied him, firm as a rock. He tore his eyes from the on-rushing ships for a second, looked at the trigger trips on the stick and grinned. The Blacks and the Yanks had at least one thing in common—they both fired their guns the same way.

A second later he reached out his free hand to the radio panel, spun the wave-length knob and clamped the phones over his head. The result made the grin on his face disappear altogether.

A high-keyed hum in the phones told him that he was in a static-jammed area. For reasons he didn't know, but could perfectly well guess, the Blacks had static-jammed their side of the lines, after sending the warning ahead.

"That's that!" he grunted. "It's through you go, kid. And hope for luck on the other side!"

Deliberately allowing the Black ships to get in close, he held his plane on a level, dead-on course, until the others were almost on top of him. Then, as their pointed snouts began to spit twin streams of jetting flame, he thumped rudder to the right, jammed on opposite rudder almost immediately and pulled the stick back into his stomach.

The Blacks, expecting a tricky zoom attack from beneath, pulled out to the side. Before they realized what was happening, Dusty was plunging into the cloud bank, engine wide open. Like a bullet he went through it, and out of it into clear air. But even then he didn't pull out.

Engine thundering, wings virtually groaning in protest against the excess strain, he held the ship dead-on for the ground.

The altimeter needle on the dash slid like the second hand of a watch. Four thousand, three thousand, two thousand—one thousand!

Below, scattered groups of Black soldiers stared up in utter amazement at some pilot who couldn't possibly avoid plunging headlong into the ground. Four hundred feet, and still diving. The man was mad, crazy—or was he dead?

Such must have been the thoughts of those bewildered Blacks. But that steel-clawed eagle at the stick was neither mad nor dead. Instinct had led him to the one way out, a wild, hedge-hopping race southward, and he was taking it at peak speed.

High above him, three Black pilots twisted their ships, seeking a glimpse of their prey who had dodged into the clouds—waiting for him to show himself, and die. And then too late, they realized that they had been tricked again.

Far below them, hugging the tree tops, miles ahead, was their prey. As Dusty

jerked his head around and looked up, he saw them slide into V formation and climb up through the cloud bank.

As he turned front again there was a happy grin on his wan and blood-drawn face. So far, so good. Twenty minutes, and an equal amount of luck, and he'd be on the American side.

IT was less than twenty minutes—twelve and a half to be exact. But to him it was a lifetime spent in hell. A hell made up of roaring guns, seething flame and heavy enveloping gas clouds.

But he did not flinch for one instant. It was a gauntlet of life and death, and the fire of the fighter within him flared up with an all-consuming intensity. A race against time—

The attack on the Z-10 area had been started twelve hours ahead. Was the attack on the Buffalo area and New York, underway now?

Plunging through flaming air he fought desperately with himself as to where he should land and spread the alarm.

Time meant everything. He had wasted all he could afford. It might even be too late now.

Beyond this hell of smoke and flame, and singing shells that made his ship rock and buck as they whammed by, were American troops. But what good would it be to tell them of the great danger at Buffalo and New York? They had enough danger on their hands, right where they were.

It was the reinforcements rushing up that he must head off. He must stop that great doomed army that was being sucked up into a gigantic trap. Once they were up there—

He banished the rest from his brain as he went charging out of the curtain of purple and red hell, and over Yank-occupied ground.

Beneath his wings, American gunners

were hurling steel death into the Black's defenses, and the ground literally crawled with puppet tanks going forward in front of infantry waves. A great grotesque fighting machine charging head-on into another machine equally grotesque in appearance.

It was not until he was several miles back of the first wave that he saw human faces. The thousands going into the battle had been hidden by gas masks and flame suits. And behind them, thousands more were preparing to take their places.

Gripped by the spell of the horrible scene that seemed to spread out to the four horizons, Dusty was unable to jerk himself out of it until a shower of steel from American guns slashed up at him.

He had forgotten what minutes before he had fully expected. Americans—his comrades in arms—were blazing away at what they believed to be an enemy plane.

And a second later the telltale *tac-atac-tac* from above, drummed against his ears. As he glanced up and saw the four Yank pursuits piling down, guns flaming, he shot out his free hand and turned up full volume of the radio.

"I'm Ayres!" he bellowed into the transmitter tube. "Captain Ayres . . . a Yank. Lead me to the nearest main area H. Q. Which way?"

The phones crackled.

"Like hell! You can't fool us. Land in that field a mile south."

In blind desperation Dusty whanged his free fist against the side of the cockpit.

"I am Ayres . . . Captain Ayres, you dumbbell . . . for God's sake, the nearest main area H. Q. quick! It's important!"

For an answer, a savage burst of fire cut across the nose of Dusty's plane.

"That's a last warning!" the phones barked. "You can't get away with it. Land, I'm telling you. My fingers are getting itchy!"

Dusty groaned, and for one wild instant

he elected to take a chance and drive through this bunch of nitwits.

But as they closed in around him he killed the urge. They'd never let him get through—not that bunch, whoever they were. He didn't recognize their markings. Nope, dammit, it was best to land.

Jerking the throttle back he sent the ship sliding down toward an infantry camp, close to the field the strange pilot had indicated. And as the plane slid down, he spun the wave-length knob furiously.

"Washington H. Q. . . . Washington H. Q. . . . Captain Ayres calling!"

But his only answer was a sharp crackling in the phones. The escorting pursuits were on his wave-length, and he couldn't get through to Washington.

And then, before he could plead with them to get off, his wheels touched and he braked to a savage stop.

SLAMMING open the door he leaped out and ran headlong for the leading pursuit floating down. As it rolled to a stop, and the cockpit cowling was slid back, he leaped up on the fuselage step and grabbed a wide-eyed, and thoroughly dumbfounded lieutenant.

"Now, damn you!" he roared. "Out of this ship . . . I'm taking it for awhile!"

The other continued to gape at him.

"My God!" he finally blurted out. "You are Captain Ayres. But—but we heard that you were dead. It came over the radio. And you're hurt, captain!"

Dusty curled his fingers in the man's tunic and jerked him up.

"Out!" he roared. "I'm in a hurry! Where's the main area H. Q.? Speak up, man—speak up!"

The other virtually fell out of his ship, assisted considerably by Dusty.

"Listen, that's my ship, captain!" he gulped. "I'm responsible for it. And there isn't any main area H. Q. Its a mobile unit attack. And I—"

"Here, what the devil's all this about?"

Dusty turned to stare into the puffing red face of an infantry general. Behind him trailed a few staff johnnies.

"I'm General Conklin!" he wheezed as he came to a halt. "What happened to you?"

"You can help me, sir," Dusty cut him off excitedly. "I've got to get word through to G. H. Q. This attack here is a fake. The Blacks are planning to smash through the Buffalo area—maybe they've started already. And you'll all be trapped!"

"What?" the other roared at him. "You call this a fake attack? You damn fool, who are you anyway?"

"Captain Ayres!" the pilot told him. "And for God's sake, sir, help me to get through to G. H. Q. The troops coming north must be stopped. The Buffalo area, and—"

"Funny!" the general said. "We were in the Buffalo area twelve hours ago, and it was as quiet as could be. Anyway, you can't get G. H. Q. now. The whole General Staff is on its way up here by special train."

Dusty saluted.

"Thank you, sir. Excuse me—I'm in a hurry."

"Here, wait a minute! Where the devil are you going? I say, captain!"

But Dusty wasn't listening. Before any of them could bat an eye, he leaped into the American plane and rammed the throttle wide open. A cloud of dirt-filled prop-wash swept them all off their feet.

And as they swore and dug at their half blinded eyes, Dusty pulled the ship clear and went screaming up into the air.

Slamming around past the other Yank ships that were now floating in to land, he cut sharp to the south and gave the engine every drop of hop juice it could take.

"Can't get G. H. Q., now eh?" he

roared savagely. "Well, we'll damn well find out about that!"

As the last ripped off his lips he snapped up the radio panel switch, and turned the wave-length knob to the S. O. S. Emergency reading. Then slapping the phones over his head, he grabbed up the transmitter tube.

"General Staff train, en route!" he shouted. "Calling General Staff train, en route. Important. Give me your position at once. This is Captain Ayres calling from the air. My map reading position approximately J-34. Give me your position. I have important information. Emergency . . . emergency . . . emergency!"

With bated breath he glued his eyes to the signal light on the instrument board. It seemed as though he died a thousand deaths before it finally blinked, and a voice spoke in the phones.

"Orders of commanding general! All stations will remain off this wave-length for thirty minutes. Until then, make all reports to your unit commander!"

Gritting his teeth, Dusty stepped up the volume.

"This is Captain Ayres!" he bellowed. "I've got to contact General Staff. If you can't listen in, tell me where in hell you are!"

With tantalizing monotony the voice in the ear-phones droned back at him.

"Repeating order of commanding general. All stations will keep off this wave-length for . . ."

"Shut up and listen to me!" howled Dusty. "My God, do you want to lose the damp war?"

". . . .make all reports to your unit commander. Signing off."

With a groan the pilot leaned back against the head rest, and glared into space. Then suddenly he sat up straight and turned the dial knob to another reading.

"Calling commanding officer of Buffalo Area! Calling commanding officer of Buffalo Area . . . on wave-length 2, 7, 8. Please plug in on me at once . . . it's important!"

Seconds dragged by, became one minute, then two. Voice trembling with rage Dusty repeated his call three times. Half way through the fourth time the red light blinked and a booming voice roared in the phones.

"Wave-length 2, 7, 8 get the devil off the air! You're jamming up everything. This is Major Trapp, General Staff adjutant speaking! Get off, 2, 7, 8 . . . and stay off!"

"Like hell I will!" roared Dusty and stepped transmission volume up to peak. "This is Captain Ayres . . . I must talk with you. Its important!"

"Captain Ayres?" exploded the phones. "You're crazy. Ayres is dead. Now, by God get off, before you get into trouble."

The light winked out.

"Of all the damn, fat-headed nitwits!" Dusty thundered.

Reaching out his free hand, he snapped off the set switch.

"Okay, okay," he muttered grimly. "Have it your way. But, I'm still going to find you. I started this thing, and by God I'll finish it!"

SWEEPING down below a thin cloud layer, he checked his position on the roller map on the dash, and then started a wide, zigzag course south, down the heart of New Hampshire and across the Massachusetts line.

But every mile he flew was a mile of raging chagrin. Below him the might of America's fighting forces were sweeping northward. Every rail-line was clogged with one-way troop and equipment traffic.

And it was the same all along the network of broad highways. Which of those countless troop trains contained the Gen-

eral Staff? The more he peered down at them the more helpless seemed his task.

And then, suddenly, he sat bolt upright in the seat. Off to his right, and slightly northwest of Worcester, he saw several troop trains easing into sidings, and leaving the main line clear.

Snatching up his binoculars he trained them on the main line and followed it south. A minute later a shout of joy burst from his lips.

Just south of the Massachusetts line a three-car armored train was speeding northward at breakneck speed. One look and he knew it to be the General Staff train. It was getting the right of way, while the fighting forces waited in sidings for it to go by.

Sticking the nose of his plane down, Dusty headed right for it like a thunderbolt out of the blue. He met it just north of Springfield. Swooping low he throttled to its speed and buzzed back and forth across the heavily armored roof. And as he did he snapped on the radio.

"This is Ayres again!" he yelled. "The Blacks are going to attack at . . ."

The last was choked off as a gun turret just back of the streamlined nose of the train spat jetting flame at him. With a curse he dodged to the side then cut down so that he was racing forward on a level with the steel-framed, bullet-proof windows. Slamming back the cockpit cowl he half raised himself from the seat and waved frantically at the dimly outlined faces inside the windows.

"The Blacks!" he shouted. "The Blacks are going to attack at Buffalo. It's a trick—a trick! For God's sake stop the general movement north. I tell you, you'll be swamped!"

And the answer he got was a double blast of machine-gun fire from the two ends of the train. An instinctive movement on the controls and a pilot's luck, was all that saved him from getting a

shower of steel in his face. Cursing and shouting, he zoomed up and tore forward along the track.

Ten miles north, his blazing eyes found what they had been seeking—a grade crossing that was wide enough, and without gates.

“By God, you boneheads, will you listen to me yet!” he grated, and swung out in a wide turn.

Cutting the throttle he swung back just over the highway. Then with a steady hand he eased the ship down foot by foot.

It was a tricky job as both sides of the highway were lined with tall trees. But his calculating eyes had seen the three-foot clearance on each end of his wing-tips, and to him three feet were as good as three miles.

Lower and lower he sank, gaging his descent to a fine hair. At the crossing a flagman was doing all sorts of acrobatics to attract his attention, and to the south he heard the faint scream of the Staff train’s siren. But he paid no attention to either. Every part of him was concentrated on making a perfect dead-stick landing.

And then, finally, his wheels touched fifteen feet from the crossing. Stick all the way back to hold the tail down, he let the plane roll forward until it was right smack in the middle of the crossing. Then he thumped down on the brake pedals, and stopped the roll dead.

“You damn fool—you damn fool! Do you want to wreck it? There’s a Staff train coming. Get this thing out of here.”

The flagman had climbed up on the fuselage step, and was screaming words at him through frothing lips. With a quick motion Dusty flung him off and legged out. The flagman was beside himself with rage.

“You’ll wreck it—the Staff train—you’ll wreck it—”

Dusty clapped a hand over the man’s mouth and pulled him off the crossing.

“I hope to hell I do, if they don’t stop!” he snapped. “Look out—here she comes!”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Purple Tornado

ITS metal sides and roof gleaming, the Staff train poked its streamlined snout around a bend half a mile away and came rushing down the track. For several hellish seconds Dusty held his breath in fear and dread. Were the damn fools going to chance being derailed and plow right through?

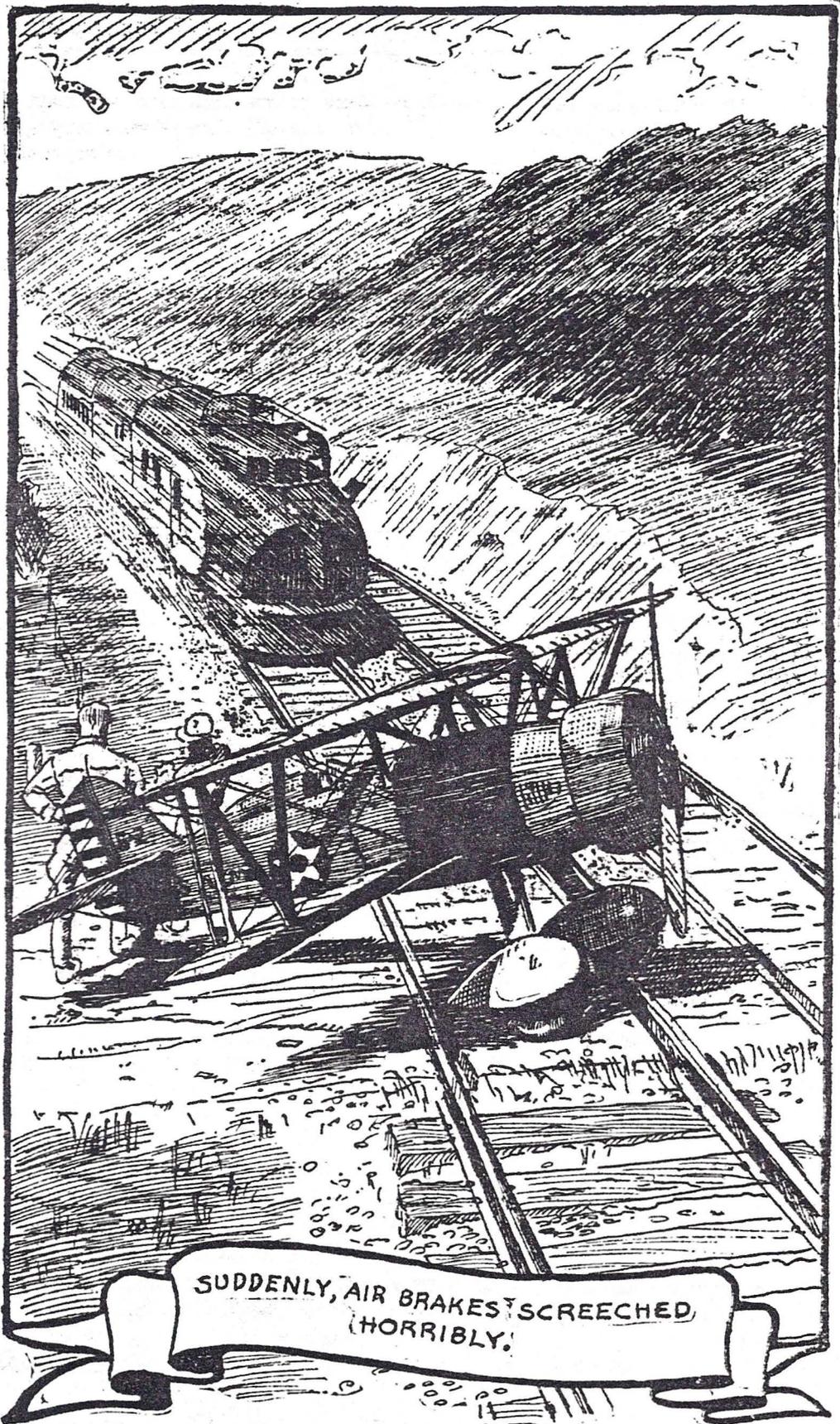
His heart like a lump of ice in his chest, he kept one hand over the fuming, gurgling flagman’s mouth, and glued his eyes to the train. On it rushed, a steel clad juggernaut on wheels. It wasn’t going to stop! It was going right—

Suddenly, air brakes screeched horribly. But to Dusty’s ears it was music. Swaying crazily the train slackened its plunging speed foot by foot. Wheels ground on the rails, and coupling joints clanged and banged together. And finally, its snout not more than twenty yards from the crossing, the train came to a dead stop.

Seconds later all hell broke loose. Doors and windows banged open and a swarm of O. D. clad figures, headed by the grease-smearing train crew, came pounding down to the crossing. The air was filled with a hundred curses, and shouted questions.

For a moment Dusty was buried in a swirling tangle of arms and clutching hands. Eventually, the roaring voice of Colonel Marberry blasted loudest in Dusty’s ears.

“Good God—Ayres! I told you, general, I didn’t believe it. Ayres—this is General Cummings, Chief of Staff!”



