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by **WILLIAM HARTLEY**

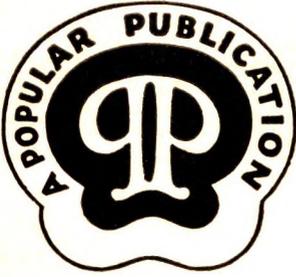
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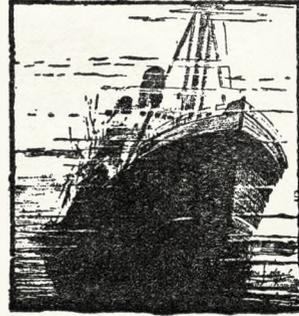
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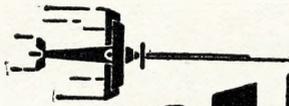
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Vol. 22

Contents for June, 1939

No. 3

Smashing Sky Novels

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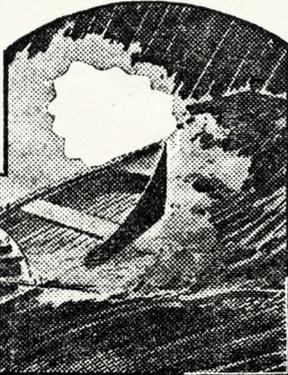
Published every month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter January 14, 1932, at the post offices at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1939, by Popular Publications, Inc. Single copy price 10c. Yearly subscription in U. S. A. \$1.20. Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd Street, N. Y. C. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable, and send to Editorial Department, 205 East 42nd Street, N. Y. C. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them. Printed in U. S. A.

CLINGING FOR THEIR LIVES TO A ROCKING BUOY



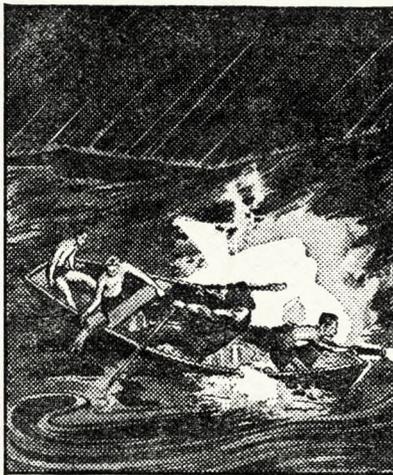
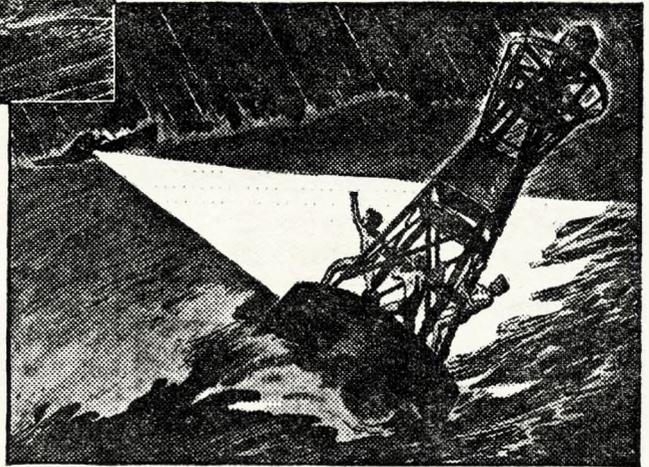
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② "But I couldn't tell where the sound was coming from. I thought of the powerful, focusing flashlight that lay on the back seat, reached cautiously for it and played it around me... *and there they were!* Three youngsters clinging in terror to a rocking sea buoy. They had tried the usual stunt of swimming out to the buoy and back, but the storm spoiled the plan.



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Sky Buggies

IN New York City, where our offices are located, we spend much of the day gazing through our high windows towards the distant spires, and the excitingly futuristic architecture of the New York World's Fair. Naturally, we also intend jumping into the subway and traveling to the Fair itself at our first opportunity, there to behold the history and the future of Aviation, told in the graphic and dramatic style that only such a Fair can produce. We wish devoutly that all our friends, living so many miles away, could find it possible to come and see the Aviation Exposition, as it will be presented.

Also, in these days, we are used to seeing sky parades that are a delight to the eye and a tonic to the imagination. Naturally, when the Yankee Clipper had arrived at Port Washington, Long Island, we hung out the windows by our heels, knowing the pilots would not be so cruel as to deny New York's millions a glimpse of this aerial monarch.

It came along, in all its resplendent silver beauty, following a train of other craft, huge Boeings, dwarfed by this new monster, speeding over the five boroughs of New York at an exciting clip, its multiple engines loud and thrilling to our ears, great wings spread in further conquest of the empty space that aviation has beaten gradually into submission with the passing years.

We have seen so much, lucky souls that we are, that we have almost overlooked an event that seems to us quite as important to the future as the exploits of the Clipper crates.

We refer to the recent adventure undertaken by Mr. Johnny M. Jones, sportsman pilot from Hollywood, who sat upstairs in a little Aeronca and let the miles go by. He sat there for thirty hours and twenty-seven minutes and traveled in that time the thousands of miles that separate

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Dare-Devil Aces

Hollywood from Roosevelt Field, Long Island. It was non-stop and Coast-to-Coast. It was really quite a job.

Naturally Johnny was a brave guy, or else he would not have been up there. But bravery alone is not the thing that makes for conquest. Mr. Jones knew what he was doing. He knew, to begin with, that you do not need a sky craft just a little bit smaller than a battleship to make such a flight. He chose a popular "light" plane, one costing about the same amount of money as a slightly expensive automobile. Something within the financial reach of millions.

As you all know, it was the stock Aeronca, C-50, and carried special fuel tanks to feed the appetite of its Continental A-53 50 horsepower engine. It was no miracle performance. It was a good job, well done. Its real importance lies in something else. It really mattered because it snaps our minds from aimless wanderings, reminding us that Aviation is not reserved for the commercial pilots, or for the exceedingly wealthy who can fly their own big amphibians. Aerial craft, in the future, is to be the property of the common man, as the automobile is today, as the horse and buggy was yesterday.

There is solid comfort in this. Being in our position, we can feel the pulse of the nation in things aeronautical. There are thousands and thousands, doubtless millions, who long for the thrill of flight, the chance to go upstairs with struts and canvas obeying the roar of an engine, their hands on the stick, carving for themselves, in the wide, untrafficked avenues of the sky, the dreams they dreamed when they seemed a million miles from realizing those ambitions.

It has to come, of course. We are offering you no news. We just like the way that Johnny M. Jones climbed into his little plane, gunned the cylinders of its game Continental and let the fifty horses take him from one side of this broad continent to the other, non-stop.

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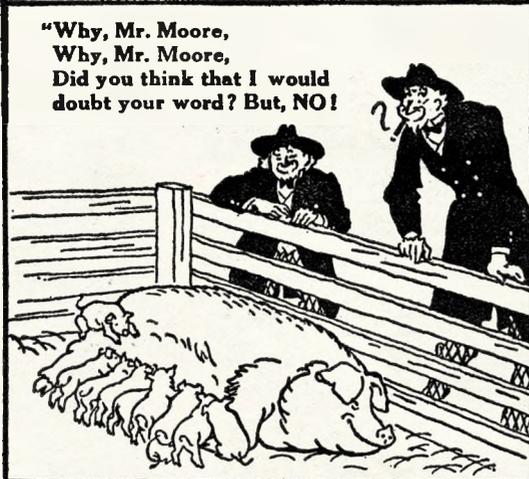
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HARTLEY

BULLETS *for the* DEAD

A dramatic novel you will not forget, for it speaks with the harsh and brittle voice of smoking Vickers Guns, and travels the trail that leads to glory—and the grave—



CHAPTER ONE

Arrows of the Damned

TALLY WEST liked Paris. He wasn't a stranger to the town, but this was the first visit he had made in a long time, and he was enjoying himself. He liked strolling the crowded streets, which were animated

by the proximity of war ; he liked the noisy sidewalk cafes ; he liked his three days of complete liberty and all they meant—sleeping as late as he pleased, eating what he liked, and drinking as much as he wanted to without worrying about patrols.

It was the last day of his leave, and then he'd be back at the field of the 33rd, flying three patrols a day, the biting odor of cordite in his nostrils, his face smeared with oil and powder smoke, his belly uneasy from all the liquor the night before. After today he had to go back.

Tally West didn't mind too much. War and the hard life were things he had become accustomed to. His big frame had seen the far corners of the earth, his occupations had usually been violent. Tally had soldiered in the army of the Shah, for a Malayan prince, for an insurgent party in one of the South American governments. He was familiar with the Gold Coast of Africa, the limitless reaches of the Russian tundra, the sandy arid wastes of the Mexican border. And now he was on the Western Front, and he liked it.

He walked easily, slowly, down the Rue Cambonne, jostled by the hurrying crowds, his big shoulders a bulwark against the mottled tide of flesh, his face, tanned and weathered by the winds of many quarters of the globe, rising above the sea of heads. Tally didn't mind going back to work, but he was enjoying this last day of leisure.