A big, white-mustached man with blazing eyes confronted Dusty.

"What's the meaning of this, captain? Was that you blocking out our wavelength? Was—"

Something snapped in Dusty's brain. He grabbed the general by the tunic lapels and shook him vigorously.

"Shut up, sir, and listen to me! The Z-10 area attack is a fake. A trick to draw you all up north, so that the Blacks can crash through at Buffalo—and at New York by sea. I—"

"Wait a minute—stop!" the senior officer thundered. "Major Trapp, have the crew pull the plane off the track. Colonel Marberry, come with me to my car and we'll hear what Ayres has to say. I'll give the order to proceed, later."

Turning his back on them, the general stamped down the train side to his car. Dusty followed at his heels. Colonel Marberry and several others brought up the rear. And it was not until they were all seated in the car compartment that the general finally unsealed Dusty's lips.

"Now, captain," he said, fixing him with a steely eye, "tell us what this is all about. A supposedly dead man coming to life, rather amazes me, to say the least."

Steadying his temper, Dusty sucked in a deep breath and started to talk, slowly. He told them step by step everything that had happened. But as he talked his anger mounted, and before long he was leaning over the table and pounding home his truths with blood-smearred fists.

"And all of that is fact, sir!" he finished up. "You're riding right smack into the biggest trap ever set. Half a dozen brave men have already died, trying to check the thing. And you owe it to them, to believe me. It's truth, sir. And I've been trying to tell it to you for over an hour, but you wouldn't stay on my wavelength!"

Completely exhausted the pilot sank

back on his seat, eyes still clamped on the general's face. For a moment heavy silence settled over the compartment room. Eventually, General Cummings coughed throatily and scowled at his folded hands.

"I WOULD believe you, captain," he said testily. "Except for a few facts that we happen to know ourselves! The Navy Department reports that the entire Black North Atlantic fleet is moving down on the main coast. And our coast patrol reports not a single Black ship has been sighted within a hundred miles of New York.

"The fact that we've been keeping in touch with navy maneuvers, and the fact that we had received a definite report from Second Infantry that you and General Billings had been killed by spies, explains why we did not let you contact us. But, aside from that, my reports from our entire line state that there is action in only the Z-10 area! And—"

Dusty suddenly leaned forward.

"When did you get them?"

"When?" the other echoed angrily. "Why, early this morning. When I ordered our general reserves to move north. The exact time, I believe, was about four o'clock."

As the general finished, Dusty shot out his hand and grabbed his wrist.

"Look, sir!" Dusty cut him off pointing at the man's wrist-watch. "It's four in the afternoon. Twelve hours! Don't you see?"

The general glared at him.

"What in hell are you talking about?"

"This!" Dusty shouted at him. "The Z-10 attack was started twelve hours ahead of time. Why, I don't know. Maybe the Blacks got anxious. Or maybe, that main shock army I saw moving southwest behind the lines got to the Buffalo area ahead of time.

"But, there were to be twenty-four

hours between the two attacks. And the end of that twenty-four hours is right now! The Buffalo area attack is starting —now!”

The senior officer started to speak, then clapped his lips shut. Colonel Marberry leaned toward him.

“I agree with Captain Ayres, sir,” he said quietly. “I would suggest that we contact Buffalo and New York and find out what they have to report.”

“Check!” said Dusty before he could stop himself.

General Cummings’ face went beat red.

“Young man,” he thundered, “I order you to keep a more civil tongue in your head! I haven’t liked your tone from the beginning!”

“I’m sorry, sir,” the pilot replied evenly. “But, I can’t help thinking of the men I saw die for their country! I earnestly beg of you to do as Colonel Marberry suggests.”

It seemed to Dusty that every man in the room held his breath, while the general scowled some more at his folded hands. Then, presently, he nodded his head sharply.

“Very well,” he got out gruffly. “It won’t take up much more of our time. Lieutenant Allen, use my official code signal and contact both New York and Buffalo for immediate reports!”

A slim, flaxen haired officer said, “Very good, sir,” and disappeared through a door leading to an adjoining compartment.

A moment later they all heard the faint sound of his voice speaking into a transmitter. Dusty sat rigid, eyes fixed on the table, a sense of bitter weariness was creeping over him. He felt as though he were beating his fists helplessly against a steel wall.

Through fire and death he had come with his warning. And now, here at the end of his trail, he had run into a stubborn “medal-rack” who had to be vir-

tually bulldozed into the smallest bit of action. What a person to put into command of the lives of four million fighting men! Hell!

Then, suddenly, his brooding revery was shattered as Lieutenant Allen came dashing into the compartment.

“General!” he called. “Captain Ayres must be right. I can’t get any reply from New York. And Buffalo’s signals faded out just as they began to talk. Something has happened at both ends.”

OF all those in the room, General Cummings was the least excited. In fact, he seemed just a trifle disappointed that something queer had happened. He glared at his officers.

“Probably only temporary,” he said almost sullenly. Then to Allen, “You tried relaying my orders?”

The young officer nodded.

“Yes sir, via Cleveland, also Pittsburgh. But neither has checked back with me. I—”

The man stopped short as sound came from the speaker unit beyond the half closed door.

“Cleveland calling General Staff, en-route, on 2, 7, 8. Unable to contact Buffalo area station as ordered. Something seems wrong at their end. Will keep trying and check back to you as soon as contact has been made.”

There was the sharp click of the Cleveland station signing off. But before anyone in the compartment could speak, the radio made sound again.

“Pittsburgh calling General Staff, en-route, on 2, 7, 8. No reply from Buffalo or New York. Unusual oscillation, but no signals. Check back in five minutes. Going off!”

“They’ve started! And they’ve static-jammed both sections from the air. They could do it easily with the equipment I saw headed that way!”

Dusty paused long enough to catch his breath.

"Now, sir, will you stop the general movement north?" he pleaded. "There's the proof you need!"

General Cummings shook a finger at him.

"Any more of your insubordination, captain!" he thundered. "And I'll have you put under arrest. Proof, you say? I certainly demand more proof than that, before I'll change the maneuvers of over two million men and arms!"

"Then may I make a suggestion, sir?" asked Dusty. And before the other could reply, "I can make the Buffalo area in less than an hour—and get the proof. If the attack has started, or is about to, I'll use your official code signal and warn every ground station within range. And you, picking up my signals can warn all those my set may not reach. It's our one chance, sir!"

"He's absolutely right, sir!" cut in Colonel Marberry, before Cummings had a chance to open his thin-lipped mouth. "We can't afford to take further risks. The danger's too great. As an appointed member of the General Staff I insist that we make sure immediately, the way Captain Ayres suggests. Here, captain, I'll help you get away."

As the colonel dragged him out of the compartment, Dusty had a flash impression of General Cummings' jaw slowly sagging open, and the faint pleased grin on the face of each of the others. Then he was running along the track toward his plane, Colonel Marberry's hurried words drifting back to him.

"I believe you, Ayres, and I'm going to risk my neck and career because I do. The general is one of the old school, and difficult at times. But this time we've got to chance the consequences."

The officer paused for breath and didn't

speak again until Dusty was legging into the plane.

"Sure you can make it?" he asked anxiously. "You look ready to flop right now. Perhaps—"

"Flop now, sir?" the pilot echoed happily. "Hell, I'm just getting started. And listen, sir, I told the general that I'd send out a warning. Well, if the attack has started I won't be sending out any warning. I'll be ordering the reinforcements back, and using the General Staff code signal! Hell, I should have done it long ago, instead of wasting time reporting to him!"

"Right!" the other nodded as Dusty reached for the throttle. "Good luck, lad. And by the way, most of Staff is different. It was his idea to drive away a pesky aviator whom he thought was strafing his train. None of us ordered the men to fire on you."

"Don't worry, sir," Dusty grinned, "I figured that he'd pulled that stunt as soon as I met him. S'long!"

A quick glance forward to make sure that the members of the train crew had stepped aside, and Dusty rammed the throttle wide open. Like a shot from a gun the plane leaped forward, bounced across the rough crossing, and went careening off to the right.

The pilot ruddered it clear and lifted it into the air. As he went up through the narrow space between the bordering trees a branch slapped against the right wing. But his speed, and steel grip on the stick, cheated death, and with a final upward lunge he roared into the open.

Leveling off at an even thousand feet, he set a dead-on course for the Buffalo area, hunched himself over the stick and strained his eyes ahead. Low hanging clouds obscured his view for several minutes.

But as the plane thundered west across the Massachusetts-New York line he

thought he saw a queer, dull haze low down on the horizon. And as he raced toward it the haze seemed to spread out, and become almost jet black in color. A great black mushroom growing bigger and bigger with each passing second.

And then, as he tore through a thin intervening cloud layer, his eyes met a sight that chilled him to the core. The mushroom was not black, as it had seemed through the cloud layer. It was deep purple in color, and no longer mushroom in shape.

In fact, Dusty's first impression was that a tornado of purple dust was rushing down across the narrow strip of Canadian ground between Lake Erie and Lake Ontario. Though still several miles from it, he could see it swirl and curl upward from an ever widening base, sweeping forward.

A few moments later he saw balls of fire rain down on the district of Buffalo. Like magic the entire surrounding area became blanketed by a great sea of flame and rolling smoke.

Outward and outward it rolled, enveloping everything in its path until it seemed as though Erie and Ontario were one great lake, covered over in the middle by that swirling, purple tornado.

Then, as Dusty saw the tiny figures of soldiers and civilians stumble and stagger beyond the fringe of the cloud, and collapse in writhing heaps, he knew that the blow had been struck. The Blacks had launched a preliminary gas barrage, and would soon start hammering through the thin line of American defenses.

But as he reached out his free hand to the radio panel, the heavens above him suddenly trembled with the savage yammer of machine-gun fire, and a swarm of jet black wings came tearing down.

Death was not through yet. Now, at this final moment it was still reaching out to slam him down into hopeless defeat.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Black Death

FOR one split second, Dusty sat spell-bound, staring up at the great vulture cavalcade thundering down. His ship seemed to wince as singing steel tore through it, and his hand reaching for the radio-dial knob jerked instinctively back to his gun trips. With a curse he snapped back to the radio panel.

"Tell them first," he bellowed at himself. "Tell them—and scrap these rats later!"

In one continuous movement he flicked up the switch, spun the dial to S.O.S. Emergency wave-length, and grabbed the transmitter tube. He opened his mouth to yell, but the words died in his throat. A high-keyed hum in the ear-phones made him groan instead. Glancing above he saw six powerful radio ships sweeping into position to form a wave-length block-out curtain between him and the eastern seaboard. He was in a dead area as long as they were between him and the coast.

Forgetting the radio for a moment he cut sharply toward the north. At his heels a flight of sleek black Darts spat streams of jetting flame. His whole body burned with a savage desire to whirl around and give them a dose of their own medicine.

"Stick to your job!" he grated harshly. "Don't go off half-cocked!"

Every nerve and muscle tensed, he held his mad headlong course to the north. Out the corner of his eye he could see the purple tornado eating its way deeper and deeper into New York State.

Helpless against overwhelming odds, the American troops were slowly giving ground. Fighting every inch of the way, and hundreds of them, to say nothing of the civilian population, were dropping in their tracks as that swirling hell overtook them. He didn't dare look back because he knew that he could not run away if he

did. The sight would send him charging down to their aid.

But his one job at the moment was to summon stronger aid than he alone could render. His weapon was the radio, not his twin Brownings in the nose, or the bombs in the cockpit chutes. His voice streaking through the air along radio waves was the one salvation of a trapped army.

Grimly holding his ship on its course, he turned in the seat, glanced back, and grunted. It was now, or never.

Bracing himself he hauled back on the stick with all his might. The craft trembled, then went screaming up in a gigantic loop.

Three-quarters of the way over he kicked hard on the rudder, slammed the stick to the opposite corner, and jabbed both trigger trips. Guns spitting flame, the ship careened around in a lop-sided half roll.

Two Black Darts, closing in, went skidding away from the steel shower. Two more tried to hang on their props for a belly shot, but Dusty was now in a thundering dive to the southeast, and the hail of steel missed his wings by a good twenty yards.

The frantic maneuvers of the small pursuit planes didn't interest him a bit. His eyes were now glued to the radio planes high overhead. And as he saw them try to swing around in front of him a shout of triumph spilled off his lips, and he cut his dive sharp east.

TRICKED out of position the radio planes were unable to keep up with him, and he went roaring past them and out of the dead area. Oblivious to the shower of death from pursuing guns, he grabbed the transmitter tube once more, and turned up full volume.

"S. O. S. Emergency . . . all American stations! Official Staff Code Signal G.

P. H. . . . Official Staff Code Signal G. P. H. Stand by for orders . . . Stand by for orders!"

Almost instantly the red light on the panel began to blink, and his heart leaped with joy. He was in clear air, and his signals were being received.

"Enemy breaking through Buffalo area!" he shouted wildly. "All units enroute to Z-10, change course and head southwest to cut off enemy attack in B-30 zone. Equip for gas and germ resistance. Enemy forces at maximum strength. All air units not engaged in actual combat elsewhere divide into groups for supporting ground defense at both B-30 zone and New York.

"Emergency . . . bear southeast of Buffalo area as it is now in hands of enemy. Prepare to check attack in B-30 zone. Relay this order to adjoining units. Official Staff Code signal G. P. H. Official Staff Code signal G. P. H. Repeating order, five minutes intervals!"

The ear-phones crackled with check-backs from a dozen different ground stations. So many in fact were clammering over the emergency wave-length that Dusty was unable to pick out a single signal.

But that didn't matter. His alarm had been received, and right now a steel fist would be swinging around to smash into that purple tornado behind him. But—and the thought chilled the blood in his veins—would that steel fist smash down too late?

For an instant he was inclined to change course and go back to the stricken area. But with an effort he curbed the idea. His job was not yet finished. He must still keep in clear air and repeat his order at five minute intervals. He—

A shower of steel-jacketed lead ripping through his right wing-tip crystalized the decision. Behind him a skyful of black wings were trying to blast him out of the

air. His lips slid back in a tight grin, and he went zigzagging crazily toward the east coast.

Five times he repeated his order. Struggling desperately to keep his ship clear of that spitting death which was licking out at him from three sides, he became a mechanical talking machine. And in his ears rattled the checkback signals from countless ground stations.

Then, suddenly, as he plunged through a section of heavy rain clouds and roared out into clear air, he choked off the order he was repeating, and shouted in alarm. For there, twenty miles ahead of him, was the city of New York—in flames!

At first glance it appeared like a gigantic torch of purple smoke and fire etched against the broad expanse of the Atlantic. But as he thundered toward it he was able to see the scene in detail.

Racing up and down the Hudson River front, their knife-like bows cleaving the churning waters, was a swarm of queer looking armored motorboats. Great streams of crimson flame gushed out from a swivel nozzle mounted atop the cabin of each craft, and like rainbows of dripping fire arced over burning ships and the piers and splashed against the buildings far beyond.

Overhead, supporting the strange fire-raid-ers, were whole squadrons of Black germ bombers and gas attack ships, pouring down their particular brand of hell upon the great city. And at lower altitude, sleek Dart monoplanes were slicing down in between the towering buildings and spraying the panic stricken multitudes with singing steel.

Like so many rats caught in a gigantic trap, civilians and home defense troops were being swallowed up by the seething red whirlpool. Every bridge across the East, Hudson and Harlem rivers had been reduced to twisted and crumpled metal

that sagged down into frothing waters, running red with human blood.

Their main garrison troops having gone north the Yank defenders were helpless against the steel tide. Coast batteries on Long Island and the Jersey shore were firing at almost point blank range at the fire spitting armored serpents streaking up and down the water front.

But only about one out of every hundred shells found its mark, and even then the damage wrought was slight.

A ring of anti-aircraft batteries about the city was desperately pumping death into the black-winged hordes above. And hopelessly bucking that hell on high were but two Yank pursuit squadrons from the eastern area. Just a handful of valiant eagles hurling themselves over the brink of certain doom.

STUNNED by the terrible spectacle Dusty sat rigid. New York, the greatest city on the face of the globe was slowly being hammered into its own blood-soaked dust. The entire metropolitan area was doomed, unless—

God, where were the Yank forces? Where were the air units he had ordered to this zone? Had all the fools gone to the Buffalo area? That was a crash-through by land—troops could handle that. Planes were needed against this attack—bombers, pursuits, attacks, gas ships—everything!

With a wild shout, Dusty slammed his ship into a thundering dive, and grabbed up the transmitter tube.

"Stick with 'em, Yanks!" he bellowed. "Tear into 'em—we have help on the way! Stick it out until the reenforcements come! Give 'em hell, fellows!"

Whether the handful of Yank eagles heard him he didn't know, nor did he try to find out. Cursing, he went streaking down into the yawning vortex of the red whirlpool.

His engine thundered in protest, and the wings groaned and trembled as a thousand steel trip-hammers smacked against them. The glass cockpit cowd melted into a million stinging splinters that whipped into the skin of his hands and face.

A lurch of the ship sent him crashing over against the cockpit side and ripped open the blood-caked gash on his forehead. Blood streamed down into his smarting eyes and half blinded him.

But his body was too engulfed by rage to sense any pain. Thumbs jammed against the trigger trips he booted and slammed the plane about the smoking sky.

A black shadow raced across his sights, and instantly became a ball of fire dropping down into the red pool. A second black shadow, and another ball of fire. A third, a fourth, a fifth—

Sane reason and caution tossed over the side, Dusty charged into anything with black wings. A thousand times over, death missed him by inches.

The metal covering of his wings became transformed into bullet-made sieves, and strips of the cowling ripped off and went skidding into the blood-red oblivion.

But he didn't notice for he no longer had any thought for himself or his plane. He had no thought of anything except the twisting, turning, fire spitting vultures all about him. Time became lost in that seething inferno. It was simply fight, fight, fight until he dropped.

And then, after what seemed like eternity dragged by, a human voice roared in the ear-phones.

"... and take circle formation. Bombers go down on the east. Attack ships from the south. Group numbers 12, 4, 16..."

As the voice droned on in the ear-phones, Dusty jerked himself up straight and stared dazedly about. He blinked hard, wiped blood drops from his eyes and looked again.

The heavens had become jammed with squadron after squadron of American planes. In line formation, group formation, and in Vs, they were charging down upon the black-winged hordes. Bombers were swooping low over the rivers and dropping roaring doom upon the flame throwers.