He stopped outside one of the hotels, where a big awning shaded the group of tables, sat down and ordered a brandy and coffee. He drank it slowly, enjoying it and watching the people about him. He was surprised when he felt the hand on his shoulder, but he recognized the voice that exclaimed :

"You old tramp! What are you doing here?"

He turned and looked at the man beside him. Jimmy Higgins was of average height, but lean and slender. His face

looked older than his thirty years, and the lines in it were etched deeply and harshly. But now it was lighted by a smile. Tally had known him since they had worked on a New York paper, three years before. When it seemed that the States might get into the thing, Higgins had quit the job, and Tally had heard that he had hooked up with Intelligence, in Washington. And then Tally had met him on the boat, coming across, and that information had been confirmed. Higgins had spent several years working in the Berlin bureau of their paper, and he was familiar with a lot of angles that would be useful now, when the countries were at each others' throats.

But Tally hadn't seen him since they had landed. He was glad to see him, and he got to his feet and grasped the other's hand.

"Jimmy, you old baboon! Where the hell have you been?"

"Here and there," Higgins told him. "Mostly in Paris, but here and there some of the time." His face suddenly sobered. He sat down across the table from Tally, and looked about him quickly, up and down the street. His eyes stopped, suddenly, at a certain point in the crowd. Tally thought they were focused at a spot across the street, and he started to turn, but Higgins said in a low whisper :

"Don't turn around, Tally. Just keep talking to me. *Don't turn around!*"

Tally was surprised at the intensity of his tone. He was facing Higgins, and his back was to the spot in which the Intelligence man was so interested. Higgins was looking at the table, now, and he spoke slowly, his voice low, almost as if he were talking to himself :

"The last few days—the same men—"

Then he looked at Tally and smiled. "Hell, here I meet a gent for the first time in a year, and I start gabbing to myself." He called for a drink and said, "I hear a

lot about you, Tally. Everyone does. You've been going great guns up there."

Tally shrugged. "It isn't too tough, Jimmy. It's just another way of using a gun. I'm pretty well practiced at most of the others."

"But seventeen planes is a hell of a lot. Or is it more since last I heard?"

Tally smiled and said, "You're short one. But what the hell does it matter? Tell me about yourself. You look as if you've been working hard."

Higgins shrugged. "The usual thing. They keep me on the go."

Tally looked again at the man's face, and he saw something that he hadn't noticed before; something that might be responsible for a large part of those lines, and that drawn, ill look; something that immediately aroused his curiosity.

Just in front of Higgins's left ear, and in a line with his left eye, was a curious scar. It was in the form of a small arrow, with a head at both ends of the shaft, and Tally suddenly realized that it was not an ordinary scar. Jimmy Higgins had been *branded* with that mark on his temple. His hair concealed the thing fairly well, but it was evident upon close examination.

Tally gestured with his hand. "Where did you pick up that little souvenir?"

Higgins' hand went to his temple, and his face suddenly grew a shade paler, as if the mention of the scar had called forth some unwelcome memory. His lips shut in a straight thin line and Tally thought for a moment that he wasn't going to speak. But his mouth loosened, and he said:

"Just a little something I picked up in my travels, Tally. That's just a reminder, I guess you might call it, of something else I carry around on my back." He shook his head, as if to rid himself of an unpleasant thought. "I'd just as soon not talk about it, Tally. It wasn't nice at all." His voice changed to a less serious

key. He asked, "What do you know?"

"Not a thing," Tally told him. "There's plenty of work to be done, and our outfit gets its share. We're busy all the time, when the weather is fit to fly in, and I guess the rest of the boys have the same story."

Higgins nodded. "It's that way all along the line. Things are really moving, Tally. Things are moving, and maybe this time we'll get somewhere."

They talked for awhile, and every now and then Higgins managed to look around without making it seem obvious, and his eyes were filled with a speculative light. He was silent for a few moments, as if thinking about something, then he asked Tally;

"Where's your outfit, Tally?"

"I'm with the 33rd, down near Falchone."

"You going back soon?"

Tally grinned. "Too soon. Tomorrow. This is my last day."

"Good," Higgins said. "You can save me a trip. Want to do me a favor?"

Tally nodded, "Sure."

Tally's hands were on the table, and suddenly there was an envelope under one of them. "You'll have to pass Wing H. Q. on your way," Higgins said. "Want to give that to Colonel Freedly? It isn't anything important. In fact it's a letter from the States. It was going to bring it down, but—"

Tally's big hand shoved it in a pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, all in one motion. "Think nothing of it, my lad. Papa West will run your little errand for you. Be glad to do it, Jimmy."

Higgins said, "Thanks, it'll save me a trip."

They sat for awhile talking, then parted with a promise to meet soon again. Higgins left, and Tally sat there, thinking about him. They had lived together for two years, in New York, and shared a lot of memories. Tally was fond of Higgins.

He wondered what the taboo subject had been—how Jimmy had received the brand on his temple, and what he had meant when he had spoken about his back. He shrugged the thought aside. If Jimmy didn't want to speak about it, the affair was none of his business.

HE hit the hay about one o'clock that night and was sound asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow. He didn't know exactly what time it was when he awoke. One moment he was sound asleep, and the next he was awake, wide awake, every nerve tense and alert. He knew there was someone else in the room. He hadn't heard anything, nor had he seen any movement in the total darkness. Some inner sense simply told him that he was not alone.

He knew better than to sit up in bed and turn on a light. If there was someone here—and he would stake his life on it—any sudden movement on his part would be ill-advised. He opened his eyes and scanned that part of the room which he could see. The shadows were thick and complete, and there was nothing in them. His head turned slowly, silently, and out of the corner of his eye, he caught a movement at the door.

It was just closing, soundlessly, and in the light from the hotel corridor he could see only the hand on the knob and part of the wrist. That was all, but it was sufficient to bring him out of bed and over to the door as fast as he could move. But that wasn't quite fast enough. Even as his hand reached for the knob, the door closed and there was an almost inaudible *click*. He tried it instantly, but found that it was locked. It took him only a moment to turn the latch and leap into the corridor, but the hall was empty.

He looked up and down its length, but there wasn't a soul in sight. The dim lights which hung on wall brackets cast a ghostly glow down the hall, but there

was enough illumination to see anyone if they were there. His room was almost in the middle of the long corridor, and the brief moment he had taken to open the door wouldn't have been enough time for the person who had been in his room to reach the end of the hall. He knew that, and he acted instantly.

He tried the door of the room next to his own, and it opened easily. He found the switch on the wall, and a moment later the room was flooded with light. An elderly Frenchman sat up in the bed, his eyes heavy with sleep, his face a stupid mask of bewilderment. Tally walked swiftly to the bed, took the man's wrists in his hands and looked at them quickly. He shook his head and said, "Sorry, Mac," and left the room, snapping the light off and closing the door.

He stood in the corridor, wondering where the intruder might have gone, and thinking of the strange coincidence that had presented itself. He had had only a glimpse of that hand and wrist that had closed his door, but that had been enough to stamp one fact indelibly on his brain.

On that wrist, bared for a moment in the dim light from the corridor, had been a symbol, an insignia, that he had seen before; a brand that he had pondered on only that afternoon, when he had seen it on Jimmy Higgins' temple—a short arrow with a head on each end of the shaft. That he should see this strange mark twice in one day, and never before, must mean something, he told himself. Higgins' had been reticent about revealing its meaning, or the manner in which he had received it. The visitor tonight had been anything but explanatory. Higgins' and the intruder were linked up in some way, and he scratched his head as he walked back to his room. It would do him no good to search further in the hotel. Whoever had annoyed him had plenty of time to get away by now.

As he entered the door, he saw his

tunic draped around a chair, and the thought hit him suddenly. He reached into the pocket that contained the letter Higgins had given him, and it was empty. Thinking that he might have made a mistake, Tally looked in the other pockets, but his search went unrewarded. The letter for Freedly at Wing H. Q. was undoubtedly gone.

He went over the situation in his mind, and it added up to nothing at all. Higgins had given him an envelope for Freedly, an ordinary letter from home which would be convenient for Tally to deliver. Higgins had been loath to talk about the strange scar on his temple. Tally had taken the letter, and in the middle of the night, someone with the same double-headed arrow on his wrist had come into his room and taken the letter.

Out of the maze of facts, he pieced together a conclusion. The envelope to Freedly had been no ordinary letter. If it had been, it was likely that it would have been delivered in the usual manner, and not conveyed by an Intelligence man who had better ways of spending his time. Tally kicked himself for not having thought of that before. That envelope had been important. Why had Higgins given it to him?

He remembered the furtive glances that Higgins had thrown over his shoulder, from time to time that afternoon, and the way the Intelligence man had slipped him the envelope, so nicely that he wasn't even aware of it until it was in his hand.

Someone had evidently wanted the thing, he reasoned, and Higgins, knowing that he was being watched and followed, and fearing that something might happen to him before he had a chance to deliver it, had given it to Tally, disguising its importance, knowing that Tally would treat it well, but not be nervous about the thing.

But whoever was watching Higgins had also kept an eye on Tally, had even

followed him to his hotel and gained entrance to his room. Had they seen Higgins pass the letter? Tally thought it unlikely. And that cemented his opinion that the envelope was as important as hell to someone.

He went back to bed, but he couldn't sleep for a long while. The whole situation kept running through his mind, and he didn't like it a bit. If they had come to his room, it meant that they—whoever the hell *they* were—had searched Higgins. He wondered whether or not he ought to keep his mouth shut about the whole thing; just go on back to the field in the morning and not say a word to anyone. Certainly no one—other than that mysterious "*they*", had seen Higgins slip him the letter. He might be getting himself into a jam that it would be hard to untangle. If he was silent, minded his own business, this was the last of the matter, as far as he was concerned.

But had he any right to close his mouth on the series of incidents? If the papers had been important to Higgins, and to that unknown party who had finally stolen them, they would, of course, be important to Major Freedly and probably to a lot of other people. If he told the responsible people that they were gone, some effort could be made to get them back. It was a matter of time. The Lord knew what might have happened to Higgins.

HE slept poorly for the rest of the night, and he was up at dawn, preparing for the trip back to the field. He wouldn't be riding alone, for Bowman would be with him. He thought of Bowman and frowned. He definitely didn't like the guy.

Captain Charles Bowman had been with the 33rd when Tally had come along. Bowman had been credited with ten planes when Tally started, and now he had twenty to Tally's eighteen. And

Bowman didn't like it. His position as the leading flyer of 33 was being challenged, and that had never happened before.

The more Tally thought about Bowman, the less he liked him. He had tried to get along with the guy, when he had first arrived, but all his efforts had failed and he had finally given up and said the hell with the gent. Bowman could fly like a fool, but his manner was cold and unfriendly. He resented Tally's easy camaraderie with the rest of the outfit; resented the string of wins he was ringing up. There had been sharp words between them, but nothing physical. Bowman was almost a head shorter than Tally, and the big guy disdained to hit him.

Bowman had come on leave with Tally. They had ridden the same car to Paris, not a word passing between them on the long trip, but they had stayed at different hotels. Bowman had kept the car, and he was to pick Tally up at eight o'clock this morning. Tally was on the steps of the hotel, waiting, when the car drove up.

He nodded to Bowman, tossed his luggage, which consisted of a single bag, into the back seat. He climbed in beside Bowman and asked;

"Have a nice leave?"

Bowman said curtly, "Good enough," and then was silent. Tally shrugged his shoulders. If the guy didn't want to talk, that was all right with him.

Outside of Paris, Tally said; "I want to stop at Wing H. Q. for a couple of minutes. It's right on our way and it won't take long."

Bowman frowned.

"The major might want this bucket back in a hurry," he said. "Wing is five miles off our direct route."

Tally let himself go out a bit.

"We've had this thing for three days. It's no damn good anyway, and they've done without it at the field this long. Another hour won't make a damn bit of

difference. We're in no great hurry."

"I don't like it," Bowman said.

"I didn't ask you that. I don't give a damn whether you like it or not. We're going to Wing. It's important."

Bowman looked at him, and Tally could feel his eyes and he smiled to himself. He had the guy worried. Bowman's mind, he knew, was filled with the question of just what the hell business Tally had with Wing. Bowman contained himself for a moment, then he asked, his voice studiously careless;

"Know someone at Wing?"

"Colonel Freedly," Tally told him.

"Got at little matter to talk over with him."

Bowman turned to stare, and Tally said;

"Hey! Watch the road! You'll have us in the ditch, Bowman."

Bowman didn't speak all the way to Wing, and when they drew up before the modest building in Monette that housed headquarters, Tally said, "Wait for me a couple of minutes. I won't be long." But as he went into the building, he saw Bowman get out from behind the wheel and saunter over to the door.

CHAPTER TWO

The High Road to Hell

TALLY asked an orderly where he could find Colonel Freedly, and the man told him to wait. He sat on a chair in the outer office for a few minutes, then he was led inside.

Freedly was a small, plump man, and Tally could see that he was a busy man. He didn't waste any time. As he talked, Freedly's eyes were scanning him from head to foot. Tally told his story briefly.

"I've been on leave in Paris for the last few days, Colonel, and yesterday I met an old friend of mine. His name is Higgins, and he's connected with Intelligence. I was sitting at a table with him,

and suddenly he slipped an envelope into my hand and asked me to deliver it to you on my way back to my field. Last night that envelope was stolen from my hotel room. I thought you ought to know about it."

Freedly didn't speak for a moment, and when he did his words came fast and were loaded with dynamite.

"Higgins was killed last night, West. His body was found in an alley, a knife in his back. Those papers he gave you were damned important. And they were stolen?"

"About three o'clock this morning," Tally told him. "I woke just as the thief left my room." He hesitated a moment, then he asked;

"If those things were important, why did he give them to me? He said that it was just an ordinary letter for you."

"He probably didn't want to scare you," Freedly said, and Tally grunted. But then Freedly confirmed Tally's opinion of why Higgins had given him the envelope. The colonel said;

"Higgins probably knew that he was being shadowed, and that they'd get to him before he had a chance to get rid of that package of dynamite. He slipped it to you, hoping that you'd get it through, but German Intelligence must have seen you with him. When they killed him and found that he didn't have what they were looking for, they took a chance on you. And they didn't miss."

Freedly looked at him closely for a moment, then he asked;

"How long have you known Higgins? How did you happen to meet him yesterday? Where did you meet him?"

"I've known him for years," Tally smiled. "Yesterday I—" Then he stopped, as the import of the colonel's questions struck him fully. He suddenly realized that he was on the grill, that Freedly was putting him through the paces, that the colonel might entertain

some idea that he was deeper in this thing than he really was. The smile was still on his face, but it was colder, now, as he gave Freedly the information he wanted. When he had finished, Freedly's voice was sarcastic as he asked;

"Did you really believe that was merely a letter when Higgins handed it to you? You knew he was an Intelligence man. Did you think we'd give him a post-man's job?"

Tally flushed. "I really didn't think much about it until I discovered that the letter had been stolen. Then, grouping things together, I arrived at your conclusion; that Higgins gave it to me because he thought it would be safer with me."

He felt the color in his face and knew that Freedly was regarding him now with definite suspicion.

"You thought of it only then?" Freedly said. "It didn't occur to you at all before the theft?"

"I don't know just where you expect to go along this road," Tally told him, "but you won't get far. Higgins was a good friend of mine, and as for the envelope, I haven't the faintest idea what was in the damned thing. If I were mixed up in this, do you think I'd come here and tell you the story? No one except Higgins and myself knew that I had that envelope. Aside from whoever took it, I mean. Why should I put myself on a spot, if I were connected with this in any way?"

Freedly paused for a moment, and when he spoke his voice was decidedly unpleasant.

"Do you usually address your superior officers in that tone, West?"

"No," Tally told him. "I've had no occasion to, so far. But no one has accused me of complicity in a murder, nor of stealing a damned envelope."

"I said nothing like that."

"You might just as well have said it.

What's this all about, anyway? What did the envelope hold that was so valuable?"

Freedly looked at him, then said; "If you don't already know, it won't do a bit of harm to tell you. That package contained plans for a major offensive that was to be set under way in two weeks. It was most explanatory. Code, of course, but it wouldn't take German Intelligence long to figure it out. We're almost committed to the plan, and discarding it will mean months of further preparation. Of course, that was only a copy, but once the Germans have it, they can prepare a defense for every move we make."

Tally was silent, and finally he said;

"Well, Colonel, there doesn't seem much more that I can do about it. I might as well get back to work."

Freedly shuffled some papers on his desk and said, "Yes, West, you might as well. My regards to Major Dudley."

But as Tally left the office, he could feel Freedly's eyes boring into his back, and he knew that he wasn't out of this thing yet. There'd be an Intelligence man at the field by the time he arrived, Tally knew, and every move that he made in the future would be watched for its possible significant relation to this episode. He'd have to be careful, he knew. One suspicious move, and they'd hang the whole thing on his neck.

Out in the car, Bowman was just getting behind the wheel again, and when Tally looked at him, the man said, "Your old friend Colonel Freedly, eh? Just had a little matter to talk over with him!"

"You've got a large pair of ears, haven't you?" Tally said. "Where do you get all your information?"

"You didn't expect me to wait in the car, did you? The chairs in the outer office were comfortable, and the orderly forgot to close the colonel's door all the way. It's no fault of mine if you and the Colonel have heavy voices."

Tally held himself in check. "It's a good thing we haven't any cats around the hangars, Bowman. A rat like you would have a hell of a life."

IN a few hours they got back to the field, and reported at Major Dudley's office. He was glad to see them, especially Tally. The major was a thin, spare man, from the regular army, and he'd never been in a plane in his life. But he was tough as nails, and his vocabulary was a thing of wonder. He was a plain, frank man, and never hesitated to speak his mind. He liked Tally, probably because the big guy was his own type, probably because Tally was the only man in the outfit who could drink along with him. He greeted them at the door of Operations.

"Hello, Tally! Hello, Bowman. Have a good time?"

"A hell of a time," Tally told him. "One hell of a time."