And as Dusty jerked his eyes seaward he saw a squadron of Yank destroyers cutting the swells toward the entrance of the Narrows. Far behind them, low down on the northeastern horizon, was rolling smoke from the funnels of the bigger and slower ships.

Exultantly Dusty tore out to the rim of the fight and swung in along side a pursuit unit. But it wasn't until then that he saw the markings on the lead ship. He snatched up the transmitter tube.

"Hey, Major Drake . . . hey gang . . . it's me . . . Dusty . . . Dusty Ayres. Let's go to town!"

The lead ship swung around on wing-tip, and Dusty's phones crackled.

"You, son? Well I'll be . . ."

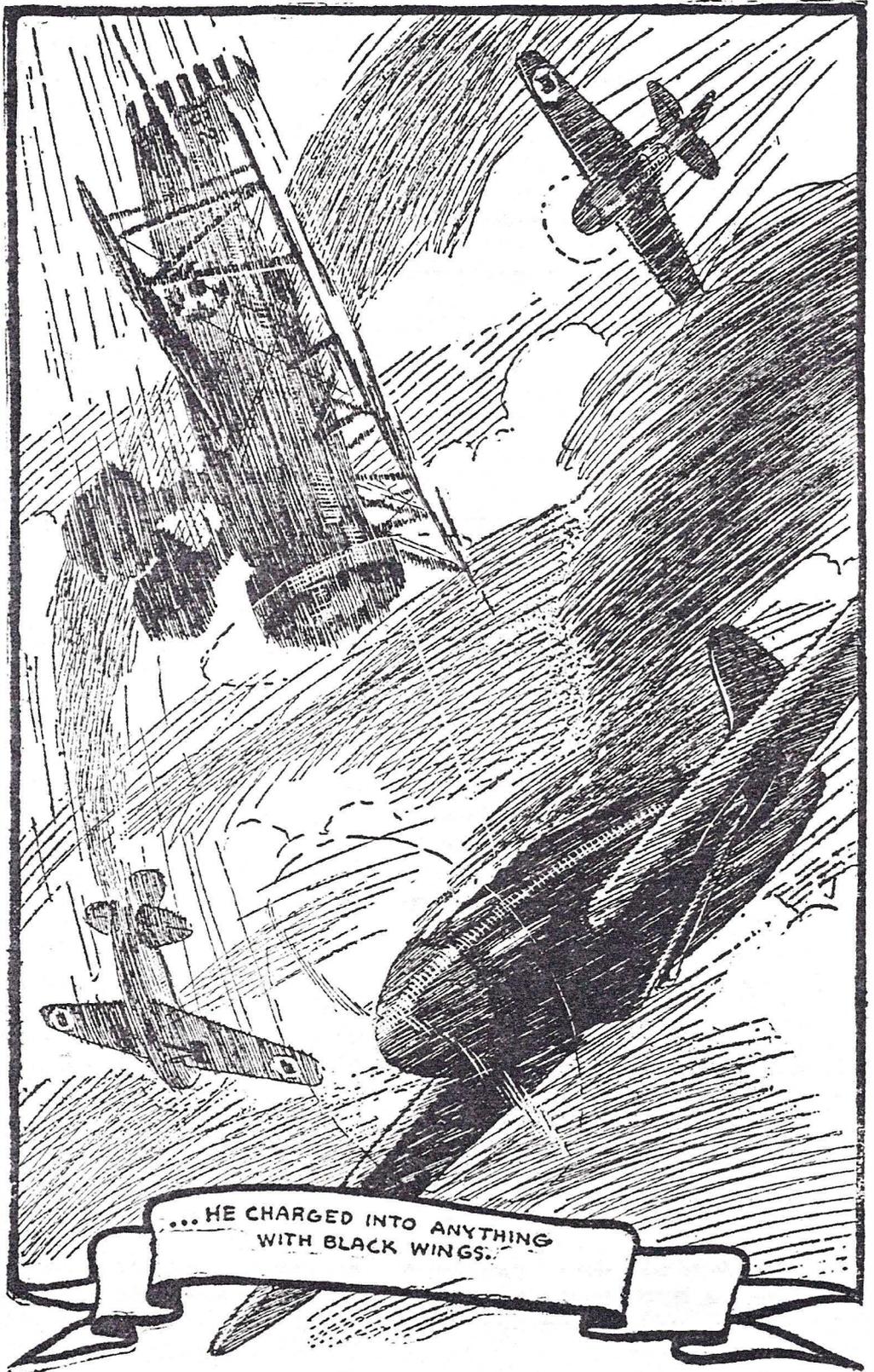
"Look out major . . . look out!" called Dusty, as he saw a Black dart come zooming up from below. "A ship . . . under you!"

As he yelled the warning he slammed his plane down and cut in under the C. O. Instantly the Black ship fell over on wing and started to cut away.

But as it went over, Dusty saw the face of the pilot behind the glass cowling. It was the Black Hawk!

TAKEN by surprise he gaped blankly for a moment, and then as he saw Major Drake's plane go tearing down on the Black he became a cursing, raving madman.

"Major Drake . . . Drake!" he thundered into the transmitter tube. "I want to get that rat! I've been laying for him, sir!"



Like a meteor, he swept down past the C. O.'s plane and pounced on the Black, both guns yammering out a hymn of pent-up hate. Through red-filmed eyes he saw the Hawk turn in the seat and look back.

A split second later the Black plane cut sharply to the left and went streaking out across Long Island. Dusty laughed harshly and tore after him.

"No you don't!" he bellowed. "This time I deal the cards. Here, blast you, this is for Billings!"

Hot steel from his guns slashed into the tail of the other ship. It lurched crazily to the right. Like a flash Dusty was on it again.

"And this for Major Walker!"

Desperately the Hawk tried to skid clear, but Dusty's singing steel caught him square amidships. The Black plane fell over on wing. Then it spun around in a dime turn and charged straight for him, guns spitting flame.

"Come on, come on, you killer!" roared the Yank, jabbing the trips again. "This is for Strickland, and the radio sergeant. And some more for Major Shelton!"

Oblivious to the blazing fire from the other's guns, Dusty held his ship dead-on for the whirling prop. His eyes gleamed like balls of fire as he saw his bursts crash into the other plane.

It was the Hawk who finally weakened and cut away to avoid a mid-air crash. And that moment was the supreme climax of Dusty's entire life. He flung his ship down to the right. Then up and over he went—and down like a streak of light.

"And the last for Agent 10!" he thundered. "For Agent 10—this and this—and this!"

Unable to slice clear of the charging plane, the Hawk nosed over and raced for the ground. But, even that was useless.

Clinging to the tail of the Black ship,

Dusty poured burst after burst into it. And then, when the Black ship was but a bare hundred feet off the ground, the right wing let go, and the plane went cartwheeling crazily off to the right. Seconds later it became lost to view in a great cloud of smoky dust, as it hit on the edge of a small field.

Hardly conscious of what he was doing, the Yank slid down and landed close to the heap of crumpled wreckage. Stumbling out of the cockpit he staggered over and started tearing the wreckage aside.

"I'm making sure that you're dead," he grated. "I promised him—and by God I'll keep that promise. I'll—"

He choked off the rest, as he pulled a slab of cowling clear and saw the figure pinned under the engine. Black eyes, seething flames in their depths glared up at him. Cruel lips moved and a string of strange words screamed against Dusty's eardrums.

"The curse of my race is now upon you," the Hawk muttered savagely. "It will follow you to a swine's grave! It—"

The man stopped talking, and coughed raspingly. Blood spilled from his lips, and then with a spasmodic jerk he arched over backwards and went limp.

Holding onto a part of the crumpled wing for support, Dusty stared down into the cruel face for a long minute. Then slowly he raised his eyes skyward.

"I promised you, pal," he said thickly. "The Black Hawk's dead!"

And then as he started back toward his plane, the last thread of strength that had kept him going, snapped. His knees buckled, and he collapsed on the ground.

Bracing his palms against the ground, he tried to get up. But his arms slipped out, and he crashed down on his face as a great cloud of darkness engulfed him.

WHEN he opened his eyes again he was swathed in bandages, and be-

tween the sheets of a hospital cot. Dully he stared at a blur just above him. Presently the blur cleared and became the grinning face of Major Drake. The C. O.'s lips were moving.

"How's it going, son?"

Dusty blinked, started to grin then gasped "I remember now—the attack! God, did they— Where's my clothes?"

The C. O. pushed him back on the pillow.

"Steady. You can't fight a one man war every day in the week. Now, hold everything, and don't worry. What happened last week, doesn't matter now. We—"

"Last week?" choked Dusty.

The other nodded.

"Eight days ago, to be exact. You were used up pretty well, you know. But, as I started to say, thanks to you we checked them at Buffalo with only a small loss of ground. And though a lot of New York is in ruins, it's still ours—and we can build it up.

"Incidentally, we gave their navy a neat beating, too. Part of it had been standing off shore, waiting for those damn flame-tossing motorboats to come back, and our boys trapped them."

The C. O. paused, and his face went grave.

"I pray to God we never have another close call like that again," he murmured. "If it hadn't been for you, if you hadn't spread the alarm—I don't even want to think of it!"

Dusty grunted.

"I just had a couple of lucky breaks, sir," he said.

"That's what you say," grinned the

other. "Don't worry, the whole country knows now what you went through, and did. And by the way, while you've been out you've been raving about the death of Agent 10. Well, you're wrong, Ayres. Agent 10 is alive."

Dusty stared at him in dumbfounded amazement.

"What?" he shouted. "Why, you're crazy! Agent 10 is dead—I saw him die. He—"

"No," the other shook his head. "Maybe you thought so, but he didn't. He escaped, got through the lines and is now in a Washington hospital recuperating."

The pilot heaved a happy sigh.

"That is good news!" he breathed.

Drake grinned.

"And here's some more good news," he added. "There are a flock of medals waiting for you. And—"

The C. O. paused and his grin widened.

"And General Cummings won't be the man who will pin them on your tunic."

The pilot shot him a questioning look.

"What do you mean by that, sir?"

"Well," replied the other shrugging his shoulders and pursing his lips, "stories get around, you know. And I have it from very good authority that General Cummings is being relieved of General Staff command.

"It seems that the War Department objects to a commanding general who has to have a fire-eating Air Force captain tell him how to run his army. Get what I mean?"

Dusty chuckled softly.

"I get it," he grunted. "And you can send those medals to the War Department, with my compliments!"

Defeated in their trick attack on New York City, what will the Blacks do next? For details on next month's gripping account of war-in-the-future turn to page 122.

Dynamite Decoy



He plunged at the big shadow that
still hovered motionless.

Night after night that mystery bomber slipped in from the sea, dropped its death eggs on Savannah naval base—and vanished. But one Yank guessed its strange secret, determined to set a dead man's trap in dynamite skies!

AS THE altimeter needle slid up to the twenty-thousand foot marker, "Buck" Bradshaw leveled off and let his ship coast along at three-quarters throttle. He unsnapped his safety straps and slipped on the chest harness of his vest chute pack.

"All right, old gal," he grinned at the instrument board. "Let's see if you're a plane, or just a lot of junk tied together. And if you are junk, papa's going to bail out and leave you flat. Oke, here we go!"

Shoving the nose down with one hand, he heeled the throttle all the way open with the other. The engine picked up maximum revs without a single sputter, and the plane shot earthward like a streak of gray light.

Narrowed eyes glued to the air-speed indicator, he held the ship in its wild plunge and braced himself against the seat back.

Down, down he raced, the engine thundering a mad song of unleashed power, and the tapered metal wings furnishing the high notes as they sliced through the air.

At fifteen thousand he nodded shortly, and an expectant gleam came into his steel-gray eyes.

"Six hundred per, even," he grunted. "Now—show me!"

As the last word slid off his lips, he hauled back the stick with all his might and thumped down hard on left rudder.

For a split second the plane seemed to stagger sidewise as though it had been struck a terrific blow. The nose "mushed" up a bit and the engine howled an ear-

blasting note, like some wild animal in mortal pain.

And then, as though it had ripped free of invisible shackles, the nose snapped up and the ship went screaming skyward, pivoting crazily on its own axis.

Once, twice, three times it spun a complete turn. Four—five—six—seven—and eight!

Then with a violent shudder from prop to tail wheel, it slid off in a stall. In a flash movement, Buck jerked back the throttle, and eased forward on the stick.

For a moment the plane "flounded," then slid forward on even keel.

Joyous triumph in his eyes, and lips drawn back in a happy ear to ear grin, he patted his free hand against the cockpit side.

"Not bad, old girl!" he shouted. "Not bad, at all. Now, we'll try an inverted loop from a stall-spin, and call it a day."

But as he reached for the throttle, the signal light on the two-way radio panel blinked rapidly.

Switching his hand to the panel, he snapped up the contact button and put his lips to the transmitter tube.

"Captain Bradshaw on your wave. Go ahead!"

"Seventeenth Defense Unit calling Captain Bradshaw," said the voice in the phones. "Report to the field at once. Signal Officer Crawford speaking."

"Hey, Crawford, what for?" called back Buck. "I haven't finished testing this crate yet and—"

"Don't know, Buck," cut in the ear-phones. "But it's the major's orders. Colonel Terry of Area H. Q. arrived

about fifteen minutes ago. Signing off."

A deep frown creasing his brows, Buck automatically switched off at his end, and sat toying with the contact button.

"Terry, eh?" he murmured aloud. "So now what?"

A cannon-fodder job, probably, he reflected. Colonel Terry, or the "Bulldog," as everyone called him (behind his back) never came visiting just to say, "Howdy, lads," and have a drink or two. When he came, he always brought trouble with him.

As a matter of fact, the Seventeen gang firmly believed that the old war horse sat up nights figuring out ways for them to prove that they were the toughest eagle brood of the lot.

Yet, in spite of all that, they loved and respected him more than any other man in the air force. A trouble maker, to be sure—but unlike most high rankers, he could take it as well as dish it out.

With an uneasy sigh, Buck swung his ship around and pointed the nose dead on for the Seventeenth Defense Unit drome just north of Atlanta, Georgia.

THIRTY minutes later he circled the field, got the "All clear" flag from the signal tower, and slid down to a perfect three-point.

As he braked on the tarmac and legged out, his corporal mechanic came running over. There was a very unhappy look on the man's grease-smearing features.

"Gosh, skipper!" he groaned. "I hope she's O. K. this time. You sure do mess her up plenty, if you don't mind my saying so."

Buck followed the sad gaze in the man's eyes and saw the great blotches on the cowl and wings—oil thrown off by the over-revving engine during the wild test maneuvers.

He chuckled and slapped the mechanic on the back.

"Yeah, she's O. K., Allen," he said cheerfully. "So don't break down. The next time I plaster her up like that, it'll be because I have to—to save my neck."

"Uh huh," the greaseball nodded glumly, fishing waste out of his jumper pockets. "Well, I'm sure hoping you never have to save your neck, skipper. Them metal wings are sure tough to clean off."

"A five buck tip when you're through, Allen," grinned the pilot as he started toward the field mess.

"Five bucks!" snorted the mechanic under his breath. "That'll make thirty-five he's promised me! Why the hell do I like that wild man so much, anyway? Oh, well, they're all half screwy!"

Cigarette stuck between his lips, Buck shouldered in through the mess door.

"Greetings, my little doves!" he called to the dozen or more wind-bronzed helion-eyed pilots lazily draped over the various pieces of furniture. "And what is the happy message for us this time?"

"That's what we're wondering, too," grunted a red-head sprawled out in a nearby chair. "He's still in conference with Major Horton in the Group office. But I say nuts to your happy message stuff!"

"Why, Red Saunders!" mimicked Buck, poking him in the ribs. "To think—"

"Ouch, easy, bum!" the other groaned. "That shellac drinking contest last night ruined me. I'll never be the same again."

"Good!" grinned Buck, going over to the bar. "That's one drink I save. O. K., gang. A round on me before the lightning strikes. Name your brand. I'll sign."

They all gathered around and the orderly behind the bar splashed various liquids into a row of glasses.

"Attention, my little doves!" called out Buck, holding one aloft. "Here's to the success of the Bulldog's next brain-storm. May it—"

He stopped short with a gulp as someone's toe connected with his ankle. He whirled around, angry words on his lips, but instantly stiffened to ramrod rigidity.

Twenty feet away, and just inside the door stood Major Horton, C. O. of the Unit. And beside him, Colonel Bulldog Terry.

Plain murder blazed in the C. O.'s eyes, but there was a faint twinkle in Bulldog's. For a second everyone held the tableau, then the Area commander nodded.

"You were saying, Captain Bradshaw?" he got out easily. "May it—what?"

Buck's brain raced at top speed. Instinctively, he looked for a hole in the floor to jump into.

"Why—why—er—I was going to say, sir," he stammered out. "I was going to say— May it be as clever and brilliant as all the others."

The tension snapped like a bowstring as Colonel Terry chuckled.

"Very good, captain. Damn quick thinking. But I'll join you in that toast, nevertheless. Orderly! Pour one for me. And one for Major Horton, too, of course."

Of all those in the mess it was only Bulldog Terry who seemed to enjoy his drink. The others downed theirs in a hasty gulp, and stood about fingering their glasses, and casting nervous looks at one another.

That is, all except Buck, who kept his eyes riveted to the floor in an effort to avoid the murderous gleam that Major Horton bent on him.

"Ah, very nice!" exclaimed Colonel Terry, setting his glass on the bar. "And now, gentlemen, about this, er—brainstorm. Your attention a moment, please."

He paused until every eye was fixed upon him.

"Unfortunately," he began, with the shadow of a grin, "it is none of my doing this time. The honors—if one may call

them honors—belong to the Black Invaders. It seems that their airmen are causing our Navy boys to lose considerable sleep.

"To get to the point. Black bombers have been dropping H. E. eggs on the Emergency naval base at Savannah. Once a night, for the last five nights, two bombs have been dropped. Only two bombs, mind you. But always at the same time—eleven o'clock, exactly! And if it keeps up, there will be very little left of the Savannah base."

"Must be a solo bomber!" blurted out Buck. "So why the—er, excuse me, sir. I'm sorry."