He had decided not to bother the major about the letter business. He'd hear of it soon enough, at any rate, and there was no use in hurrying the thing along. He merely said, "I'll be in to see you in a few minutes, as soon as I get rid of this bag."

He went off to his hutment, leaving Bowman with the major.

He stowed the bag, had a brush-up, then went back to Operations. He hadn't been gone five minutes, but when he walked in the door, he knew Bowman had been talking to the major. Dudley didn't waste any time.

"You got yourself in a jam, eh? Couldn't keep out of trouble, could you, Tally?"

"Bowman's been shooting off his mouth, hasn't he?"

The major nodded. "The guy can't keep anything like that to himself for five minutes. Particularly when it's about you. He thought I ought to know about

it, he said. Gave me all the details."

Tally nodded. "Well, it doesn't make much difference. Wing'll probably have somebody up here soon, putting me to bed every night. The whole thing stinks, and I thought I'd spare your nose for awhile, anyway. But Bowman had to get it off his chest, eh?"

Dudley nodded. "The guy can fly like an eagle, but in many other ways he reminds me of several old ladies I used to know. He sure carries a tale fast."

"What the hell," Tally said. "Everybody'll know about it soon." Then he asked, "What's on the books?"

Dudley consulted some papers on his desk.

"The usual thing. You take the twelve o'clock down along the Treville sector, then the six o'clock."

Tally said, "Okay. I'll be seein' you."

He went back to the hutment, sat reading for awhile, then consulted his watch. Time to get going. He pulled on an old flying coat, took his helmet and goggles, and went out on the tarmac. The five ships were warming on the line, and he walked to his own Spad. The other pilots were in the pits, and climbing aboard, he ran his eyes over the instrument panel and gave her the gun. He waited at fifteen hundred for the rest of the crowd, and when they came upstairs, he headed off down along the lines.

There was a lot of activity on the ground, he could see, but very little in the air. His eyes searched the heavens, but there were no ships in sight other than themselves. He settled back in his pit for a leisurely ride, but never relaxed his vigilance.

They had made half of the return trip when Tally spotted the Fokkers. There were seven of them, swinging out of the west, heading into Allied air. They were a thousand meters higher than the Spads, but Tally made that up almost immediately. He was up in the pit, now, straight

and alert, swiftly figuring out all the angles. Seven Fokkers were not too many, and especially under these circumstances. The lice were far from home, and Tally's job would be to chase them back where they belonged. They might make a fight of it, and they might not. It all depended upon the leader; whether he thought it worthwhile to risk the advent of another Allied flight.

The two groups of planes met at four thousand meters, and neither had any appreciable advantage. Tally struck first with his group, for that was his way in an indecisive moment. And in the flash of an eye the two bodies of planes had become one.

Tally picked out the leader, met him head on, and when the gent banked away, Tally was after him. But the Hun was smart, an experienced hand in the air, and he didn't stay in his bank long. He twisted over on a wing suddenly, and sent his kite into the sky, and Tally had a tough job keeping out from under. He knew that he was in for an interesting session, and he grinned. He liked it.

He jockeyed for position for a full minute and a half, and during that time he had a chance to observe the scrap in the air about him. One of the Spads was going down in a slow glide, a Fokker on its tail. But suddenly another Spad broke out of the melee and dove on the Fokker. The German's attention was distracted, and the disabled ship went down unmolested. But then Tally was too busy with his own adversary to bother about anyone else.

They were in a circle, each ship trying to cut the spirals closer, and suddenly Tally said, "The hell with this," and whipped the Spad over on its back and cut across. For just a moment he had the Fokker in his sights, and he cut loose with the Vickers. He was over the target before he could release the trips, but even as he topped the Fokker, he threw it a

quick glance and saw that his slugs had almost taken the pilot's head off. The man was as dead as he would ever be.

He straightened out the Spad and looked for more trouble, and at that moment the ship which he had downed floated past him, and he sucked in his breath sharply. He saw something which he had not noticed before.

Just below the pit of the German plane, in black paint on the gray background, was painted a small arrow. But the arrow was peculiar in that it had two heads, one at each end of the shaft. It was the same design that Tally had seen on Higgins' temple, on the wrist of the man who had entered his room and stolen the envelope entrusted to him.

He sat there, his brain engaged with the strange problem, until a handful of tracer, whipping past his nose, pulled him out of the coma. And then he went to work again.

It was tough going for awhile, for these gents knew their business. But so did Tally's boys, and when a flight of British Camels hove into sight in the east, and the Germans decided that home was a more pleasant place than this chunk of air, there were only four Fokkers left out of the original seven. There were three Spads, one having gone down in flames, and one, which Tally had seen, having gone down with a dead motor.

On the way back to the field, he went over the problem in his mind, but he couldn't make anything out of it. The double-headed arrows had him stopped. He had never seen the insignia before, and all of a sudden he was seeing it everywhere. He shook his head in bewilderment. He was sure that it held the secret of Higgins' death and the loss of the campaign plans.

ON the field, he went quickly to Operations, and asked Major Dudley, "Any word from Travers? He went down

with a conked motor over near Riene."

The major nodded. "We just got a call from an artillery outfit. He's not hurt, and he's on his way back. The plane is almost a complete washout. You lose anyone else?"

Tally nodded. "Jeffers. In flames. But we got three Fokkers. There were seven of them."

"The usual gang?" Dudley asked. "Von Vorst and his crew?"

Tally shook his head. "Not this time. I've never seen this crowd. They were flying gray ships, and the only insignia they carried was a double-headed arrow. The arrow had a head on either end of the shaft,—the usual one, and another where the feathers ordinarily are. I've never seen the set-up before. You know who it is?"

Dudley nodded, and Tally thought his jaw went a bit tighter.

"I know who it is," he said, "and I'm surprised that you don't. Didn't you ever hear of Larsdorf?"

Tally grinned. "Sure. Everybody's heard of Larsdorf. But he isn't around this sector."

"He is now," Dudley told him sourly. "That's his insignia—a double-headed arrow. I don't know why he's here, but he is."

"Larsdorf, eh? I've heard a bit about the guy, but I never thought I'd be as interested in him as I am."

"You've had ships shot down before this, Tally. Why all the interest in Larsdorf?"

"What do you know about him?" Tally asked. "He must be quite a character."

"He is," Dudley said. "I thought most people knew the legend."

"Maybe I had my head in a bottle when all this information was being passed around. All I know about the gent is that he can fly like hell and has a beautiful bunch of men in his outfit. He seems to flit around like a moth with the hives.

Sometimes he's around here, sometimes he's in the East. How come he covers so much ground?"

"You say you never heard the story," Dudley said, "so I'll tell you all about him. He's a fabulous character."

Tally lighted a cigarette, and the major started to talk. He listened carefully.

"Larsdorf is really a different sort of a person," Dudley began. "In the first place, he's rich. No one seems to know just how much money he has or where he got it. From his family, it's supposed. He's an only child, and a very talented man. He's a clever scientist, one of the great mathematicians of the world, and an accomplished linguist. In addition to these talents, he has developed certain attributes to a remarkable degree. He's a fine psychologist, but his qualities are not confined to his mind. It is rumored that he is one of the finest fencers and pistol shots in Germany. He's a duelist of great renown, and he's spent a great deal of time and money hunting big game."

"He doesn't limit himself a bit, does he?"

Dudley shook his head. "No. I wasn't lying when I said the man was a fabulous character. His talents, if directed correctly, would benefit the world a great deal."

Tally interrupted him. "But how come he's in the army? Such a gent should be smart enough to see that he's wasting his time, flying one of those crates around."

"I forgot to mention that he has a deep sense of adventure. Perhaps I didn't, though. His dueling and big game hunting should have given you that phase of the man. To him, this war is a lark, a great game that he can play, and with all his own toy soldiers."

Tally looked puzzled, and Dudley went on.

"**H**E has his own army. It's difficult to believe, but that's a fact. It's not so impossible as it seems. He chose

to fly, probably because it's the riskiest sort of business, and he gathered his squadron about him. He supports it himself, pays all the expenses and salaries, puts the money on the line for every plane that he uses. He has the best technicians and mechanics, and some of the world's greatest flyers."

"Some outfit!"

"It goes beyond that. He has an intelligence system of his own that works with the regular German Intelligence, and although it works *with* the regular army, still it is independent of it. If you get what I mean. There is collaboration, but no definite hook-up. Larsdorf tells his men what to do, but no one else gives them orders. If he wants them to work with German Intelligence, they do. If not, they won't work. His crew isn't large. Perhaps he has thirty flyers, and twenty men in his intelligence outfit. But they are the last word in efficiency."

"And each of his men is marked with this design of his?" Tally said. It was more of a statement than a question, and he knew what the major's reply would be.

"Every one of them. The flyers and the other workers. They have this strange design, this double-headed arrow, branded on their wrists. And another thing; every man he captures, if he is of any importance, is branded on the temple with this same insignia. Just in case they escape, it will tell Larsdorf's agents that this man is known to be no ordinary person—that he has been captured by Larsdorf and has been deemed to be of such ability that Larsdorf thinks it well to mark him for the future, in case of escape."

Tally nodded, several things becoming clear to him.