"So why haven't our Coast Patrol Units nailed it?" echoed the colonel. "That what you mean, captain? Well, the funny part of it is, that they have. Every night the bomber has been shot down. But—and pay close attention, gentlemen—but the pilot who shot the bomber down was killed himself. By that, I mean, that the bomber exploded in mid-air, and practically blew the attacking ship apart.

"In other words, we've lost five pilots and planes as against five pilots and bombers for the enemy. An even score, except for the damage done to the naval base."

THE senior officer paused to clear his throat. "Now, he continued, at length, "of course, the bomber comes from one of their middle Atlantic carriers. It is of surprisingly slow-speed type, and easily spotted in the air because of its exhaust. Those are all eye-witness facts. Strange as it may sound, the craft is never sighted until just before its bombs are dropped.

"But last night, one of our patrol ships flew into it and exploded before the bombs were dropped and although the ship was in flaming pieces, it still dropped

its two bombs—both of which were direct hits on one of the drydocks.”

Bulldog paused again and swept his eyes over the group of puzzled faces.

“Sounds crazy, doesn’t it?” he grunted. “But it happens to be truth—an exploded bomber scored two direct hits. Now this give-and-take warfare isn’t getting the Coast Patrol anywhere. In fact, we’re slowly losing a very valuable naval base. As you know, just now most of our Atlantic fleet is in northern waters, having a pretty hot time off the New England coast, so I understand. But when it steams south for repairs, the Savannah base has got to be able to handle its share. And—you gentlemen are elected to make sure of that. A compliment to your, er—wild reputation.”

Stunned silence followed the senior officer’s words. For several moments, in fact, they all stared at him in befuddled amazement.

“You mean, sir,” said Buck, who found his tongue first. “You mean it’s up to us to stop this trick bombing?”

“Right! I mean just that, captain. Coast Area H. Q. has appealed to me for assistance. They’ve lost five pilots and planes and cannot afford to lose any more. This unit is one of the best night-flying units in the Force. So I’m giving you first crack. Of course—” He shot a sidelong glance at Major Horton—“Of course, if you’d rather not tackle it, there are other good units. Not so well qualified as yours, of course. But still—”

“You know my answer to that, sir,” said the C. O., quietly. “I’ll stake my life on these chaps. We’re waiting for orders.”

Bulldog Terry pulled his trick half grin again.

“No special orders,” he said. “Select your ten best pilots and planes. Quarters are awaiting you at the Tenth coastal field. You will work with them, or inde-

pendently, as you wish. All I want is results. Stop the damn bombing. I don’t care how you do it only do it. Any questions before I leave?”

“Yes, sir,” said Red Saunders. “How come the anti-aircraft detectors haven’t picked up the bomber’s engine as it came in?”

Bulldog considered the question a minute.

“Can’t answer that, lieutenant,” he said eventually, “except to say that they haven’t so far. Undoubtedly the bomber gets altitude first and glides in.”

“And after, sir?”

The colonel shot a sharp look at Buck, who had asked the question.

“What do you mean, captain?” he demanded.

“I mean, sir, do the detectors pick up anything afterward besides our own engines? After listening to what you’ve said, sir, I think it’s more than a one-bomber job. Frankly, I don’t see how a bomber can drop eggs after it’s been blown up. The eggs would go up with it.”

“Neither do I,” the other shrugged. “But it’s a one-bomber job, right enough. Coastal swears to it—and they certainly ought to know. They had five times to find out. But it’s up to you gentlemen now. Good day, and good luck.”

With a half salute that included them all, Bulldog Terry walked out of the mess, but not before he’d given Buck a long look, that as far as the pilot was concerned, meant any one of a million different things.

“Bradshaw!”

The C. O.’s bark snapped Buck out of his pondering reverie.

“Pick out eight others besides yourself, and be ready to take off in thirty minutes with full load.”

“Eight and myself, sir?” echoed Buck. “Why, I thought the colonel said—”

"He did, and I'm the tenth!" Horton snapped. "That tongue of yours damn near got us into a jam, awhile ago. I'm going to stick close, so I can button it if I have to. And by the way—what the hell were you doing with that new ship? Trying to see how much oil you could throw?"

Buck grinned. Horton was a prince at heart, who loved to be tough on the surface. But a buzz-saw when he had to be, just the same.

"No, sir. Just testing her out to the limit. Can't tell when I may have to go that far, some time."

"Well, from the looks of her, she's way past the limit now!" the C. O. growled. "But—well, pick your eight and be quick about it!"

BUT Buck didn't pick his eight pilots. Out of fairness to all, he had them draw straws, and thirty minutes later ten sleek pursuit ships roared off the take-off runway and climbed heavenward in perfect V formation.

In the lead was Major Horton. Number one to the left, Buck. And number one on the right, Red Saunders.

As they roared eastward toward the coast, Buck slumped back lazily in the seat, kept his position automatically, and miled over what Colonel Terry had said.

The result was a strange tingling sensation that rippled up and down his spine. Scrapping bombers was nothing new to him. He'd had plenty of that work when the Unit was on service up north. Yet somehow this new job toward which they were clawing the air didn't strike him as being a bomber job.

"Bombs dropping after the ship has exploded?" he snorted. "Nuts, those coastal guys must be either full of hop, or just plain dumb. If that isn't a two-ship job, I'll eat my prop. Huh!"

And so it was in that frame of mind

that he landed at the Tenth coastal field, and turned his ship over to the waiting mechanics. Giving Red Saunders the nod he started toward the mess when Major Horton's voice stopped him.

"Just a minute, you chaps!" he called to them all.

"Now, listen," he said as they gathered about, "we're visitors, see? And the first man who starts riding any of these Coastal boys, is going to catch plenty from me. I know you hellions—and I don't want any free-for-alls. Coastal may think we're busting in on their ball game, and maybe get testy to us. So keep your fists in your pockets. Get it!"

They all nodded solemnly.

"I know damn well you don't!" the C. O. glared at them, and let the glare linger longest on Buck. "But that's a promise. One dizzy step, and I'll go into my dance!"

"Just a minute, major," spoke up Buck as the C. O. gave them the dismissal signal. "How do we do this job—alone, or with the Coastal lads?"

"I'll let you know after mess," the other replied. "I'm going over now and have a talk with Major Carter. In the meantime, you stick together, and keep your noses out of things."

And with that he left them. Instinctively, they all looked at Buck to make the next move. The senior pilot grinned and answered the question that gleamed in every eye.

"O. K., gang," he said. "Until then, we'll knock off a few for luck. Guess the bar orderly will take our dough. Let's find out, anyway."

Pairing off, they trooped into the mess and right up to the bar. Save for a lone Coastal pilot slumped down in a chair in the far corner, the mess was empty. Giving him but a passing glance, they concentrated on what the bar orderly had to offer—which was anything they wanted.

"And who the hell might you birds be?"

They all turned from the bar at the sound of the growling voice. About ten feet away stood the lone Coastal pilot. He was a giant of a man, a good two inches taller than Buck. And right now his moon-shaped face was flushed to the ears and his lips were curled back in a menacing snarl. In short, the man was fighting drunk.

"You heard me!" he roared, focussing smouldering eyes on Buck. "Who the hell are you—and what are you doing here? I'm talking to you, captain."

"The Seventeenth Defense, if it makes you feel better, flyer," replied Buck easily. "My name's Bradshaw. What'll you have?"

The other's eyes narrowed in savage suspicion.

"The Seventeenth, eh?" he grated. "I've heard of you mugs. Supposed to be tough. And what are you doing here, huh?"

Buck felt Red Saunders stiffen beligerently at his side.

"Nix, Red!" he shot out the corner of his mouth. Then to the big Coastal pilot. "Down here to help you clean up these bomber raids. Perhaps you can tell us about it, pal?"

"Don't go calling me pal!" he snarled. "I haven't got a pal any more, see? Lost the best one God ever made, last night. But, I'm going to even up, get me? I'm going to even up, and then some!"

"A swell idea," Buck grinned. "Count on us to help. Then your pal was the lad who flew into the bomber?"

"You're a liar, he didn't fly into it! I saw what happened. It got him when he was diving on it, see? He was clear of it by a hundred feet—and then the damn thing blew up, and Ted went down."

Buck nodded understandingly.

"An even break," he said. "Your pal, Ted, got the bomber, anyway."

For some reason the other seemed to take the remark as a personal insult. He weaved forward a couple of steps, and stood swaying crazily on the balls of his feet.

"What the hell do you know about it?" he roared. "Ted didn't get the crate, see? He hadn't even opened fire! I was right behind him, and I know what I saw. Ted didn't fire a shot! My pal didn't fire a shot, and the thing blew up."

As though waiting for more argument from Buck, the big pilot stuck his chin out, and slowly doubled his hamlike fists. And then when no one spoke, he took it as an additional insult.

"Don't believe me, eh?" he thundered. "You think that just because I've had a few drinks, that I don't know what I'm talking about. Like the rest of 'em, huh? Well, I'll tell you something—and you can take it anyway you want. I'm getting the bomber tonight, and any guy who gets in my way is going down with it! So take a tip, keep out of my way. I can't be bothered with a lot of you willie boys clogging up the air. I've got a job to do, and I'm the guy that's doing it. Yeah, I'll show 'em this time."

"Sure, sure," soothed Buck. "And I'm wishing you a million in luck. Here, let's have a drink on it."

The other cursed savagely.

"The hell I'll drink with you!" he roared, advancing another step. "Just remember what I said—keep out of my way! I don't need any help from a bunch of half-baked land pilots!"

Buck's eyes flashed, but he kept a grin on his lips.

"Then O. K., flyer," he shrugged. "If you feel that way about it, slide back into your corner, and we'll drink alone."

It must have been the wrong thing to say, for the other's face went black with drunken rage.

"I do, bum!" he snorted. "And here's something for you to feel!"

A massive fist tore upward, straight for Buck's jaw. Red Saunders choked out a warning. But it was totally unnecessary. Buck had handled more than one fighting drunk before.

With a half turn he let the other's blow slide off the side of his neck. Then with a quick reverse movement he shot his left fist forward.

The fist didn't travel more than six inches at the most. Then there came a sharp *smack* as knuckles sank into yielding flesh. The Coastal pilot jerked up straight, blinked once or twice, and then with a tired little sigh collapsed in a heap on the floor.

Buck rubbed his knuckles and stared down at the man. He slowly shook his head from side to side.

"Now, isn't that swell!" he muttered. "Hell, why do they always pick on me? The major will froth for sure, now. Oh, well—"

At that moment the door opened and the officer in question stepped into the mess. At his side was Major Carter, C. O. of the Tenth Coastal.

THEY both stopped short, and stared wide-eyed at the crumpled figure. Then with unerring decision, Major Horton walked quickly up to Buck.

"You, eh?" he snapped. "Damn you, Bradshaw, didn't I warn you not—"

"Just a second, major!" the pilot cut in on him. "I hit him, yes. But there was no way out. He started it and I had to finish it."

"That's truth, sir!" chimed in Red Saunders.

So mad that he couldn't form words, Major Horton simply stood still "scorching" them all with his eyes. And then, presently, Major Carter, a tall, lean man

with deep-sunken eyes, stepped forward and touched Horton on the arm.

"I'm inclined to believe the captain, Major Horton," he said quietly. "Pickford, here—" he paused and shot a contemptuous look at the unconscious man on the floor—"He has a rather nasty temper when he's drunk. And he's been drunk since he lost his flying mate, last night. The chap who crashed into the plane, that I've just been telling you about. I don't doubt that he started it all. Frankly, I'm afraid that the loss of his friend has unbalanced him just a bit. I'm going to ground him, anyway. He's been threatening all of the pilots to keep out of the air tonight. Insists that revenge must be his alone."

"Pardon, sir," spoke up Buck suddenly, as the other paused. "About that crash last night. That seemed to be the thing that got him started. He swears that this Ted, this pal of his, did not fly into the bomber—or even shoot it down. Says that the bomber exploded when his pal was still a hundred feet over it."

The Tenth Coastal C. O. nodded.

"I know, he told us the same thing. But of course, he was just raving. True, none of us were as close to Marvin as he was. But it's absurd to think that the bomber would blow up of its own accord. Marvin must have hit it, and was unable to get clear."

"I wonder," murmured Buck softly.

"Eh, Bradshaw?" Major Horton cracked down on him. "You wonder, what?"

Buck started to speak, then checked the words in his throat. He shrugged.

"Nothing, sir, nothing," he said quietly. "Thought I had a hunch, but I guess I haven't."

The C. O. snorted. He was still mad and not a little chagrined over the fact that he no longer had sufficient cause to give vent to his wrath.

"Well, Major Carter and I have talked it over," he addressed them all. "The Tenth will patrol the off-shore area, and we will cover the naval base. All communication will be done over wave-length 645. So keep your panels open on that reading. We start patrolling at nine sharp, and fly seven-man flights right through the eleven o'clock zero hour. Captain Bradshaw will lead one, and I'll lead the other. Pick your own altitude, only be sure to keep your sets open for signals from the Tenth Coastal, in case they sight anything off shore. That's all. Now, get ready for mess. The Tenth has been kind enough to invite us to eat with them."

As the C. O. finished, the figure on the floor stirred, groaned a bit and sat up. Through dazed eyes he stared up at the ring of faces, then suddenly lunged to his feet.

"Who the—"

"Pickford!"

Major Carter's voice cut like the lash of a whip, and the big pilot jerked to attention.

"Pickford! Go to your quarters and consider yourself under open arrest. I'll see you later. Now, get out!"

The big man swallowed, shot Buck a venomous look, and then saluted.

"Yes, sir," he mumbled thickly, and went out.

At mess Buck was unusually quiet. Eyes half closed, he concentrated on his plate and seemed to take no interest in the conversation.

In direct contrast to Pickford the other members of the Tenth Coastal were white lads and played the perfect host. True, there was a faint atmosphere of sadness prevalent in the room. The Tenth had lost five men, and none of them had any yearning to celebrate.

Nevertheless, they did their best under the circumstances, and went out of their

way to be sociable to the Seventeenth brood.

However, it was all lost on Buck. Like a deaf, dumb and blind man, he slouched in his chair and mechanically shoveled food into his mouth. Once Red Saunders nudged him.

"Hey, guy! Snap out of it. What the hell's eating you?"

To which came the answer, "Huh—me? Oh, I'm just thinking. Lay off!"

But after the meal Major Horton finally cornered him in the mess lounge.

"Listen, Bradshaw!" he snapped. "I've been watching you, and I know that old look on your face. You're working up to something. So spit it out. We're all on this job, you know. And if you've got any ideas that'll help, let's have 'em!"

Buck scowled at the rug a moment before answering.

"No ideas, sir," he said slowly. "Just a hunch. This solo bomber idea doesn't ring true. Why should they throw away a perfectly good crate, just to drop a couple of bombs?"

"I don't know," grunted the other. "But I'm afraid you'll have to take the Tenth's word for it. Everyone of them insists that there was just one bomber each night. And what's more—they got it!"

"Not according to this chap, Pickford," murmured Buck. "He said the thing blew up by itself."

"Drunk!" snapped the C. O. "You heard Major Carter. But, what else have you been thinking about. Out with it!"

The pilot hesitated a long time. Then, finally, "Let Saunders lead for me, sir. If you don't mind, I'd like to fly with the Tenth."

"What? Why?"

"I can't give you any answer, sir," the pilot replied lamely. "It's just—well, I'd just like to take a crack at spotting the

thing coming in. Maybe I'm nuts, but I'd like a try, anyway."

The C. O. gave him a long searching look. Then suddenly nodded.

"All right, go ahead," he said. "But I don't expect anything. You're good, I'll admit. You've come through before. But the Tenth is good, too."

"Thanks, sir," grinned Buck, obviously relieved. "And I'll try to come through again."

AT TEN minutes of nine Buck was giving his ship a last check-over when Major Carter walked up and touched him on the arm.

"Understand you want to fly with us, captain," he said. "What position?"

Buck slowly wiped his hands on a bit of waste.

"Top-cover, if I may, sir," he replied.

"Hum-m-m-m," mused the other thoughtfully. "I've heard a lot about you, captain. Pretty fond of solo work, aren't you?"

"It helps me keep out of the other fellow's way," Buck countered.

Major Carter laughed shortly.

"Well, top-cover it is, then," he nodded. "And I wish you luck."

"And I'm the guy that'll be needing it!" muttered Buck under his breath, when the other was out of hearing. "Yeah, me and Tough Guy Pickford. He's got it figured, too, or I miss my guess."

With a nod for emphasis he legged into his ship, slid the glass cowl closed, and booted the electric starter. The engine caught on the first rev and purred out sweet sound to Buck's ears.

Releasing the wheel brakes, he let the plane roll forward slowly and watched the Tenth Coastal amphibian scouts roar down the take-off ramp and slide up into the night-filled sky.

There were eleven of them in all, but

as the last one took the air there was suddenly a great commotion in front of the end hangar. Seconds later a twelfth amphibian, mechanics running after it, went tearing down the runway.

As it flashed by, Buck saw the big figure of Pickford hunched over the Dep wheel. He grinned and nodded.

"Figured that you'd bust loose, big boy," he murmured. "Well, I'll be seeing you, I guess."

Taxiing out, he hand-heelled the gun forward and streaked down the light-flooded strip of concrete. Pulling clear, he swung around to the north and held the ship in a gentle climb.

At twenty-five thousand feet he was still climbing and still headed north. Far below him the lights of Savannah and the naval base were lost to view in a thin cloud layer. But he did not take the trouble to look down. He kept his eyes glued to the altimeter and compass dial.

And then, finally, when the needle quivered at the forty-five thousand foot mark, he leveled off, banked around due south and snapped off the ignition.

Sticking the nose down just a shade, he glanced at the magnetic clock on the dash and saw that the hands showed exactly nine thirty-two.

"My guess is about fifteen minutes," he grunted aloud. "We'll see, anyway."

Holding the ship in a very shallow glide, he relaxed comfortably in the seat and stared down into the darkness below.

Six, seven, eight minutes past, and then suddenly a dark blur came rushing toward him, and a split second after he had thumped hard on right rudder and gone corkscrewing out to the side, two streams of jetting flame cut the darkness and etched a sparking trail that passed within ten feet of his left wing-tips.

In one flash movement he spun the wave-length dial to the emergency reading and snatched up the transmitter tube.

"Pickford, you blasted fool!" he roared. "Cut it out. This is Bradshaw!"