"As for his activities," the major continued, "he goes wherever he is needed most. And he likes it where the going is toughest. We've been giving them a lot of trouble, so they call Larsdorf and he

comes along with his cute little outfit to plague us. We have our hands full of trouble now."

"I guess we have," Tally agreed. Then he said, "Bowman told you most of my story, so you might as well hear the rest. This fellow Higgins, who gave me the envelope that was stolen, was branded on the temple with that symbol. He made a funny remark—about the brand on the temple being merely a reminder of something on his back. What did he mean by that?"

"I don't know," the major said, "but it wouldn't take me a hell of a long while to guess."

Tally shuddered, for the same thought had occurred to him. The brand on the temple was small, but there was plenty of room on a man's back to play around. He went on.

"That was the first time I had ever seen that arrow, but I didn't have to wait long to see it again. That night in my hotel, I awoke suddenly, and someone was just leaving the room. They were out in the corridor, and there was just enough light coming into the room to see the man's hand. On the wrist was this strange brand, the same one."

"They get around," Dudley said. "Anything big, anything important, you can bet your boots that Larsdorf has his oar in the water."

"This was big, as you've probably heard."

"Right up his alley. Apparently they had caught Higgins before, probably in Germany, and when he escaped, as he evidently did, and returned to duty, they had one of their men keep an eye on him. That was why they knew he had those papers. It was an easy thing to tail him, and when he was alone, to jump him, drag him into a car, kill him and dump him in an alley. But he didn't have what they were looking for, and then they thought of you, the man he had met dur-

ing the day. You were lucky you didn't get a bundle of steel in your ribs."

Tally nodded slowly. "I was lucky, but Jimmy Higgins is dead. I liked that guy."

Dudley sensed the note in his voice, and instantly he said;

"I don't want you to do anything foolish, Tally. Remember that. Whatever you do now, it won't bring Higgins back."

Tally nodded. "I know that. But I wasn't thinking only of Jimmy."

He strolled out of the shack, his face knotted in a frown, Major Dudley's worried eyes on his back. The major shook his head and said to himself;

"I don't like this. It looks like lots of trouble ahead. Lots of trouble. Tally and Larsdorf make one hell of a combination. Like a keg of powder and a big bonfire. A wonderful combination."

CHAPTER THREE

The Spandaus Sing

TALLY went directly to his hutment from the talk with Major Dudley, and there he sat down and did a lot of thinking. He had all the pieces of the puzzle, now, and they added up to something. Higgins had been caught once before by Larsdorf, and had made his escape. When he had been entrusted with the copy of the campaign plans, one of Larsdorf's agents in Paris had spotted him and killed him, then had come to Tally's hotel and found what he was looking for.

Now the plans were in the hands of Larsdorf. But there Tally pulled up short. Right now, the chances were that the plans *weren't* in Larsdorf's hands! The man had stolen them early this morning, not ten hours before. If Larsdorf's organization worked as Dudley had said it did, the agent would bring the envelope to Larsdorf instead of submitting it to the first German officer he saw. That

meant that the man had to leave Paris, work his way into German-held territory, then to Larsdorf's field. It might take him a day or two; certainly he couldn't do it in less than twenty-four hours. Something might still be done about the mess.

But if anything was to be done, it must be done damn soon, and there was no better time than right now. He took his jacket, helmet and goggles and went over to the hangar. His ship had had a few holes patched, but he saw the mech refueling it already and he noticed that the belts had been refilled. He told them to warm it up, and in a few minutes it was on the line, Hisso turning over.

Tally debated about talking his scheme over with Major Dudley, but decided against it. There'd probably be some objections, and there was no time for arguments.

As he climbed into the pit, two things happened. 'B' Flight came in, all five of them, with Bowman at point. Just as the ships set down on the tarmac, up the field a bit from Tally near the Operations shack, a staff car came rolling into the drome. A man got out and went into the office, then he and Major Dudley came out again in a moment. Bowman was near them, and Tally smiled as he thought of how hard Bowman was probably listening to their conversation.

But he had other things to do. He checked the ship quickly, then rolled to the far end of the field, to come back into the wind. As he turned, he saw the man who had come in the staff car pointing in his direction, then Bowman ran for his ship. Tally wondered what was going on, but he didn't have much time to bother with guessing games. He took the Spad off and started easily for the lines.

He had gone about two miles when he heard the chatter of guns behind him, and he turned quickly, amazed that he had missed any German ship in the air, sur-

prised that one should venture so far back of the lines unobserved. But it wasn't a Fokker. It was Bowman's Spad, and he saw that the man was motioning him back. He waved the guy off impatiently and resumed his course, but he ducked a moment later when tracer ate its hungry path past the pit.

He turned once more, and Bowman's gestures became fore emphatic. Tally thumbed his nose and headed northeast again, but he kept his eyes on the other ship, and made sure that the man was in no position for a clean shot. But Bowman whipped down in back of him, and the Vickers on the cowl of the other Spad winked red. He was shooting in earnest, now, and Tally got out of the way just in time. The lead just missed him, and he whirled over quickly in an Immelmann and got the other ship under him. He threw a burst close to Bowman's pit, and when the pilot turned, Tally waved him away. But Bowman wasn't having any.

He was flying for the money, now, and Tally realized that his actions were those of a pilot in a dogfight. The other Spad whipped around in a tight bank, and Bowman let go with a bundle of slugs that found a home for themselves in the back of Tally's ship. And then Tally got the set-up.

The man who had come in the staff car had been from Intelligence—the guy he had been expecting after his talk with Colonel Freedly in the morning. He had asked Major Dudley about Tally, where he could be found, and when they had gone to look for him, they saw Tally just taking off. It must have looked pretty bad, like a guy making a getaway, and then Bowman, who had been right at hand, had been sent to bring him back or knock him down. It would be Bowman.

But he'd had enough of the guy's nonsense for one day, and he determined to make this short and sweet. He knew he had made a mistake in not telling

Dudley of his plans, for then the major would have been able to hold the Intelligence johnny off.

The guy had shot past him, and now Tally whipped around tightly, got in back of Bowman and stayed there. Bowman tried every trick in the book, and he knew them all. But Tally stuck. He kept right on Bowman's tail, holding his fire, until he had forced the guy down to three hundred feet. Then the other flyer went up in a strut-bending zoom, and Tally deliberately went underneath, waited for Bowman to come down on him again, and as the Spad came into his sights, he sent a couple of pounds of lead right smack into the Hisso. He took his hand off the trips just in time to avoid throwing slugs into the pit, then he pulled aside and watched Bowman set the crate down, dead-stick, on the rolling meadow below. He flew over the ship once, waving his hand gleefully, but his grin turned to a snarl, and curses rimmed his lips as Bowman pulled his Colt and fired up at him.

Tally got out of there fast, then he had to grin in spite of himself. "It would have been one hell of a joke if he'd gotten me with the Colt. Yeah, a hell of a joke—on me!"

Uninterrupted, now, he resumed his flight. He reasoned that Larsdorf would be staying at Von Vorst's old field, for everything was set up there, and ready for him. He'd be foolish to go anywhere else, or set up a new base. He headed in that direction, his plans vague and hazy in his mind. He didn't care just how the hell it happened, but what he wanted was to get on Larsdorf's field. Once there, he had an idea, based on all that the major had told him about the man, that he could get away.

HE was within five miles of the field he was heading for when a flight of five Fokkers dropped out of a cloud, a few

miles off to his left. He watched them for a moment, then suddenly cursed. They were heading for a Bristol two-seater that was evidently trying to make its way home after an observation flight. All his plans forgotten for the time being, Tally turned the Spad on a dime and headed for the fun.

The Bristol was having a tough time of it when he arrived on the scene. The observer had accounted for one of the Fokkers, which, Tally noted, bore the double-headed arrow on their fuselages, but the remaining four were set for the kill. Tally broke up their plans the way a wolf breaks up a fold of sheep. They apparently hadn't seen him until he was almost on them, and then it was just a little bit too late.

His first burst ripped through the wing of one of the ships, and before the fellow had a chance to turn, he had a headful of lead. The Fokker fell, turning over slowly, and Tally was up in the pit shouting as he saw what was about to happen. The Fokker was falling, but in one of its slow gyrations, it clipped the end very neatly off the Bristol's right wings. The British ship went into a spin and started down, and it was evident that the pilot had some sort of control, for its flight was fairly well balanced and even. The man at the stick couldn't keep it in the air, but he could set the big plane down gently.

But Tally didn't have much time to watch it, for the three remaining Fokkers were on him in a moment. It was short and furious, and he got one of them before the Hisso up in front of him was crippled. He pulled it into a glide and tried to pick a likely spot on the ground below. He had only a thousand feet under him, and not much time for selection. He kept an eye on the Fokkers, too, for he didn't know what sort of ideas they might get. But apparently they were content to let him land, if he

could, and that satisfied him. He picked out a small field below him and headed for it, and he was lucky.

He was rolling fast when he hit, and he knew that he wouldn't stop before he reached the other end of the clearing, which was bordered by a growth of high trees. He held it on the ground, swinging the tail to kill his speed, until the last moment, then he headed for a space between two of the trees. The fuselage fit, but the wings didn't. They came off neatly, and the body of the plane slid along in the soft pine needles and finally came to a gentle stop.

Tally stepped out, as easily and as undamaged as if he were stepping from an auto to a curb, and dusted his hands. He smiled to himself and said;

"It wasn't bad. It wasn't bad at all. Just what the doctor ordered."

He hadn't seen the Bristol land, but he had an idea that it had made out as well as he, and that pleased him. He suddenly thought of his reason for coming over, and spent two minutes cursing the Bristol.

"If it hadn't been for that damned thing, I would have hitched myself right over Larsdorf's drome and been pulled down there. As it is, a bunch of ditch diggers will grab me and I'll spend the rest of my time in some stinkin' prison."

He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and was just lighting one when a squad of infantry pounded into the clearing from the other side. He knew that flight was worse than useless, for if he attempted to run they'd probably shoot him down. He finished lighting his butt, then stepped out from the trees and shouted. The men turned, saw him, and began to advance cautiously, rifles at the ready. He laughed.

"Take it easy boys, there's only one of us. The marbles are all yours."

They surrounded him, took his Colt, then marched him about half a mile to a road. There was a truck parked there, and all got aboard, Tally in the middle, hemmed in on every side.

The ride was brief, and Tally was both surprised and pleased when they reached their destination. He saw that it was not only a flying field, but it was the old drome that Von Vorst had used. He hoped that Larsdorf hadn't moved.

Evidently he hadn't, for now that they were here, Tally heard the man's name mentioned several times as his guards in the truck spoke to several of the field mechanics. He was taken off the truck in a few minutes, and marched to a large log building. It looked like a hunting lodge, and Tally guessed that it had been ex-



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actly that in the days before the war. His opinion was confirmed when he saw the interior. There was a great, long room on the ground level, and around the walls were the mounted heads of the regional game. A great fireplace took up most of one wall, and Tally noticed that there was a stairway on either side of the room, leading to the upper part of the house. In one corner was a writing table, and at it sat a man he instantly identified as Larsdorf.

The man was tall and finely built, and his head was erect and well-shaped. The eyes were keen and piercing, and a trim Van Dyke beard adorned the strong chin. He waited for the guards to bring Tally to him, and one of them spoke quickly and briefly. Larsdorf had been gazing at Tally while the man spoke, and now, when the guard had finished, he said in perfect English;

"So you shot down two of my men, trying to protect a Bristol, eh?"

The voice was low and well modulated, and there was no trace of an accent. Tally answered;

"And quite a job it was, too. The boys knew what they were doing. They were good."

Larsdorf's eyebrows raised.

"Good? They were two of the best in the world. They were members of my squadron."

Tally grinned. "Pardon me! I stand corrected. They were two of the best in the world. But now they're dead."

Larsdorf didn't speak for a moment, but when he did his voice was as cold as the wind off a glacier. He said;

"Yes, they are dead. And within an hour or two, you will join them. I don't make a custom of killing the men whom I capture, but you are of a frame of mind that I do not take to kindly."

"It's a fine state of affairs," Tally said, "when you take a guy outside and shoot him if you don't like his looks."

Larsdorf held up his hand. "Take you outside and shoot you? Unthinkable! It shall be much more pleasant than that. You'll soon find out all about it. We are having dinner in a few minutes, and with every meal there should be a certain amount of entertainment. You shall provide that."

Tally shrugged. "I was never much at telling jokes or juggling, but I'll see what I can do for you."

Larsdorf smiled. "You'll have no trouble making us laugh, I can assure you."

Tally saw that several tables were being set in one corner of the room, and pilots started to come in, singly and in pairs. Presently all the places were filled, and Larsdorf walked to the head of the center table and motioned to Tally to sit beside him. He arose and tapped his plate with a knife.

"We have a visitor tonight," he told the men before him "and he will not mind attempting to amuse us. He's a fine strapping specimen, and it seems to me that a bit of wrestling might be in order before we eat."

He looked down the tables, as if for approval, and there was a great deal of applause. Larsdorf turned to one of the servants waiting on table, and said a few words in German, which Tally didn't catch. The man hurried away. A few minutes later, a huge mountain of flesh, dressed in chef's clothing, entered the room, and Larsdorf smiled.

"This is where you supply the entertainment, my friend. You are big and apparently strong, so it is not asking too much of you. This—" pointing to the huge man in the middle of the room—"is a chap I happened to pick up several years ago in Singapore. Ujak is a fine wrestler, but he excels at the rough and tumble."

Tally looked at the man again, and saw that he was taking off his clothes. He re-

moved everything but a loin cloth, and his massive body seemed to fill the room. The small slanting eyes were cruel, and the thick lips were wet, as if in anticipation of what was to come.

"Ujak is a fine cook," Larsdorf continued, "but fighting is his first love. And I will warn you, my friend, that Ujak has no principles. You are to protect yourself at all times."

Tally didn't wait for any more. He knew what was expected of him. He stripped to the waist quickly, leaving his tunic and shirt on the chair he vacated, then strode to the middle of the room to meet the wrestler. The splendid muscles in Tally's back stood out like steel cables, and his great arms were loose and relaxed.

CHAPTER FOUR

To the Death

THEY met in the center of the room, and Tally quickly grabbed for a leg. But the mountainous man moved with surprising agility, and the leg was swiftly removed and Tally was instantly enmeshed in a punishing headlock. The man's hands were close to his face, and even as the terrible pressure was exerted, Tally felt the great fingers searching for his eyes. He squirmed out of the hold in a moment, then again stalked forward.

This time the giant Malaysian made

the first move. His heavily booted foot shot out for the groin, but Tally was ready. He twisted to one side, grasped the foot with both hands and heaved upward. There was a terrific crash, and Ujak landed on his back on the floor. He was over on his face like a cat, getting to his feet, and Tally circled him swiftly and clamped on a full nelson. He locked his hands in back of the great neck and started to apply the pressure.

The resistance was terrific, and the man tried in every way to break the hold. Tally wouldn't let him get to his feet, and the great bulk threshed around, attempting to get Tally underneath. But all the while the pressure increased. Tally knew what he would have to do. There was no use in taking any further chance with this great beast. The man would undoubtedly kill him if he had the chance. Tally tightened the hold until he thought the bones in his arms would crack under the strain, but finally he heard what he had been waiting for—the dull snap of the vertebrae under the fold of muscle and fat. There was no longer any resistance. A man with a broken neck does not offer much resistance.

Tally got to his feet and walked back to the table, his chest rising and falling. He donned his shirt and tunic in utter silence, and it was only when he sat down that the applause broke—great waves of shouting and clapping. He glanced at Larsdorf. The man was looking at him



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fixedly, and amused before he spoke.

"It has never been done before. I have never seen Ujak beaten."

"He only lost once," Tally grinned. "That's something you can say about the guy. He was strong, but not smart. He should have worn a starched collar to-night."

"Very entertaining," Larsdorf said. "Very entertaining."

"I hear you give all your visitors a good time," Tally told him. "A pal of mine named Higgins told me that you gave him special attention."

Larsdorf looked at him quickly. "You knew Higgins?"

"You keep informed, don't you. Yes, I knew Higgins. How did you know that he was dead?"

Larsdorf shrugged. "One hears of those things. He had something that I wanted badly, and I had word from my agent that this article which I prized is no longer in Higgins' possession. I heard also that it was necessary to kill the man. My agent is on his way here with some very important papers at this moment."

Tally's heart was in his mouth. So his trip had not been in vain! The man had not yet arrived, and although he might come at any moment, there was still hope of pulling this thing out of the fire. To conceal his excitement, he said;

"But about Higgins. You certainly gave him the business. That brand on his temple—and his back." He was shooting in the dark about the back, but his curiosity had been aroused, and he wanted to make Larsdorf think that he knew all about the thing.

"The brand is nothing," Larsdorf said. "It is over in a moment, and is placed there merely so my agents may identify a man whom we regard as dangerous and important. It is really an honor to carry the mark. But Higgins' back; that was unfortunate. We were quite sure that he had some information that would be of

value to us, and we found it necessary to flog him." He shook his head in wonder at the memory. "We whipped him for the better part of an hour, but he would not talk. Finally, I could stand it no longer, and had it stopped. He was a brave man."

The meal went on interminably, it seemed to Tally. Every moment he expected the door to open for Larsdorf's agent, and then the party would be spoiled. For as long as only that one man knew what was in the envelope, it was worth regaining. The messenger had to be killed, and the envelope stolen before anyone else had an opportunity to see it. But how it was going to be done, Tally had not the faintest idea.

Larsdorf was well fed, now, and in a talkative mood.

"You have shown that you excel at wrestling, and that is a sport I have no passion for. But with the sword and the pistol—that is another matter."

Tally was thinking fast, and now he said;

"You fancy yourself with the sword?"

Larsdorf looked at him and smiled. "I am known to be a swordsman with few equals."

The idea was far advanced in Tally's head, and now he said;

"I've used the sword quite a bit myself." He was suddenly serious. "I'll tell you what I'll do, Larsdorf. I hear that you're a sport. I'll duel with you. If you win—" he shrugged —"it won't matter very much. If I win, you set me loose. How does that sound?"