Instantly the firing stopped, and the dark blur swung in close. Buck rather sensed than actually saw the silhouette of a Tenth Coastal amphibian. A few moments later his ear-phones growled.

"Figured it too, damn you?" Well, that's more brains than the rest of 'em have. They wouldn't listen to me—the bums! But, get this, mug! First crack is mine—or so help me, I'll wing you!"

"You can have it," Buck answered evenly. "Now, pipe down. Someone may be on this length, you dummy! And take a look before you shoot, next time."

A click in the ear-phones told Buck that Pickford had snapped off.

Spinning his own dial back to the 645 reading, he continued down in his gentle glide.

Minutes dragged by, and then finally he slid down through the thin cloud layer and directly over the Savannah naval base. The dash clock said ten minutes of ten.

"Less three minutes getting clear of that damn fool," he grunted, "and it's fifteen, even. Well, now we'll wait and see."

Flicking up the ignition switch, he caught the engine and nosed up heavenward again. The ear-phones crackled and he heard Major Carter giving formation orders to his pilots, but he paid no attention. Not even when the Coastal C. O. ordered a report from each pilot.

What had been a hunch a couple of hours ago was now firm belief in his mind. The very fact that he had met Pickford at high altitude was proof positive that he was on the right track.

Tough about Pickford. The big slob had figured the truth, but the others wouldn't listen to him—thought he was drunk, and talking through his helmet.

For a second, Buck's hand hovered over

the transmitter tube. Perhaps it might be best to tell the rest about his hunch, now that he was sure he was right. Either he or Pickford might slip up, and—

"Nix!" he growled, letting his hand drop back into his lap. "You may be wrong, Buck. Play it through on your own hook!"

SWINGING upward in wide, lazy circles, throttle at cruising speed, he killed time by checking his position and keeping tabs on the dash clock.

Every few minutes the ear-phones crackled with a sharp order from Major Carter for him to report his position. And twice Major Horton, who had picked up the message, chimed in with a curt order of his own.

But with a grim, unconscious shake of his head, Buck ignored them all and kept right on climbing into the night-filled heavens.

Little beads of sweat broke out on his forehead, and a worried frown knitted his brows, when finally Horton roared out an "S. O. S.—Report at once" order on the emergency wave-length.

But he simply gritted his teeth and refused to speak into the transmitter tube.

"Nothing doing, major!" he muttered to himself doggedly. "Those babies may have directional finders, and I don't want them to spot me up here. If I'm wrong, you can go into your dance later."

And with that, he impulsively reached out his free hand and snapped off the set.

Leaning back against the head rest, he kept one eye on the dash clock, and one on the darkened sky ahead. With tantalizing slowness the hands of the clock crept around the dial.

A thousand times he swore that the thing had stopped. And a thousand times he was sure that he saw a great dark shadow rushing toward him from the north.

When the hands finally showed ten-thirty his nerves were on edge and his heart was pounding with trip-hammer intensity.

With a smothered curse, he rapped his free fist against the cockpit side.

"Cut it, Buck, cut it!" he grated at himself harshly. "Stop acting like a damn greenhorn!"

The sound of his own voice calming him somewhat, he carefully checked his position, made sure that he was thirty-five thousand feet up, and directly over the Savannah Naval Base. Then sucking in his breath he swung due north and regulated the engine speed at half throttle.

Snapping off the dash lamp, he hunched over the stick and strained his eyes at the darkness.

"Make or break now!" he breathed fiercely. "And, damn you, Pickford, don't try to steal the whole show!"

Seconds dragged past, and became minutes. More seconds, and more minutes. They seemed like years to Buck, and his taut nerves quivered and strained against the savage check he held on them.

And then, as the dash clock hands showed exactly fifteen minutes of eleven, he saw it—a great ragged-edged shadow floating down from the north.

It looked as tall as it was wide—almost a solid square of inky darkness floating down through the night.

A second or two later it seemed to hover motionless—a mysterious phantom bird poised to strike.

Eyes glued to it, Buck tapped rudder gently and eased off to the right, throttling a bit as he did so. And then, suddenly, something swooped down from the left, Brownings yammered savagely, and two streamers of jetting flame tore across the sky.

Buck cursed wildly.

"Fathead, Pickford!" he roared. "Are

you asking for it, you damn fool? Wait until they launch it—wait until they launch it!"

Hardly had the last word ripped off his lips than the square shadow seemed to split in two near the bottom. And the lower section dropped clear and went sliding down at a flat angle.

Instantly, Buck belted the throttle wide open and slid his fingers up to the trigger trips.

"Now, Pickford, now!" he howled.

Engine thundering out a song of battle, he plunged straight at the top part of the big shadow that still hovered motionless.

His guns chattered and spat parallel lines of flickering flame that reached out in the night like fingers. His heart leaped with savage joy as he saw them dig into the hovering shadow.

On his left, two more fingers of jetting flame poked downward into the shadow.

And then, the shadow ceased to hover and all hell came spewing out from its middle. A hundred steel barbs ripped and tore into Buck's plane, and a hundred more beat a savage tattoo against the bullet-proof cowl of his engine.

But, lips drawn back over clenched teeth, he held his ship dead-on for the swirling shadow and kept his thumb jammed against the trigger trips. When it loomed up dead in front of his prop and took on the unmistakable shape of a giant catapult bomber, he hauled all the way back on the stick and went zooming straight upward.

In the seconds allowed he snatched up the transmitter tube.

"Ten and Seventeen on patrol!" he howled. "Explosive glider on the way down . . . explosive glider on the way down. Keep clear of it . . . keep clear of it . . . let it blow up . . . do not attack it . . . explosive glider on the way. . . ."

He choked off the rest with a wild

cry. Below him Pickford was racing straight into a dead cross-fire from the nose and tail of the bomber.

It was plain suicide, but the half drunken, brain-cracked pilot was too fired with the berserk desire to destroy the destroyer of his pal to realize the danger of his position.

FRANTICALLY kicking his ship over on wing, Buck tore down, guns blazing at the gunner pit in the nose of the giant bomber.

A withering return fire blasted up at him, but he ignored it completely. A few more seconds and Pickford would be blasted out of the skies.

"Break clear, Pickford!" he roared. "For the love of God break clear . . . they'll get you!"

But all his shouting was in vain. The madman at the Coastal amphibian controls roared straight into that blazing hell.

It was as a fly trying to attack a hawk. And the result was inevitable. Three seconds later, maybe less, Pickford's flame-spitting plane flopped over crazily. As though it had smashed into a cable net in the sky.

Guns still spouting steel, it swirled around in a flat spin, then skidded outward left wing high. And then, as it seemed to stop dead for a split second, a dozen flaming fingers zipped across the air space and clawed into it.

Buck groaned helplessly and closed his eyes. When he opened them a moment later, Pickford's plane was a ball of fire hurtling down through the night.

"So long, Pickford," he muttered. Then as a lump rose in his throat, he roared a curse, "But I'll pinch hit for you, buzzard!" he thundered. "I'll get it for you!"

Sticking the nose straight down to the vertical he plunged right through the

bomber's fire and down into the clear.

Then bracing himself, he hauled back on the stick and pointed the nose dead-on for the shadowy wings above and jabbed both trigger trips. His guns spewed hot steel, and almost immediately floor guns in the bomber answered his fire. But by "sawing" rudder he kept clear and went right on rushing up.

To his fired brain it seemed that the bomber was mashing down, rather than he roaring up. Flickering darts of flame formed a ring about his screaming wings, and the rattle of half a dozen guns blended in with the yammer of his own.

Up, up he went, his lips forming shouted curses but making no noise. Heaven and earth seemed to stand still. Time itself seemed to stop and hold its breath as that avenging Yank streaked upward into the yawning mouth of that blasting hell.

Steel against steel, spitting flame against spitting flame. Seconds more and a clawing metal propeller would crunch into fuselage covering. Something had to give way . . . something had to give way!

And then, as though the fingers of Lady Luck guided the showers of smoking steel, a burst from Buck's guns found a fuel tank. Instantly a great sheet of flame shot skyward, and as though struck by a monster's fist, the bomber lurched outward and rolled slowly over on its side.

So close was it, that, as Buck closed his eyes, breathed a prayer and slammed the stick over against the cockpit side, he felt a faint tremor run through the ship as his left wing-tips brushed against one of the bomber's rudders.

Then he was clear and careening outward across the night sky.

Righting the ship, he banked around and stared dully at the flaming bomber as it munched awkwardly down. In the light of the flames he could actually see the

pilot in his cowed nacelle fighting desperately for control.

In the cowed gunners' pits, black uniformed figures were frantically squirting chemicals on the flames. And then without warning the main fuel tank let go. Night was turned into day as a great shower of blazing and smoking debris went swirling off into oblivion.

"There you are, Pickford!" muttered Buck, turning his eyes away. "You can have it!"

Then picking up the transmitter tube, he yelled, "Bomber destroyed! What's the report on the explosive glider? Has it gone up yet?"

As he glanced expectantly at the signal light on the panel, the blood froze in his veins.

God Almighty! In the excitement of spotting the bomber with its explosive-filled glider attached, he had forgotten to switch on his set again. His warning to the Tenth and the Seventeen had simply been wasted breath.

Stunned for an instant, he glanced at the dash clock. It was seven minutes of eleven. Good God, the scrap had only lasted for eight minutes. But in seven more minutes that explosive glider would be over the Savannah base. In seven minutes, Death's decoy would be luring some unsuspecting Yank to close in, attack it, and meet his own doom when it exploded.

Hardly conscious of what he was doing, he sent his ship thundering earthward, snapped on the radio and spun the dial to the 645 reading.

"Ten and Seventeen!" he choked out wildly as prop-wash screamed past his wings. "Ten and Seventeen, attention, for God's sake!" And then without waiting for the call-back signal, "An explosive glider is heading your way . . . explosive glider heading your way. Keep clear . . . keep clear. Let it blow up . . .

let it blow up. It's a fake . . . a decoy . . . let it blow up!"

Babbling at the top of his voice, he repeated his message over and over again. But as he stared at the signal light on the panel his heart sank.

He cursed himself not to believe it, but he knew that the other lads had switched off, now that it was close to zero hour, so that the phantom attacker would not pick up their positions on patrol.

Good God, now when it meant most of all, the gang were unknowingly blanketing their own sets.

HE KEPT his plane in a madman's dive earthward. In contrast to half an hour ago the dash clock hands seemed to race about the dial. Five minutes of eleven—four minutes of—three minutes of—two—

And then he shot down through the thin cloud layer and into a world crisscrossed with searchlight beams.

For an instant he was blinded. When vision cleared, he saw half a dozen Seventeen planes tearing up toward a hovering shadow just under the cloud layer.

One ship was far in the lead, and as a searchlight beam swept across it, Buck saw the personal marking of Red Saunders.

With a bellow of alarm he steepened his dive and veered off at an angle that would carry him across Red's line of flight.

A second later a searchlight beam flashed across the hovering shadow, brought out tapered wings and narrowed fuselage in clear relief, and then swept onward, only to stop dead and start groping about for the raider it had picked up.

"Red . . . Red!" bellowed Buck, banging his fist against an already wide open throttle. "God, man . . . keep clear . . . can't you see? . . . it's an explosive

glider . . . a time glider, Red . . . keep clear . . . keep clear, Red!"

But with his set dead, Red Saunders could not hear, and like a streak of light the Seventeenth pilot closed in on the decoy craft.

At that moment something snapped in Buck's head. He howled a curse, slammed the stick up against the instrument board, and stood up on rudder.

The plane quivered violently from prop to tail, then lurched downward and to the left. Rising half out of his seat, Buck slammed back the glass cowling, and stuck his free arm up through.

Like a rocket gone berserk the plane slammed down across Saunders' line of flight.

For one horrible instant Buck thought that he had misgauged his dive. His pal's prop seemed to leap for his wing-tips. But he simply braced himself and waved his arm in a "Retreat" signal.

"Red . . . Red . . . keep clear!"

A split second and they would crash. Instinctively, Buck steeled himself. Through a haze he saw the nose of Red's plane go up.

"Thank God!" he mumbled thickly. "Thank—"

He never finished the last. At that instant heaven and earth became one great sea of flame, and the thunder of a hundred volcanos beat against the sides of his head.

Presently he heard faint rasping laughter in his ear and a voice cursing with the fury of the damned. And suddenly he became conscious of the fact that it was his own laughter and his own voice that he heard.

A red film still blurred his eyes, but through it he saw a brilliantly lighted field.

Figures were moving about it, and on one side were hangars, with planes in front of them.

He blinked stupidly.

"Not dead!" he mouthed thickly. "By God—I'm not dead!"

Hands and feet went into action. Somehow, he got the battered plane swung around, and headed it down toward the center of the lighted field. He saw an ambulance race toward his approximate landing spot, and a wild laugh rattled off his lips.

"Fool you—I'll fool you. Watch!"

Blurred eyes fixed on the ground, he watched it sweep up toward him. Here it was—time to level off. Ah, that's the idea. Now throttle. Now switch off, in case—

Crump, crump, crump!

"Ah, made it!" he grunted.

"Hey, guy, here, take this! Shut up. Sure you made it."

THE voice seemed to clear his head. He jerked his eyes wide, and stared dumbfoundedly about him. He was in the Tenth Coastal mess, and everyone was there. Red Saunders was holding out a whisky glass filled to the brim. He gulped it down, and new life surged through him.

"Hell!" he choked. "I just landed. How the hell did I get here?"

"You landed ten minutes ago, kid," grinned Saunders. "And you've been telling us that you made it ever since. How's it go?"

Buck pointed to the empty glass.

"It could be better," he grunted.

As Red turned to refill it, Major Horton stepped close and fixed Buck with a questioning eye.

"Knew damn well you were up to something!" he said. "What was it all about, and why didn't you tell us?"

Buck shrugged, let his eyes sweep over Major Carter and the Tenth Coastal pilots.

"Pickford figured it out," he said slow-

ly. "I got my tip from a couple of things he said. Never believed the one-bomber idea anyway. And the eleven o'clock each night seemed funny, too. So I got a hunch about a decoy ship being used—one that wouldn't be missed if it was lost.

"The answer to that was a glider, of course. A glider full of H. E. and timed to blow up at eleven o'clock. Well, a glider would have to come in with the wind, and the maximum altitude for a bomber with a glider load would be about thirty-five thousand.

"After mess tonight I studied the wind charts—begging your pardon, Major Carter, for not asking permission. Anyway, I found that high altitude winds were from the north tonight. So I guessed fifteen minutes as an average time for the glider to come down from thirty-five thousand, and from that figured just how far north of here the bomber would let it loose. And—"

"But why that, captain?" cut in Major Carter. "I don't follow you. Why couldn't they release it from a shorter or longer distance? What matter did it make?"

"Just this, sir," explained Buck. "Because of ground detectors, the bomber had to float in, too. So to make sure that it would not be spotted, they used the decoy glider. In other words, by some trick sparking machine for exhausts, probably, that was also timed, they made you think that you'd spotted the real one.

"But they had calculated gliding speeds so that when you spotted the decoy ship over the base, they too, were exactly over the base and set to drop real bombs!

"Only they were higher up. And in the fuss of you chaps chasing the glider and its blowing up, the real bomber simply put on steam and drifted out to sea, and its carrier home. Simple, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is now," grunted Major Horton. "But finish your story. You sighted it?"

"Sure," grinned Buck. "I timed my speed north from directly over the base at thirty-five thousand. I admit, it was but a hunch—but it worked. I sighted the ship, and so did Pickford. But I had snapped off the radio, and when I tried to warn you, as they released the glider, I didn't realize I was yelling at thin air. That's why I came piling down later, and damn near had to crash into Red to make him zoom away. He was headed straight for hell."

"And damn near killed yourself," said Major Carter, admiration in his eyes. "But what about Pickford? He washed up. Did he—"

The officer didn't finish the question. He simply looked it. Buck hesitated only a split second.

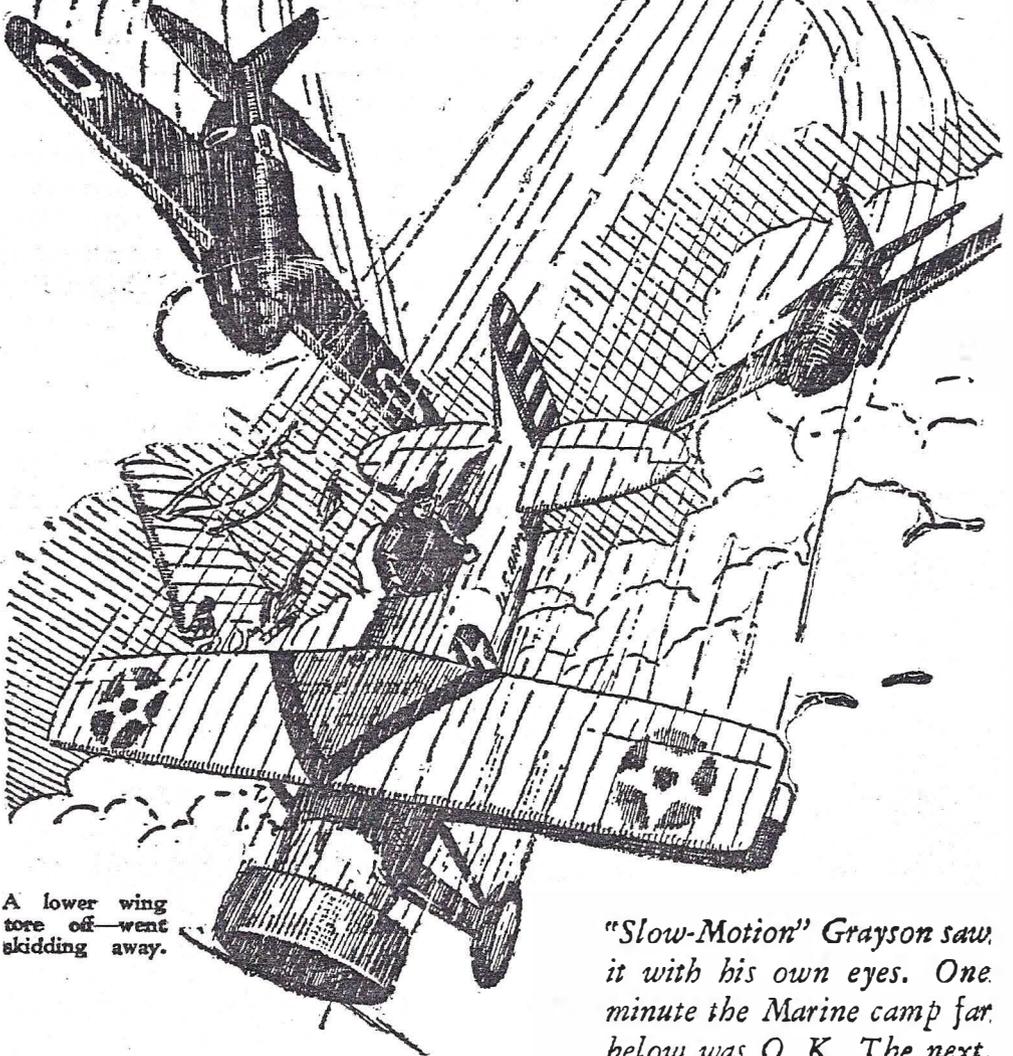
"Pickford did the real job," he said quietly. "It cost him his life, but he made good his promise to his pal—he got the bomber. I saw him do it, if you need confirmation for the official records."