Larsdorf smiled. "To me it sounds very foolish. You have never seen me work with the blade."

"And you have never seen me," Tally told him. "Which makes us all even. And I'll give you another proposition. We'll duel left-handed. Perhaps your superiority won't be so marked, then. What do you say?"

Larsdorf looked at him, smiled broadly,

then nodded. "You have asked for this, not I."

He barked an order to one of the men, and the fellow crossed the room and took a pair of crossed foils from the wall. He came back, gave them to Larsdorf, and the group of pilots cleared a space and stood around expectantly. Larsdorf handed one of the blades to Tally, stepped back a pace and said, "*En garde!*"

THEY held the foils in their left hands. A good swordsman is almost as good with his left hand as he is with his right. Tally knew that. But Tally knew something of which Larsdorf was totally unaware—that he, Tally, *was* left-handed. It made quite a bit of difference.

Larsdorf did not know, either, that Tally had spent countless hours in practice with his good friend, Pierre St. Morenz, the world's professional champion. Nor could he have any knowledge of the many times Tally had used the steel in defence of his life. But the German soon caught an inkling of these several facts.

Larsdorf was clever, but fencing with his left hand, he was no match for Tally. The blades flashed for three minutes in lunge and riposte, and then Tally saw the small opening he wanted and his steel flashed like a live thing and bit into Larsdorf's left shoulder. It bit deeply, and came out the other side, ripping the muscle on top, and Tally stepped back. He could have spitted Larsdorf through the belly or the chest two or three times during the engagement, but he had restrained himself. This was all he wanted.

The wound was painful and bloody, but not serious, and the pilots grouped around their fallen leader—all but a few, who watched Tally with a mixture of caution and admiration. Suddenly, from the conversation, he knew that Larsdorf had passed out from the loss of blood, and several of the men discussed what should be done with Tally. Finally it was de-

ecided to lock him in one of the rooms at the top of the stairs until Larsdorf recovered sufficiently to decide his fate.

Two men escorted Tally to the top of the stairs and thrust him into a room. He heard the key turn in the lock, then one of the men called for a guard, and Tally heard a soldier clump up the stairs and take up a position outside the door.

The room below was in an uproar. The spectacle of Larsdorf going down to defeat, after the earlier scene with the wrestler, had upset the routine of the place and the composure of every man in the outfit. Larsdorf was unconscious, to add to the turmoil, and until he came to, which, Tally knew, would be soon, the place was confused, without a leader.

He examined the room he'd been locked in and found that it had been formerly used as a storeroom. There was only one window, and that was high overhead in one of the walls. He knew that the heavy door was locked, and that there was a guard out there, too. His chances of getting out looked exceedingly lousy to him.

He knew that he had to work fast if he was going to accomplish anything. He felt that his person was in no danger, for he fully believed that Larsdorf, whatever else he might be, was an honorable man in this sort of an affair. He had beaten the man, and he somehow knew that Larsdorf would let him go. But that was not all he wanted. He wanted the package that Larsdorf's man was bringing to the field.

The fellow should be here soon. That he hadn't come up until now Tally considered a great piece of luck, but he didn't know how long his streak would stay with him. He had to get out, and get out fast.

He pulled a piece of luggage underneath the window and climbed up on it. He could reach the sill with his raised hands, now, and he knew that he could get through the small opening if he worked hard. But he'd have to go through head first, and he didn't like that idea very

much. He knew the ground was about twenty feet below, and that's a long way to drop, when you're going to land on your head.

But he pulled himself up until his head was level with the window, then hoisted a bit more and rested on his elbows. The window opened inward, and he managed to pull it back and hook it on a nail that was there for the purpose. He looked over the edge and the ground seemed very far away. He'd break his neck if he tried it. And then he spotted the drainpipe.

It was off to one side, just out of arm's reach, and just beyond it was the roof of the porch at the front of the building. If he could lean out the window far enough, he might be able to reach it. Then he could swing himself to the roof. It was worth a try.

He lowered himself to the floor again and removed his boots, then went back up to the window. He looked around carefully, saw no one, and edged himself slowly out. High above he heard the motor of a plane, but he was too busy to bother with it at the moment.

His outstretched arm grasped the drain, and as he twisted the lower part of his body out the window, he hoped that the pipe was strong enough to hold him. There was one agonizing moment when only his feet anchored him to the window, then he pushed away and out.

The pipe held, and his swinging body landed as lightly as a cat's on the roof of the porch. He crouched there in the shadow, breathing a sigh of relief. Then he heard the plane again and gave it all his attention.

It was coming down to the field, he knew now, and he wondered who the hell would be flying at this time. Night had fallen long ago, and the heavens were as black as the inside of a derby hat. It was unusual for a flight to be aloft at this time, and even more extraordinary for a single flyer to be up there. And then the

illuminating thought occurred to him.

Larsdorf's agent, working his way into German-held territory from Paris, would cross far up the lines, some hundred miles or more away. The man would undoubtedly be in a hurry, and would certainly be able to commandeer a ship, with his credentials. What would be more natural than that the man should do just that, in his haste to get back to Larsdorf? He determined that he would wait, here on the porch roof, until things developed further. He was in no hurry. If he had things figured correctly, all the fuss about Larsdorf would keep their minds off him, locked up in the storeroom.

OVER on the field, he heard the plane land. The engine coughed to silence, and Tally edged to the side of the porch roof, just above the path that led to the field. In a moment he saw what he had hoped to see.

One man was coming up the path. He was trotting, evidently in a hurry, but most satisfactorily, he was all alone. He was all alone, and he was dressed in civilian clothes, Tally noted with glee, and he figured that there was a fine chance that this was his man.

It was twenty feet to the ground, and when the man neared the side of the porch, just on the edge of the light that streamed from the front door, Tally dropped on him. He hit perfectly, one knee landing at the base of the fellow's neck, both of them rolling, with no sound other than a dull thud.

Tally was on his man in a flash, both hands on the fellow's throat, but there was no need for further action. The man was dead. Tally's knee had broken his neck.

"Two in one evening," Tally muttered to himself. "I'm getting real good."

He went through the dead man's clothes swiftly, and in a hidden pocket that almost escaped him, he found what he was looking for—the envelope that had been stolen

from him. A hasty glance told him that it had not been opened, and he grinned gleefully. He'd pulled the fat out of the fire after all.

He rolled the body into the bushes after taking a Luger from a shoulder holster, and made his way silently to the field, keeping to the shadow. He reached the back of one of the hangars without being seen, and then he heard a shout from the house. Evidently someone had discovered his escape.

The Fokker in which Larsdorf's agent had arrived was just down the line, and he knew that it was warm enough to start with the booster magneto. There were several mechanics about, but they were running towards the house, attracted by the shouts. He'd have to act fast.

He snaked out of the shadows, and he was just at the wing-tip of the plane when the field lights went on suddenly. The entire drome was illuminated glaringly, after the total darkness, and Tally was blind for a moment. When everything came back into focus, he looked about him and swore feelingly.

He wasn't fifty feet from the path to the house and there, staring at him, was Larsdorf. The man must have recovered about the time Tally had escaped. There was a crude bandage on his left shoulder, and

there was an ugly looking Luger in his right hand. He raised it instantly, and Tally shot from the hip.

Both shots roared as one, and Tally felt the lead caress the top of his shoulder hotly. But his own slug went home. He saw Larsdorf drop the gun, and the blood gushed like a fountain from his upper arm. And then Tally was in the pit of the Fokker.

The motor caught on the first try and roared smoothly. Tally didn't wait, but took it down the field and into the air. He was grinning to himself.

"Stick a sword in his left arm, then pot him with lead in the right arm. He won't do any duelling for a hell of a time to come. And not an awful lot of eating, either."

He headed for home, fairly certain that he wouldn't be intercepted in the darkness, and thought of Major Dudley's surprise—the look on Colonel Freedly's face when the envelope was laid on his desk. He laughed, and then he thought of Bowman.

"That lousy little bum! He's too small for me to hit, but I'm sure as hell going to find out if his bottom is big enough to land on with a size twelve shoe!"

The thought made him feel better; much better than any other phase of the day's work.