WINNERS OF THE "BOMBS RUSH" CONTEST IN JUNE BATTLE BIRDS

1ST PRIZE (A copy of Jane's All the World's Aircraft for 1919): Foster Cushing, 32 Turner St., Brighton, Mass. SURPRISE WINNERS: Victor Jarmulowsky, 362 Powers Ave., Bronx, N. Y.; William Birkfasy, 674 N. Main St., Wellington, Ohio; Stephan Zeman, 28 Hudson Ave., Guttenberg, N. J.; Edward D. Bonham, Jr., 6133 Kenmore Ave., Chicago, Ill.; Clinton Hiester, 1915 Parker St., Berkeley, Cal.; Steve Kovack, 2406 Bridge Ave., Cleveland, Ohio; SUBSCRIPTION WINNERS: Lewis Owen, 508 Summit Ave., Oradell, N. J.; Gerald Jackson, Jr., 10 Montagu St., London, W. I., England; Victor Santos, Box 84, San Juan, Porto Rico.

If Linton Copelin will send us his correct address, we will mail him the Surprise which the judges awarded his answer to the April contest (announced in the June number).

The Invisible Raider



A lower wing
tore off—went
skidding away.

"Slow-Motion" Grayson saw it with his own eyes. One minute the Marine camp far below was O. K. The next, it had burst into flames. Yet for miles around the sky and sea seemed absolutely empty. What was this new blow of the Blacks? How could America fight off an invisible enemy?

LIEUTENANT HARRY J. GRAYSON, better known to the 32nd Coast Patrol Group as "Slow-Motion" Grayson, stopped talking long enough to sip his drink appreciatively.

"Is that a drink, or is that a drink?" he grinned at the four other wind-bronzed pilots of B Flight who were gathered

about the mess lounge table. "But, as I was saying, I could see that her horse was kind of skittish, and that she didn't know much about riding. So I just hung along in back of her, ready to give my nag the spurs in case anything happened."

"You mean," snorted "Chunky" Stubbs. "You mean, hoping she'd fall for your

golden locks and invite you up to the house for tea, or something. You riding a horse in San Diego Park for pure exercise—nutts you were!”

Slow-Motion shot him a glare of scornful reproof.

“Maybe if you did a little riding between patrols,” he snapped, “you’d work some of that excess fat off your hide. Anyway, as I expected, her horse suddenly bolted, and away he went down the bridal path, her hanging on for dear life and yelling loud enough to be heard across the country.”

“And you go after her and stop the plug, just when it’s ready to collapse from old age!” broke in Chunky. “Sure, we all read about it in the paper’s. So what? Aren’t you ever going to lay off telling us about it?”

“And how!” agreed the others in chorus.

Slow-Motion muttered a soft curse, fished a hand in his tunic pocket and pulled out a letter.

“All right, smart apes!” he rapped at them, scaling the letter onto the table. “Take a look at that!”

One of them opened it, and they all read it together.

Lieut. H. J. Grayson,
32nd Coast Patrol Group,
San Diego, Calif.
My dear Lieutenant:

In recognition of your gallant action last week, I am sending under separate cover a little present which I hope you will accept as an expression of my sincere gratitude, and admiration of your courage.

Gratefully yours,
(Mrs.) Grace V. Lowell.

“I bet it’ll be a horse blanket,” Chunky Stubbs grinned.

“Or a cowboy’s ten gallon lid,” offered somebody else.

“Yeah?” Slow-Motion grated. “Well,

you muggs will laugh out the other side, when I show you the check?”

“Check?” exclaimed Stubbs, his jaw dropping. “Gosh, kid, did she send you a check? How much?”

The other took a sip of his drink, and cocked an eyebrow.

“Haven’t got it yet,” he said. “But it should be one for at least five hundred iron men. The Lowells are lousey with dough. Yeah, it should be at least five hundred, maybe more. She’s mighty grateful for what I did, and—”

“Special express package for you, sir.”

They all looked up as the mess orderly entered and handed a flat, six by eight, package to Slow-Motion. And they all saw the return Lowell address in the upper left corner.

“A check, eh?” razzed Stubbs. “Or maybe she sent it in cash, huh?”

GRAYSON ignored him, broke the string and ripped off the paper covering. The cover of the box bore a swank San Diego shop monogram. Inside was Mrs. Lowell’s card, and something wrapped in tissue paper. As Slow-Motion removed the tissue paper, they all gasped.

“What the—?” gulped Stubbs. “My God, it’s a sash—a Mex cowboy’s sash! Say, kid, did you loose your pants when you were stopping her nag? Here, gimme!”

Before Grayson could stop him, the stocky pilot swept the neatly folded ten feet of bright yellow and red silk from the box, twined it about his middle and started a rumba around the table. Face beet red, Slow-Motion made a flying tackle and they both went down in a heap. Twenty seconds later the place was in an uproar. Everyone was locked in each other’s arms and legs; all scrambling for possession of the “hero’s” reward.

“Here! What the devil’s this all about?”

Get on your feet, all of you! Have you lost your minds?"

Instantly they all froze in whatever positions they were in, and stared up into the blazing eyes of Major Wallace, recently appointed C. O. of the Group.

"Come on, up—up!" he barked.

Sheepishly they untangled themselves, got to their feet and stood stiffly at attention.

"Now then," began the C. O. "Word has just come—er—good God, what's that?"

He shot out a finger at the sash that was crazily wrapped about Grayson's left arm and shoulder. The pilot swallowed hard, and clawed off the sash.

"A present, sir," he got out with an effort. "It—it's a sash."

"A sash?" echoed the C. O. incredulously. "My God, put the damn thing out of my sight!"

Face flaming, Grayson stuffed it in his tunic pocket. The C. O. gave him a final steely glare, then let it include them all.

"A fine bunch, I must say!" he got out harshly. "Acting like school children in an officers' mess. Well, I'll give you something better to do! Base Supply Depot in C-3 zone was fired on half an hour ago—and from the sea. Just how or what, H. Q. doesn't know. And we've been given the job of finding out. We'll patrol the coast in flight relays. You—gentlemen—will go out first. Keep your eyes open, and look sharp. Grayson, you lead, and make ten minute radio contacts with the field. That's all—get going."

In silence they trooped out and went over to the hangar line. Chunky Stubbs hung back until he was in step with Grayson.

"His nibs' breakfast was punk again, I guess," he grunted.

Slow-Motion nodded heavily.

"Yeah, something like that," he murmured, without turning his head.

Stubbs shot him a side-long look.

"Not sore are you, kid?" he asked. "I was only horsing around. And I'm sorry about the check—you not getting one, I mean. But, that'll make a swell cleaning rag, fellow. How about giving me half of it?"

"Being my best pal is all that stops me from giving you a poke in the nose," Grayson growled at him. "A cleaning rag, huh? It's going to be my luck charm. You wait and see. She's a wonderful woman, and this'll bring me luck. Yeah, maybe even a transfer to a unit where the C. O. doesn't have indigestion five times a day."

"Well if it brings you that much luck," murmured Chunky. "I'm going to go out and stop me a run-away horse, right pronto. See you, upstairs."

With a half nod Grayson went over to his ship, started to leg in then changed his mind. Face set stubbornly he unbuttoned his tunic, pulled out the sash and wrapped it tightly around his waist. Then he buttoned his tunic over it, and climbed into the cockpit. Through smoldering eyes he studied the instruments, and checked the radio wave-length dial. It was all mechanical, for his mind was thinking of the five hundred dollar check he didn't get. He could use five hundred very nicely. That crap game last week had—

"Aw nutts!" he broke in on his own thoughts. "I'll make this thing bring me luck, or bust a gut. Give me the horse laugh will they? I'll show 'em!"

In emphasis of the remark, he snapped off the wheel brakes and hand-heelled the throttle open. The prop became a shimmering silver disc, and the plane rolled out onto the field. Checking it a bit, he turned toward the signal tower. Five seconds later the red flag dropped, and ten seconds after that he was pulling the wheels clear of the runway.

SLIDING up to ten thousand in wide, lazy circles he finally leveled off and roared out over the San Diego coast and the broad expanse of the Pacific. Ten miles from shore he veered north and cut his throttle to half speed. Then he turned the wave-length dial and picked up the transmitter tube.

"Attention gang!" he called. And when the red check-back light on the dash blinked, he went on: "Spread out in V formation. Chunky, you and Dawson cover the right. Spaulding, you and Wilson cover the left. I'll take the front. Watch for subs, or a destroyer sliding in under a smoke screen. We'll go as far north as L. A. and then turn back. All of you yell, if you sight anything. Signing off to check with the field."

Turning the dial another few points, he called:

"Thirty Second Field Station. B Flight reporting . . . Grayson speaking. Flying coast north to L. A. Nothing sighted as yet. Sea calm, clouds at fifteen thousand in spots. Visibility O. K. We . . ."

The voice of Major Wallace cut in on him.

"Grayson . . . been calling you ever since you left. Keep your wave-length open. Head for map position C-16. Two H. E. shells have just landed in the destroyer basin there. Hurry up, before they get away."

Slow-Motion didn't bother to answer. With actions which belied his nickname he spun the map roller, found C-16, and changed his course a few degrees east of north. Ten minutes later he was able to pick up the destroyer basin with the aid of binoculars.

At first the whole waterfront seemed in flames. But as he thundered toward it he saw that civilian and military firemen were keeping the flames confined to three buildings. Five Yank destroyers were churning water out toward open sea. But

a sixth was belching flame and smoke, and going well down by the stern at her mooring buoys.

To starboard, a fire-tug was hurling tons of water upon her in a frantic effort to stem the flames long enough for the crew and officers to cast off. But even as Grayson watched it, the flames reached a powder magazine and a great column of fire and yellow smoke shot skyward, and spewed outward, umbrella shape.

"Hey, kid . . . hey, Grayson! Look. . . to the south!"

As Chunky Stubbs' voice rang out in the ear-phones, Slow-Motion jerked his eyes from the destroyer basin and looked south. Ten miles down the coast a seaplane base was becoming a great pool of red flame. It was as though the fury of hell itself had suddenly crashed down from above. One look and the pilot snatched up the transmitter tube.

"Fellows, check altitude for bombers! I'm going down for a close look. Something's screwy!"

Without waiting to see if they carried out his order, Grayson shoved the nose down and went thundering straight for the flaming seaplane base.

What had started it, he had no idea, but as fresh bursts of flame spouted skyward he realized that fuel storage tanks were blowing up in the intense heat, and trapping every living thing within reach of their flickering tongues. Several pilots were striving desperately to taxi their lumbering planes out into clear water, but before they got fifty yards they became balls of red on the water.

Swooping low over the place, Grayson groaned and climbed back for altitude. There was nothing he could do to help the poor devils down there. Those not already trapped by the flames were fleeing the area for their lives.

Leveling off at a safe altitude the pilot swept the seas with piercing eyes—and

saw absolutely nothing but mile after mile of blue green swells, and the five American destroyers to the north. Clouds above him hid the rest of his flight, but after a short delay he was able to get Stubbs on the radio.

"Not a damn thing up here, kid," the stocky pilot reported. "Must be the work of spies."

"But H. Q. said that shells had been used," grunted Grayson, more to himself.

"They've been wrong before," the ear-phones commented. "Shall we come down?"

"No," replied Grayson. "Take a good look and make sure. Go up to thirty thousand if you have to. It must be bomber work. Couldn't be anything else. Hell, the sea's clear for fifty miles out."

The ear-phones muttered something and then clicked silent.

ABSENTLY Grayson snapped off at his end and sat scowling at the shore line. A moment later he jerked up in the seat and let out a wild yell. Once again flames were spouting upward from the shore. And this time they came up from the barracks of a Marine camp situated about twelve miles south of the seaplane base. Like magic they had appeared—as though someone had touched off a giant match in the very middle of the camp.

Though he couldn't be positive, because of his altitude and distance, Grayson was pretty sure that there had been no explosion. He had been staring at the exact spot at the moment, and flames had simply columned upward. There had been no shower of debris, that would hurl skyward after an explosion. One second a camp thriving with activity, and the next, a fountain of flame.

With a savage movement he snapped on the radio and called the 32nd field station.

"Grayson!" he said when the red light

blinked. "What's the H. Q. report? Positions C-12 and 9 have gone up in flames since last report. We can sight no bombers, and there are no enemy ships off shore."

"You're crazy, there must be!" Major Wallace's voice barked back at him. "H. Q. says that it's shell fire. Enemy ships are using liquid flame shells . . . and scoring direct hits, so they must be in close to shore. I'm sending the rest of the group out. The 10th and 15th is also joining the patrol. Now, dammit, stay awake, Grayson. Use your eyes . . . find out what the devil's causing it. Understand?"

"Nutts to you!" grated Slow-Motion a split second after he switched off. "You damn rocking-chair pilot, why the hell don't you lend a hand, if you know so much!"

Three hours later his temper had not improved a single bit. As a matter of fact the tantalizing mystery of the whole thing had put his nerves on razor edge. With the aid of the other units who joined the hunt, the 32nd Group had covered every square inch of water from San Diego to L. A. and back; from the shoreline to a good hundred and fifty miles out. A couple of Yank destroyer squadrons had churned up and down the coast, but nothing had been sighted—nothing on the land, on the sea, or in the air.

Finally, fed up with the fruitless search, and grudgingly admitting the possibility of Chunky's guess, that the four shore fires had been caused by Black agents, Grayson signaled his Group and led the way back to the field.

Five minutes after they had landed, Major Wallace had them all gathered in the mess. Steel-blue eyes sparking, hands clenched behind his back, he stalked up and down in front of them, like a drill sergeant in front of a bunch of gangling rookies.

"What's the matter with you pilots?"

he roared at them. "Here is one chance for 32 Group to make a reputation for itself—and you fail. Fail miserably. Frankly, I'm saying this for the benefit of B Flight, mostly. You other pilots were sent out after the explosions had taken place. So were the other two squadrons. Lieutenant Grayson! What have you got to say for yourself?"

Mindful of the sympathetic looks flashed his way by the rest of the gang, Slow-Motion lumbered to his feet and looked the C. O. straight in the eye.

"I haven't anything to add to my first reports, sir," he said evenly. "However, I will say this—if the damage done was caused by shell fire from enemy ships off shore, then I'll eat my shirt! So, I would suggest that you contact Yank Intelligence and have them check up on the spy angle. It was inside spy bomb work, if you ask me!"

The C. O.'s face went crimson with rage. And his little trick mustache fairly bristled as he stepped close to the pilot.

"Oh, so you do, eh?" he lipped with a grimace. "And how long have you been C. O. of this Group, and giving orders?"

"It was simply a suggestion, sir," Slow-Motion cut in steadily, struggling to keep a curb on his mounting anger. "I don't want your job, major."

The remark served only to increase the other's wrath.

"The devil you don't!" he exploded. "For the three months I've been in command here, you've sulked and moped around because you couldn't run things like you used to when Major Parks had command. Well, I'm a different type of C. O., Grayson. I don't play favorites, or let junior officers tell me how to run things. And you'd better get that into your cocky brain."

A LOW growl, like winter wind in the tree tops, spread about the room.

Major Wallace whirled on them, virtually trembling with rage.

"And I'll have none of that!" he thundered. "One sign of insubordination and you all get court-martialed. I know your feeling for Major Parks, and it is regrettable that his sudden illness killed him. But, there's a war on and none of us have time to grieve over the departed. My methods are my methods! Understand? And, by God, you'll carry them out, or I'll know the reason why!"

"We're trying to, sir," spoke up Grayson for all of them. "But, you were not on the patrol, or you would have the same idea that we have. And—"

"What in hell do you mean, Grayson?" the other thundered down on him. "Damn you, are you inferring that I—"

"No sir," the pilot cut in, clinging to the last thread of self control. "But, for for God's sake, major—"

He choked off the rest as he saw the C. O.'s clenched right fist arcing up. Twisting his head he took the blow on the side of the neck.

Just what happened next, none of the others saw clearly. There was a blur of lightning movement, a sharp *smack*, and Major Wallace's body curved over backwards, slammed into the corner of a table and slid off to a limp heap on the floor. A split second later, a Lieutenant Grayson that few of them had ever seen before, whirled and checked their impulsive rising motions with a blazing-eyed command.

"Steady, gang! It's my affair, and you birds keep out of it. I was dead wrong, see? I shouldn't have done it—but I did. And I'll take the consequences, not you fellows. Now don't be dumb. Stay right where you are. He hasn't got a thing on you, and—an—oh hell, s'long!"

Chin up, eyes fixed straight ahead, Grayson stalked out of the mess and over to his plane. But as he started to leg in,

Chunky Stubbs panted up, grabbed his arm and swung him around.

"Hey, listen, kid!" he shouted. "Where you going? He deserved it, fellow. The things he said about Parks—hell, I was going to sock him, myself. Listen, where're you headed?"

"I'm going to beat him to it!" the other grated. "I'm going to report to the Area H. Q. commander myself—and get my side of it in before he does. Beat it back, Chunky, before he comes to. No reason for you to catch hell, any of you, on account of me. So scram!"

Stubbs cursed.

"Don't be like that, guy!" he snorted. "Hell, we'll all swear that he slipped and fell down. Besides, he took a swing at you first. We all saw it. Listen, running to H. Q. will just get you in that much more trouble. General Baker's a tough egg, you know."

"I know," the other nodded grimly. "And, he's the one who stuck Wallace in there. Nope, Chunky—I shouldn't have smacked him. So, I'm going to fess-up before he has a chance to rake you birds into it."

"Aw, listen—"

Before Stubbs could say any more, Grayson legged into his ship and goosed the gun. The stocky pilot had to leap quickly to one side in order to save himself from a dirt bath.

Face set, eyes staring gloomily ahead, Slow-Motion eased the ship off the runway and poked the nose skyward. With his free hand he absently fingered the folds of red and yellow silk about his waist.

"It brought me luck, all right!" he muttered between clenched teeth. "Oh hell, guess I would have socked that bum anyway. He's had it coming to him for a long time. So long as the gang don't catch it, I won't mind—much!"

Heaving a sigh, he reached out and

spun the wave-length dial; picked up the transmitter tube.

"Grayson of 30 calling S. W. Area H. Q.," he intoned. "Coming in to report to commanding officer. Please set landing signals. Be there in twenty minutes."

The red light blinked and the earphones cracked.

"S. W. Area H. Q. . . . message received. Commanding officer is not here. Gone to S. F. H. Q. What's your message, please?"

Slow-Motion grimaced at the transmitter tube. He started to speak, then changed his mind.

"Nothing," he grunted eventually. "Nothing important. I'll call later. Signing off."

Snapping up the wave-length switch he leaned back against the headrest.

"So what?" he growled aloud. Then answering himself, "So you're out of luck. Wallace will get him on the ground wire, and it'll be just too bad for you."

C LIMBING up through a scattered cloud bank in wide, lazy circles he glumly debated the idea of flying to San Francisco H. Q. and reporting there to General Baker. But after a while pride and sane reasoning made him shove the idea overboard. It would be bad enough to report to Baker at his own H. Q. But to chase him all the way up to S. F., well—the hell with it.

"Might as well stick up here and wait for him to get back," he grunted. "Probably be my last ride, anyway. Why did I—"

As he slid up through a fleecy cloud he choked off the rest with a wild cry, and hurled his ship over on wing-tip. A jet black plane had suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and was streaking straight at him, its pointed snout spitting lines of jetting flame.

Totally bewildered for the moment he

was unable to check his roaring dive until he was enveloped in the cloud bank, and staring wide-eyed at the misting whiteness that swirled about him. And then with a curse he got control of his jumpy nerves, and sent his ship screaming upward through the cloud bank.

But as he shot up into the clear the Black plane pounced upon him like a vulture pouncing upon a sparrow. A streak of black light, it sliced in, and a dozen unseen fingers poked holes in the dural covering of his right wings.

Where the strange plane had come from, and what it was doing over the San Diego area, he did not know, nor did he try to figure it out at the moment. He only knew that death was slapping at him across the heavens.

So furious was the surprise attack that he didn't even have time to spin the wave-length dial.

Both hands gripping the stick, thumbs poised to jab the trigger trips forward, he lunged over in a flash half-roll, cut sharply back in a reverse maneuver and then went roaring heavenward, straight as an arrow. For an instant the other pilot had been tricked out of position.

"And how do you like it?" roared Grayson, and jabbed the trigger trips.

The twin Brownings yammered a chattering song of death, and made-in-America slugs ripped and slammed into the tail of the Black plane as its pilot tried frantically to skid clear.

"And some more for luck!" howled the Yank as he kicked over on wing and followed it around.

But the Black pilot was no greenhorn. He had been caught once, and the luck of the devil had saved him. Around he tore, well clear of Grayson's withering blast. And then with a maneuver that made the Yank gasp in sheer admiration the Black pilot spun straight upward for

six full turns, cut over and came down like a meteor gone crazy.

For hellish seconds whining steel beat a satanic tattoo against the turtle back of Grayson's plane. Breath clamped in lungs, and heart in his throat, he booted his ship around in a dime turn to the right. Three quarters of the way around he yanked it into a half loop. And when he rolled off the top he saw the Black ship swing out of its mad dive and start to zoom up. It was his moment, and with a blood curdling whoop the Yank plunged down upon it.

Eyes narrowed, hands steady on the stick, he lined the enemy plane up in his sights and gave it both guns. Like a feather in a gale of wind, the Black plane slipped this way and that as its pilot tried to get clear. But Slow-Motion Grayson clung to it as though the two planes were tied together. And every second of the time he kept pumping hot, singing steel into its streamlined structure.

PERHAPS it was two minutes, or maybe ten, before the movements of the enemy plane became sluggish and awkward. Like a bat blinded by sunshine it swung around in crazy circles—now dipping slightly this way, and now that.

Several times Grayson stopped firing long enough to swoop down close alongside and signal to the figure under the glass cowling to surrender. But each time the figure made no answering movement other than to try and cut around in close for a broadside blast. And then, when he almost succeeded, and a savage burst ripped through Grayson's tail section, the Yank cursed and stopped trying to be merciful.

"Okay!" he bellowed. "If it's like that, then take it!"

As the last words slid off his mouth he went roaring down on the twisting Black plane with all the fury of hell itself. Sawing rudder, he swept the plane from

prop to tail-wheel with a withering fire that no plane on earth could stand. And the mysterious Black plane was no exception.

For a second or two it remained as one piece. And then, as Grayson's armor-piercing slugs found the fuel tanks, the enemy craft exploded in a great flash of light, and went showering down into a cloud bank in a billion smoking pieces.

Fired to peak pitch, it was a moment or two before that shouting, cursing, mad-flying Yank realized that his surprise attacker had been destroyed, and that he was tearing around and wasting ammo on thin air. With a grunt he took his thumbs from the trigger trips, leveled off and slumped back against the headrest.

"Sweet essence of tripe!" he mumbled thickly. "I shot him down—I shot down a Black plane! But where the hell did he come from?"

He shook himself, wiped a hand across his wet brow, and spun the wave-length dial.

"Grayson calling 32!" he shouted. "Grayson calling 32. I have just destroyed an enemy pursuit plane over . . . over . . ."

He stopped and stared downward. A cloud layer had formed beneath him, and he could see nothing except a strip of the Pacific far to the west. The fact gave him a startled jolt, and he grunted a sharp exclamation.

"What the hell?" he exclaimed. "There weren't that many clouds before. Yeah, only a few here and—"

"Grayson . . . Grayson! This is Stubbs! What were you saying?"

The crackle of his pal's voice in the phones jerked him out of his trance.

"Huh?" he ejaculated. "Oh you, eh, Stubbs? Listen, I just smacked down a Black pursuit. But I don't know where the hell I am. Clouds have closed in on me. Keep on my wave-length, while I go down through them and find out."

"Hey, kid, cut the comedy! What the hell are you beefing about? What do you mean, shot down a Black pursuit? Say, listen, guy. . . ."

Grayson didn't hear the rest, for at that moment a cloud bank directly in front of him, seemed to slit open in the middle and all hell came belching out at him. At first glance it looked like a wall of fire curving over him. And then it went swishing downward like so much red spray, and two Black planes came charging out at him. But it was not the two charging planes that tore a wild shout from his throat. It was the cloud bank out of which they charged.

Seconds before, it had appeared to be just a great mass of fleecy clouds in the sky, but for a flash instant he saw a huge dull glistening shadow that was spurting red fire at that bottom edge. And then, as though a fading mirage, it became transformed into fleecy clouds again.

Hardly conscious of his action he grabbed the transmitter tube.

"Stubbs—Stubbs! For God's sake, come up here with the gang. There's something in these clouds. I don't know what—but for heaven's sake, come up with the gang!"

"Up where?" the ear-phones yelled back. "I can't even get you on the directional finder. Tell me . . . where are you, kid . . . what's happening to you?"

Grayson started to answer, but a savage burst of steel slapped into his ship, and he promptly forgot all about Stubbs on the other end. He needed both thumbs on the trigger trips, if he wanted to go on living.

THE two Black vultures struck. One from each side they came, props clawing the air, and twin ribbons of continuous thin flame leaping down at him across the sky. With a frantic effort, he belted the stick against the cockpit side, and stood

up on right rudder with all his strength. His bullet-riddled plane seemed to moan in protest, yet around it went in a quick turn.

And above it all he heard the faint cries of Stubbs in the phones. But he couldn't tell what his pal was saying. Couldn't for the simple reason that his ears rang with a crazy jumble of a hundred different sounds.

Face grim and drawn, lips curled back in a defiant snarl, he kicked and booted his craft all over the cloud-filled air. A dozen times he tried to lose himself in one of the cloud banks, but each time the enemy pilots seemed to anticipate his maneuver and beat him back into clear air with death-rattling bursts of fire.

And then, suddenly, his spinning brain realized that the two Blacks were keeping him away from only one bank of clouds. Curiously enough, he had tried to duck into it each time—perhaps because it seemed thicker and more dense than the others.

“... Where are you? Say, kid, where are you?”

For a second, Stubbs' voice registered in his brain. And with it came realization that he was fighting a losing battle. Try as he might, his two attackers were too clever for him. And they were slowly hammering his ship into crumpled shreds.

Hurling the ship into a wild spin, he released one hand from the stick and snatched up the transmitter tube.

“Hang on, Stubbs, hang on!” he roared. “I'm going to find out now.”

“Well, for God's sake, hurry up!” the ear-phones barked back at him.

Oblivious to the hail of singing steel that poured down after him, Grayson hugged the stick to his stomach and went whirling into the billowy mass of clouds. A glance at his altimeter jerked a gasp of surprise from his lips. He was at

eleven thousand. He'd been over eighteen when the first Black ship had charged him.

Straining his eyes ahead for the first glimpse of clear air and the ground below, he sat tensed as drawn steel.

At five thousand his heart began to thump against his ribs. And at three thousand a cold sweat broke out on his face and the back of his hands. Good God, had his altimeter gone haywire? Or had the clouds closed down to sea level?

It must be his altimeter—there were never clouds at sea level in Southern California during June. Maybe a low mist in the early morning, but not at three o'clock in the afternoon.

And then when the needle swung around to the two thousand foot mark, and he was going to pull out anyway, the last layer of filmy mist swept up past him, and he plunged down into clear air. With quick motions, he pulled the ship out of its spin, and looked below—and there were the blue-green swells of the Pacific.

Turning in the seat, he stared east and gasped in dumbfounded astonishment. He was about ten miles off shore from the little Mexican town of Santa Telmo in Lower California, and well over a hundred miles down the coast from the San Diego area.

THEN suddenly, without warning, a great shadow dropped down out of the clouds just over the shore line. It didn't drop down exactly. It floated down with waving streamers of cloud clinging to it.

For several seconds, Grayson stared at it blankly, and then as though a flash of lightning had passed through his brain, he suddenly realized what it was.

It was not a part of the cloud bank—it was a scouting blimp of dull burnished, dural stripping. And the waving stream-

ers of cloud were made from generated steam that poured out from vents which ran the entire length of the keel.

He was looking at one of the Black Invader Fire-Blimps. From what he'd heard about them during the Black conquest of Europe, he knew positively that this was one. With the aid of steam and vapor generating equipment aboard it was simple for the crew to create a perfect camouflage. With the aid of radio beam contact with an established base, navigation was but routine. And for bomb sighting, the recently perfected, fog penetrating, infra-beam was used.

No wonder direct hits had been made on the destroyer basin, and the other three places. Hidden by its own cloud, the blimp had simply drifted over the objective and dropped a couple of flame shells, and then drifted on south with the prevailing wind. And while three squadrons of Yank planes had frantically searched the sea area, the blimp had eased inshore and waited for them to go home.

But why had its three defense planes, suspended from the keel cranes, jumped him? The answer to that was easy, too. While killing time he had accidentally come too close.

Probably the blimp commander had done his assigned job and was trying to get south to his secret base in neutral Mexico, when suddenly an "annoying" Yank pilot had blocked his path. So out came one defense plane to settle that Yank. But the Yank had turned the tables, so the other two had been released—and a shower from one of the flame guns to cover their attack.

Yeah, simple, now that he saw the damn thing. And they, thinking the spin fatal, were actually easing down toward their base, and believing their secret still unknown.

"But it isn't!" he bellowed. "I'm still here—and, damn you, here I come!"

Whipping around on wing-tip, he went plunging straight toward the glistening hulk. Seconds later, as he ripped out a fruitless burst from his guns, a tongue of flame spewed from a slitted vent just back of the snub nose of the blimp.

Like a red hand it reached out toward him, and for one hellish second he thought that it would engulf him. But he was not near enough and the flame showered down harmlessly into the water below.

"You won't get a second chance with that stuff!" he howled.

Hauling back the stick, he sent his plane thundering upward. He grinned tightly as he saw the blimp start to turn around so that its flame gun could be trained on him. But his speed was too great, and a second flame shot missed him by a good fifty yards.

And at that instant his ear-phones crackled.

"Grayson . . . Grayson . . . We're in the air now. Where in hell are you?"

He gulped and swallowed hard as Stubbs' voice came to him like a faint recollection out of the past. In the excitement of seeing the blimp he'd forgotten about Stubbs. In a quick movement, he scooped up the transmitter tube.

"At M-7 . . . at M-7. Come a-flying, gang . . . there is a . . ."

Taca-taca-taca-taca!

A THOUSAND metallic wasps crashed down through the glass cowlings. Hot splinters dug into his cheek and neck, and his ear-drums were blasted inward by a shrill twanging sound. Through dazed eyes he saw two black flashes piling down on him, and the next instant his plane quivered and trembled like a flimsy kite in the vortex of a volcano.

Instinctively, he belted the stick and

rudder in one berserk effort to smash clear. And as he spun around he opened his mouth to shout into the transmitter tube. But with a groan, he closed it shut, dropped the tube and snapped off the radio set. Instantly the shrill noise in the ear-phones died out. A stray bullet had found one of the transmitting tubes and the set had gone haywire with throw-back oscillation.

Hardly daring to hope that his position signal had been received, he tossed all caution overboard and flung his ship at the flame-spitting Blacks. Around and around he went, banging the controls with every ounce of his strength, and jabbing the trigger trips so hard that both his arms ached clear up to the shoulder sockets.

But with each passing second he realized that the two Blacks were slowly but surely weaving an unbreakable web of singing steel about him. At intervals he caught glimpses of the blimp out the corner of his eyes. Steam was beginning to pour out from its vents, and the craft was moving out to sea. Hell, it would soon be lost to view, and with his radio gone, he was helpless to signal the others of its existence. Signal the others?

He groaned and risked a sizzling burst in order to scan the skies. Nothing—yes—dots streaking down from the north. Thirty-two! Stubby and the gang were coming!

Shouting crazy words of defiance at the two Black planes relentlessly closing in, he whipped over on wing-tip, skidded around and shot right between them. As he did, two spears of white flame slid across the small of his back. But he hardly felt the pain. His brain was on fire with a wild plan.

The blimp, in the distance, was fast hiding itself in its own cloud and beating a retreat to some spot far out to sea.

Sobbing, shouting and cursing in the same breath, he pounded the throttle and

tore northward to the flock of dots. Behind him two black-winged killers tried desperately to smash him out of the air.

One mile more—a half mile—

And then, suddenly, a slashing burst from one of the Blacks ripped into Grayson's plane. The ship trembled violently, and seemed to actually groan, as a weakened right lower wing tore off and went skidding away.

Stunned for an instant, Grayson watched it through glazed, red filmed eyes. Then with a berserk curse he ripped open his tunic, and tore off the red silk sash. Balling it in one hand he jammed his arms through the seat pack chute straps, snapped the buckle and slammed back the shattered cowl.

Scrambling out, he poised himself for an instant on the crazily swirling plane and then leaped into thin air.

"And I can still tell them!" he belted at the Black planes as he yanked the release cord.

WAITING a second for the chute to billow out, and the shroud lines to go taut, he then twisted until he was facing the oncoming Yank planes. Clutching the two ends of the scarf in one hand he waved it frantically about. A second later, as the lead Yank plane swerved toward him, he shouted with joy.

"Watch, Stubbs!" he cried. "Watch, and for the love of God, read it!"

Shortening up the sash a bit, he started signaling International Morse, employing the recognized flag signal method of a sweep down to the right for a dot, and a sweep down to the left for a dash. Three times he sent the message.

E-N-E-M-Y B-L-I-M-P I-N F-A-K-E
C-L-O-U-D H-E-A-D-I-N-G O-U-T
T-O S-E-A R-A-D-I-O H-E-L-P

And then, as he saw Stubbs waggle his wings in a "message received" sig-

nal, the broad expanse of the Pacific came up and enveloped him.

So unexpectedly did he hit the water, that before he could unsnap himself from the shroud lines they tangled about his arms and legs. Desperately he tried to kick clear, but like the tenacles of an octopus they coiled tighter and tighter about him.

Choking, gasping for breath, he fought with the fury of a wild man. Before his eyes floated a million crazy visions. He saw balls of fire spilling down out of the sky. And presently he saw something float down close to him. Water splashed up in his face. He had the weird impression that his hands grabbed something—that he was lifting himself up out of the dripping water. And then a great black cloud crashed down on him, and he knew no more.

A babble of voices finally pried his eyelids open. Dully he was conscious of the fact that he was no longer in the water. He was in a bed, between nice, clean, white sheets. But there was a sea of faces floating in circles before his eyes. Slowly they stopped circling about, became transfixed, and took on familiar shapes and outlines. He sat up with a jerk, and gaped wide-eyed at the 32nd gang gathered about him.

"Well, guy," Stubbs' voice came to him, "snap out of your trance! We're waiting to celebrate."

Grayson stared at the stocky pilot, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"How'd I get here?" he mumbled.

The other laughed.

"You tried to swim here," he said. "I saw you were having trouble so I crash-landed near you. And you swam over and pulled yourself aboard. Boy, were you like a fish in a net! I'd signaled for destroyers, and so we only floated for half an hour or so. Then the Tucson picked us up and put us ashore. Of course they

had to pump most of the Pacific out of you first. But I guess you'll live!"

Grayson ignored the crack as memory rushed back to him.

"That blimp!" he said. "That—"

"Keep your shirt on, kid!" Stubbs choked him off. "It's all taken care of. Right down under the Pacific, as a matter of fact. Once we got the tip from you, the boys simply went to work on it, and that was that. And on the Tucson you mumbled something about maybe there was a secret base near Santa Telmo, so bombers have gone down there to smoke it out. If they don't, the Mexicans will." Slow-Motion grinned, then suddenly looked around the room.

"But where's Wallace?" he demanded, frowning.

"That's why we celebrate," Stubbs told him. "Hell, you didn't think it was because of what you did, did you? It seems that H. Q. was getting wise to him. Anyway, a couple of the big boys came down, and we told them plenty of what had happened. Answer? His nibs left on the next train, and there'll be a real C. O. here tomorrow."

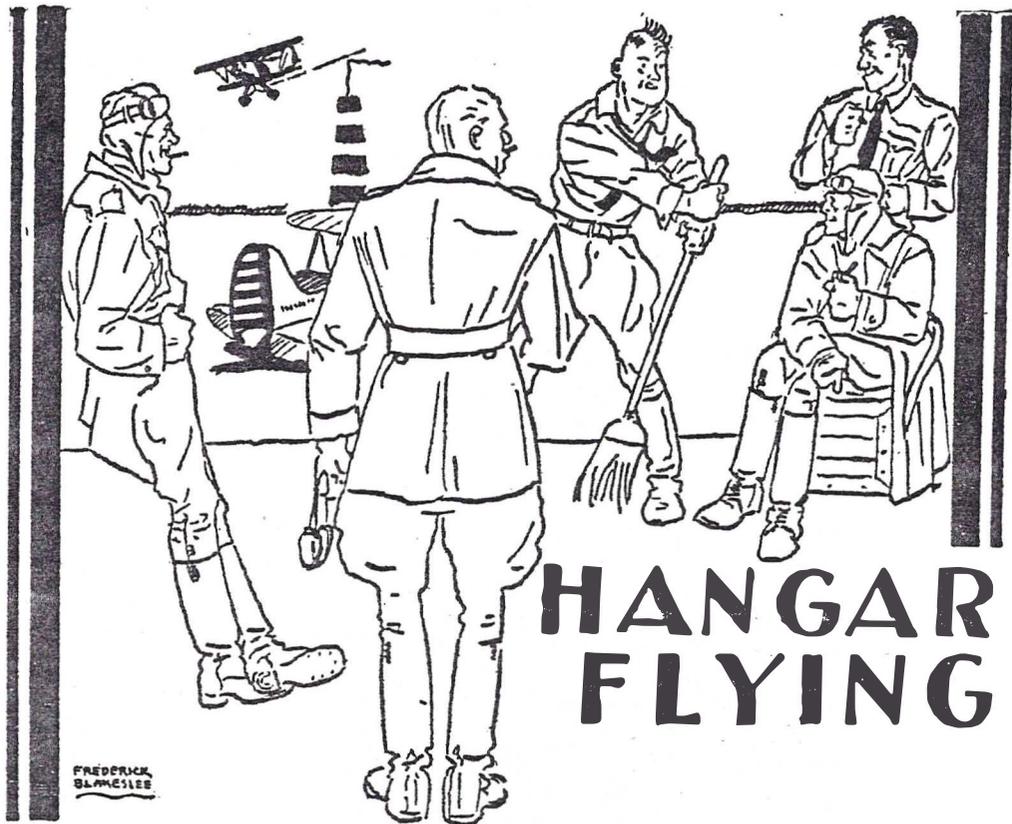
With a confirming nod, the stocky one stood up.

"And now for cat's sake let go of this damn thing. You've been clinging to it, like it was your long lost brother. Here, I'll take it while you have a drink!"

Stubbs reached for something on the bed. Grayson looked down and saw that he still clutched a water soaked red silk sash. It didn't look much like a sash now. But with a sharp cry he jerked it free from Stubbs' outstretched hand.

"Like hell you'll take that!" he roared, stuffing it behind his pillow. "Didn't I say it would bring me luck? Why, gosh, if I hadn't seen that Mrs. Lowell's horse was kind of skittish, and—"

"Nutts!" snapped Stubbs. "Shut up on that, or you'll never get a drink!"



HANGAR FLYING

GREETINGS gang, and how are all the little elevators and ailerons this fine day?

Anyway, and besides which, now that we are all together for the regular monthly meeting, I want to confess that Uncle Sam's fleet-footed letter carriers have been lugging a lot of mail my way.

So I take this opportunity to thank you chaps for taking the time out to drop me a line and letting me know just how Dusty and his brood are registering in your own particular neck of the woods. After staying up nights figuring how to get that guy out of all the jams he gets into, it is certainly mighty gratifying to learn that you chaps think he's O. K.

I want to devote this month's meeting to chinning about the suggestions that you chaps made.

Of course, some of you birds suggested ways for the old skipper to do about twice as much work as he has been doing. And

those eggs I will meet outside later, and tell them a thing or two!

However, the suggestion that came from the majority was to publish three-view drawings of the various ships, so that you model makers could roll up your shirt sleeves and go to work.

Well, believe it or not, that suggestion was sent in in two different forms. Some of you want Mr. Blakeslee and myself to dope out three-view drawings of the Silver Flash and the Dart, and the germ bomber, etc. Others thought that it would be interesting for you readers to make the drawings, and for me to publish the best ones each month.

Personally, I think that last suggestion is a wow. And here are my reasons for thinking so.

(1) All the planes in the Dusty Ayres stories are designs that Mr. Blakeslee and I believe will come to pass in the not too distant future. Although we may

picture them in our minds, and I may describe them to you on paper, it doesn't necessarily follow that you will visualize the same thing that we do. It may be that you'll get an entirely different idea—and that idea may be one hundred per cent better than ours. And so, if you all send in your ideas, out of the bunch we might get a few perfect ones.

(2) I said in the very beginning that this is your magazine, and that the old skipper is simply trying to grind out the kind of action and thrills that you want. Therefore, it seems to me that everyone of you chaps should have a chance to picture just what you believe that the ships of the future will look like.

Now, you don't have to be an aeronautical engineer, or an artist, to set your idea down on paper. Make your drawings in ink, if possible and be sure to include measurements and all that sort of thing, as the main idea of three-view drawings is to help the model makers do their stuff.

Speaking of model making—a few of you chaps have started in already, according to your letters. And a lot more of you will probably get under way real soon. Its risky to send models through the mail.

So here is a suggestion. Take a snapshot of your model—a good clear one—and shoot it in with your name and address, and I'll publish it in the next issue.

And that reminds me of something that I meant to tell you long before this.

In case you don't realize it, publishing companies work two or three months in advance. For example, as I spin this off to you, the first issue of Dusty is tucked under your arm—and this will appear in the third issue.

So, in case you don't see any of your suggestions acted upon in the next couple of issues, don't go frothing at the mouth and think that the old skipper has mentally told you all to go fly a kite or something.

Your suggestions mean plenty to me, and I'm making it my job to act upon them as fast as I possibly can. But because of the fact that we work so far ahead, its going to take just a little bit of time before I can put the suggestion into practice.

Maybe that sounds a bit bawled up. But I simply want you chaps to realize that I'm keeping my ears and eyes open, and any suggestions that you make will not be overlooked. If you'll just be patient, you'll eventually see it all in print.

Now, here's a couple of suggestions that I'm going to pass on to you for what they are worth—that is, what you think they are worth.

First, one of you chaps wrote in and said that he would like to have a part of the book devoted to what he called a Pen Pal section. In other words, I'm to publish the names and addresses of all those who would like to write to each other.

Personally, that seems pretty good to me. I'm getting to know you chaps, and you are getting to know me, so why not you all get to know each other? By writing to each other you could work up a lot of swell arguments, and as we all believe in national preparedness, I think it would help a lot for you lads to chin it over among yourselves, instead of having to wait a month or two before you find out what some chap has to say in the monthly meeting of the Hangar Flying brood.

Well, there's that one. Does it meet with your approval, or does it meet with your approval? Let the old skipper know, and he will be guided by your wishes.

Here's another suggestion, and one that I think is a peach, though as a matter of fact it can be incorporated with the first.

All you chaps interested in aviation—past, present and future—have undoubtedly collected pictures and drawings of

all kinds of things that are aeronautical, such as planes, engines, airports, military insignia, pilots, airway terminals, etc. Now, it is quite possible that you have duplicates of some, and you'd be tickled silly to swap one for a picture of something you haven't got.

For instance, perhaps Bill Jones in Boston has a couple of pips of the Curtis D-12 powered Hawk, but he would like a good picture of a Wasp power Boeing F4B. Well, it might happen that Jim Hicks out Frisco way has just the picture that Bill wants—and so they could swap.

Well, the suggestion was to work it this way. In each issue I would publish the name and address of each chap, what he had to swap and what he wanted. In that way, all you had to do was to look over the list and get in touch with the chap who had what you wanted. It would simply be a swapping department—no selling, or anything like that.

Now, though the idea seems to have merit, maybe it leaves most of you cold. So rather than go off half cocked, we are going to wait and hear what you chaps have to say.

So, mull over these two suggestions, put your ideas down on paper and shoot them in to me.

Don Wollheim of little ole New York sent me a peach of a letter that was just chocked full of interesting information and suggestions. No kidding, Don gave me so many good ideas that I guess I'll have to start a card file or something for future reference.

But there was one thing in particular that he mentioned, and with his kind permission I'm going to chin about it right now.

He writes—

“Why wouldn't the Black Darts, being advanced planes, be built of metal in the same manner that some of the larger

modern planes are? And if so, would a single burst of Dusty's machine gun suffice to tear a wing right off? I doubt it very much.”

Well, I'm going to try to do my best to get out from under with an explanation that will satisfy Don and any of you other chaps who possibly thought of the same thing.

The Black Darts are supposed to be of metal construction, and parts of them armor plated. But it is my theory that, as has been the case in the past, so will it be in the future, that protection from attack—that is, pilot and plane protection—will be sacrificed for speed and performance.

Dural is a metal, as we all know, but it is not bullet-proof. Bullet-proof metal will naturally be heavy, and although it is quite possible that the cockpits and engine cowlings and fuel tank coverings of the future planes may be protected by bullet-proof metal, I do not believe that every part of the plane will be so protected. If it were, speed would be sacrificed for weight, and a pursuit ship without speed certainly doesn't belong in the same sky with a pursuit job that has got speed.

However, that isn't what I really wanted to speak about. The part I'd like to chin about in detail is the sentence—“would a single burst from Dusty's machine gun suffice to tear a wing right off?”

Ever since the last war, fiction writers have been using the old thread-bare sentence about how the hero lines up his guns and shoots the wing, or wings, off the ship of that bold bad enemy who is trying to do dirty work at the sky crossroads.

Now, I don't know just what you call it, but for the want of something better, let's call it air-author license. That's the way they express that bit of air action

when the wing pops off the other ship.

But, button back your ears and listen to me. Maybe once in a hundred thousand times a pilot may actually chew a wing off another ship with bursts of bullets. And by that I mean, have his bullets go right through the wing stubs like a band-saw. I said once in a hundred thousand times, but maybe it should be more.

However, here is what happens. When a wing comes off in a dog scrap, it simply means that bullets slapping into the structure of the wing have so weakened it that the excess strain on the plane, due to its pilot trying to get out into the clear is more than the wing can stand and so it tears itself off.

I've seen a lot of wings go off in my time—none of my own, thank God—but I have yet to see a clean break. Every time excess strain of maneuvering made a bullet-weakened wing tear itself off.

And so, what I'm trying to bring out is, that it was possible for one well-placed burst—call it lucky—from Dusty's guns to smack right into the wing stubs of the Dart, and as the Dart was maneuvering violently at the moment the added strain was more than the wing, metal or wood, could stand, and it consequently let go.

But as I said that Dusty shot it off, I can see why Don began to wonder. And so I'm extending him my thanks right now for giving me the tip. I'll watch myself in the future and try not to bawl up what actually happens.

And, incidentally, I hope that more of you will follow Don's lead and question any statements that I may make in the Dusty yarns. There will probably be descriptive phrases that will leave you in doubt as to their possibility in real life. Just jot them down on paper, and call the old skipper up on the tarmac.

Now, on to another letter that I received. It has to do with my suggestion

at our first meeting that you chaps send in your ideas regarding what should be guarded the most, and what you think of the idea of a separate air force for the U. S.

Here's a letter from Bill Cummings, and he says in part—

"I have thought up some places and things that should be guarded and made as strong as possible.

"(1) The islands belonging to the U. S. should be guarded from strikes between peoples causing the loss of the islands' natural resources that are sent out for exchange.

"(2) Strikes in government, oil, airplane, munition, etc., factories. This would cause a great disturbance between the government and the people.

"(3) Downfall of the army and the navy.

"(4) The biggest possession of the U. S., Alaska, should be guarded even if it is nothing but frozen waste. I don't think that in the past Alaska has been given as much consideration as other possessions belonging to the U. S. We should guard against trouble in fishing factories in Nome, gold mines and the other natural resources, and also trouble in the government at Alaska. If these should go on the blink and be destroyed then the U. S. would realize what the lost of them really meant.

"(5) I also believe that the eastern, western and southern coast line of the U. S. should be strongly guarded—particularly the southern coast line.

"As regards the U. S. Air Force being a separate and independent arm of defense, I believe that it is a good idea provided each does its own particular work. The Navy could take care of the island possessions, and do aviation work at sea. The Army would take care of the big thing—our own country. Or, for the sake of argument have the southern part of the U. S. go to the Navy and the northern part to the Army. But on the condition that the two would be equal in power, ability and good common sense. The army officers would control the army flyers and the navy officers would control the navy flyers. This, of course, being outside war.

"Now, in time of war I would suggest to elect the President as the big official

and the head man. He could give orders in two hours, while it would take the other two branches too long to decide on the next move. This would make them a large independent force that possessed flexibility of movement, and could be divided up and dispatched to separate points of danger without interference from each other."

Well, there you are, gang, that's what Bill thinks on those two subjects. Now, I am publishing this letter because it is interesting, and contains room for argument, and was one of the first to come sliding across our desk. I'm not going to make any comments on it, other than what I've already said. I want you chaps to read it over, and decide whether you agree or otherwise. Perhaps there may be things that you'd like to add to it. Anyway, go ahead and let her rip.

Before signing off, there are a couple of more things I want to mention.

First, about the letters you've sent in. I certainly welcomed them with open arms and opened eyes, and I'm going to answer every one.

You took the time out to write to me, and it's only fair that I should take time out to personally express my appreciation of your courtesy and helpful hints.

But at the same time I've got to keep right on trying to give you good Dusty Ayres yarns, so if my answering letters are a bit delayed please try and understand—will you, huh?

And just because I don't happen to publish your letter don't get the idea that I consider it not good enough. If I published all of them, this mag would become twice its size.

So in fairness to all, I'm going to pick one or two each month that I believe you other lads would like to read—and ones which I consider a good basis for a swell round-robin argument.

The other thing I wanted to speak

about is the Hangar Flying Club. Some of you chaps have written in to ask if the members of the old club automatically become members of the new club.

The answer to that is YES, a thousand times over. The old club was a swell gang, and just because I happen to change the name of the club and devote its meetings to chinning about the next war, doesn't mean that we are going to change the old gang over, or anything like it.

And, also, some of you new lads have written in asking how you can join the club. You can join it by just letting the skipper know that you want to join. And if you want a club pin just send in twenty-five cents in cash or stamps, and the pin will be sent to you.

Very soon I'm going to have some new Hangar Flying club membership cards printed. They will be free to whoever wants one. When they are ready I'll let you know, and you can then let me know if you want one.

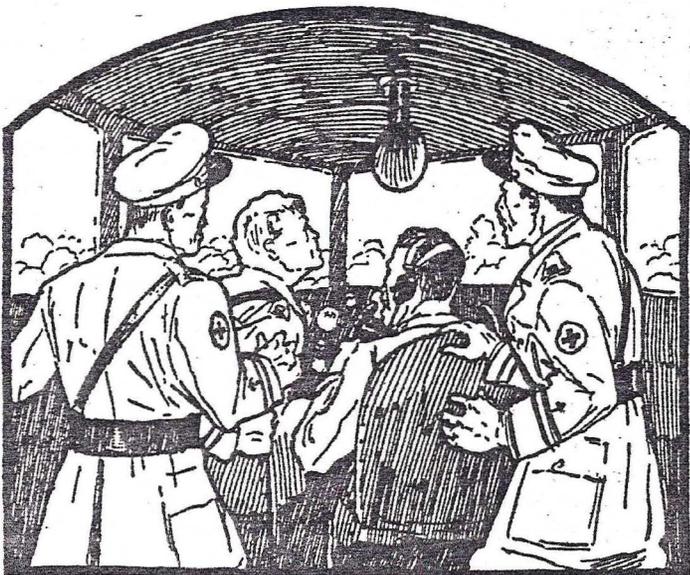
But, as I said at the very beginning of these meetings, a pin or a membership card does not mean a thing if the spirit isn't right there in the old heart.

We are pledging ourselves to do everything possible for ever-lasting peace, happiness and prosperity for the peoples of this wonderful country of ours—the greatest in all the wide world. And if we keep that thought close to our hearts every minute of the day, it doesn't matter how many pins we wear, or how many membership cards we carry around.

And so, keep your nose down on the turns, you chaps, and let's hear from you when you get time. S'long.

Skipper Sid Bowen

"Ambulance Sixteen! Emergency! . . . Pursuit escort calling Ambulance Sixteen . . . Go down at once, an enemy flight has been sighted . . . Will try to drive them off, but . . . oh, my God, what's that?"



The speaker unit in the ambulance plane emitted a blood-chilling screaming sound—weird and eerie. It was not like the scream of a human being in mortal pain. There was something metallic about it—more like the screaming sound of an over-reving generator grinding its bearings to shreds for lack of oil.

Keeping just beneath the cloud layer, the twin-engined Yank Ambulance plane No. 16 was clawing air toward Washington Base Hospital, carrying its sergeant pilot, two medics and an unwilling passenger, Dusty Ayres. Slouched down in the spare cabin seat, Dusty had been trying furiously to figure out the cockeyed situation. Why orders for him to go to Base hospital for observation? And why that escort of four Staff pursuit ships up there above the clouds? It was crazy. . . .

Now, at the sound of that terrible scream, he was jerked out of his reverie. Spellbound, they all stared wide-eyed at the speaker unit. Then with a shout, Dusty leaped forward, and—

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