THE END

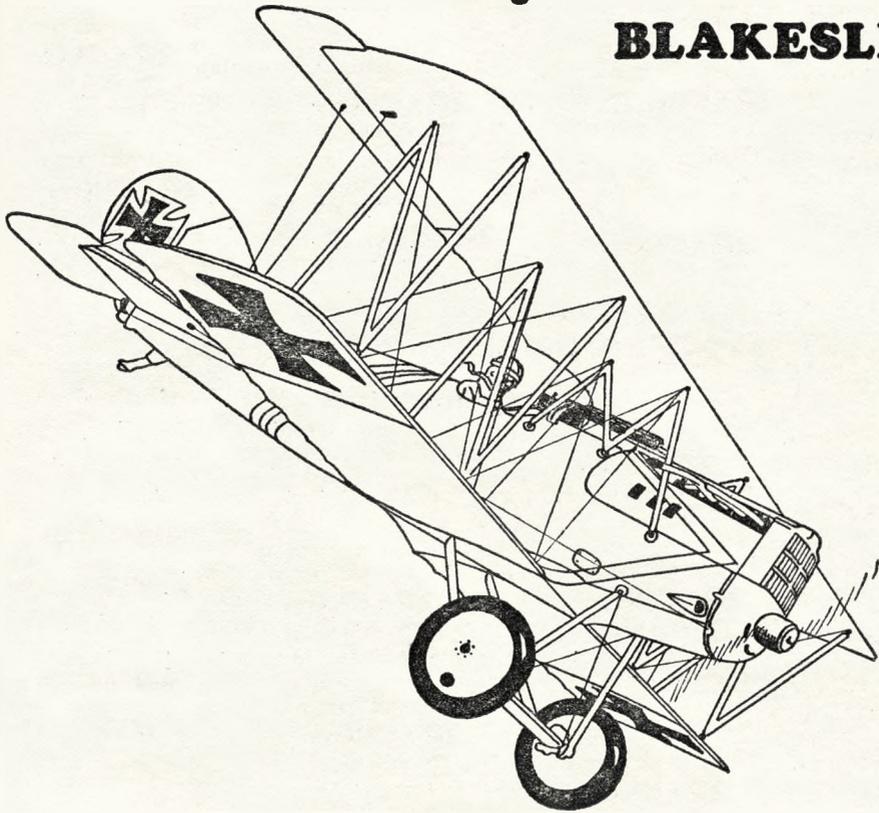
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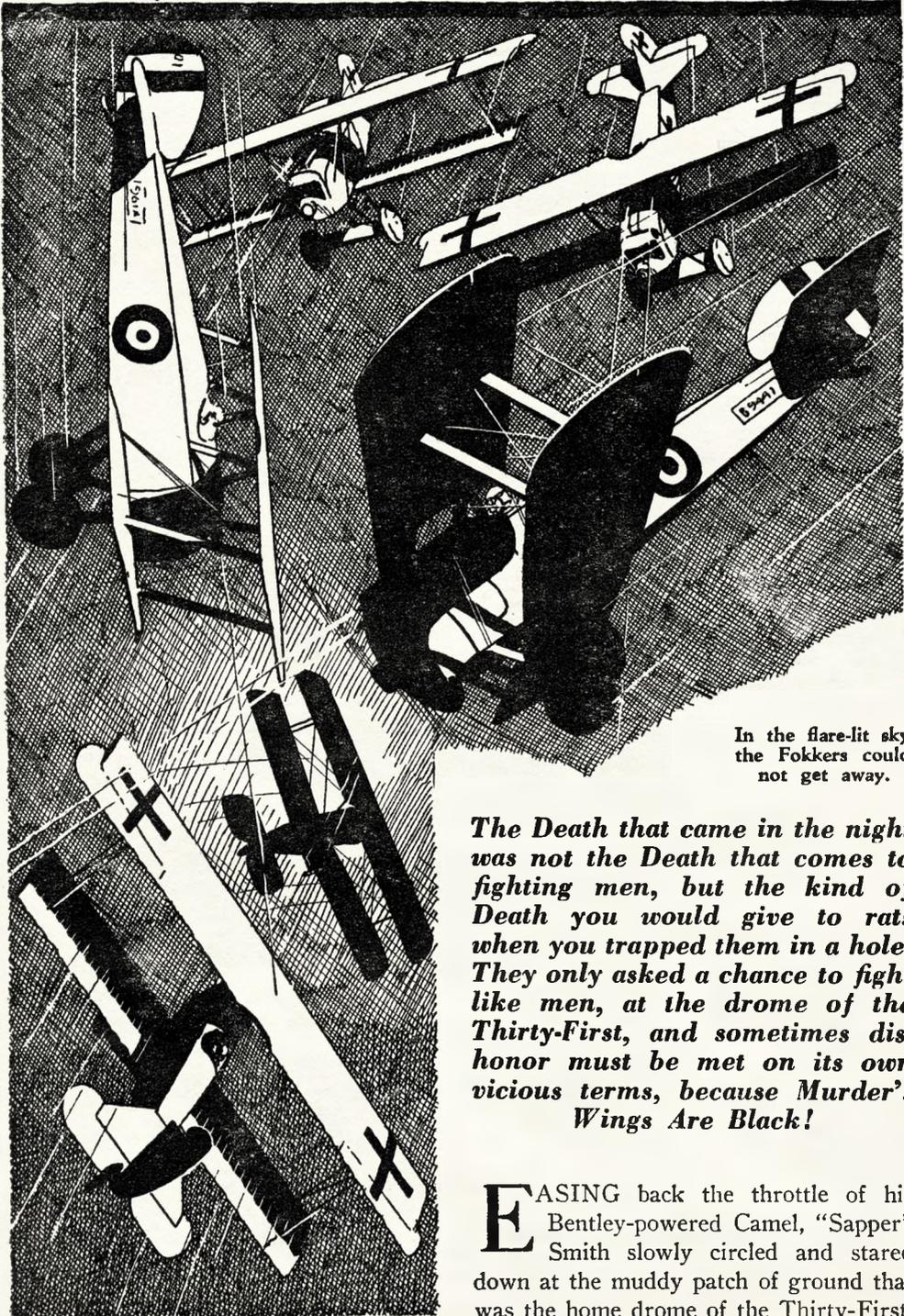


THIS month you are due to have a modern ship, and here it is. If you start with the correct unit it will go together easily. Some of you might have a bit of trouble, but stick right to it. Turn to pages 52 and 53, pals.

Last month's ship was the war-time Pfalz D.12. For those of you who have been yelling for data, here it is. This ship came out near the end of the war. It had a 180 h.p. Mercedes engine with a speed of about 180 m.p.h. Those of you who saw the motion picture *DAWN PATROL* must have seen this ship. Today it can still be seen at the Jarrett Museum of World War History at Workmen's Dairy Farm, Morristown, New Jersey.

Murder's Wings are Black

by ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN



In the flare-lit sky
the Fokkers could
not get away.

The Death that came in the night was not the Death that comes to fighting men, but the kind of Death you would give to rats when you trapped them in a hole. They only asked a chance to fight like men, at the drome of the Thirty-First, and sometimes dishonor must be met on its own vicious terms, because Murder's Wings Are Black!

EASING back the throttle of his Bentley-powered Camel, "Sapper" Smith slowly circled and stared down at the muddy patch of ground that was the home drome of the Thirty-First.

"There it is, fellow," he grunted aloud. "Your new home until you get filled with Spandaus slugs. Or prove that you're not worth a damn as a squadron C. O."

Shrugging, he circled back into the wind and slid down through the fading twilight for a perfect three-point. As he taxied up to the line, greaseballs and pilots came running. Sapper's first glance at them proved discouraging. The greaseballs stared with only dumb curiosity on their dirty maps, but there was unmistakable hostility in the eyes of every pilot. But he didn't blame them any. He remembered once when his own commanding officer had died, killed in action, and he had resented it when a stranger was sent to take command, rather than a member of the outfit. But now the shoe was on the other foot, and he was the stranger, sent to take over a dead man's job.

Cutting his switch he legged out, pulled off his helmet and goggles and let his eyes travel over the group. "Your new C. O., fellows," he said quietly. "And I don't think I feel any happier about it than you do. Flight Sergeant!"

His words seemed to relax the tension in the air, before the Flight Sergeant stepped forward and clicked his heels. "Yes sir?"

"You have charge of the mens' likker ration, of course," Sapper said. "Well, double it tonight, and let me know if there's not enough to go 'round. And, now, gang, how about letting me buy the first drink? That's always a good way to get to know each other. Let's go."

Sapper directed the last at the sullen-eyed pilots, grinned and walked over to the mess lounge. The pilots hesitated a moment, then followed him inside and lined themselves up at the bar. Sapper waited until every glass was filled, then turned and hooked his elbows on the bar and faced the others.

"And now, who's senior pilot?" he asked.

A tall redhead moved forward a pace or two.

"Me," he said gruffly. "The name is Banks, Captain Banks."

"Then you're my man, Banks," Sapper grinned. "You know the ropes around here. I don't. What's been going on, and what do you suggest that we do about it? All I was told at Wing was that last night Major Carter, a pilot, and three mechanics died mysteriously. What's your story, Banks?"

By the time Sapper finished, the hostility had faded completely from the redhead's eyes. Instead there was a light in them that could be taken for fear—hopeless, baffled fear. And it was reflected in the eyes of the others. Sapper kept a grin on his face, but a cold tingle rippled through him. He had seen that look in the eyes of men before.

"I don't know how to tell it, Major," Banks spoke slowly. "Because none of us knows just what the hell happened. I mean. . . ."

The redhead paused, as though completely at a loss for words.

"Have a try at it anyway," Sapper encouraged.

"Well, it was just about this time last night," Banks said. "No, it was later, because it was dark. Anyway, we were all here in the mess when we heard Fokkers coming over. They were damn high. There's an ammo dump about twenty miles west of here and sometimes night flying Fokkers take pot shots at it with their small bombs. Anyway, we piled out, figuring to get set to take off and slap them down on their way back. And then—well, then it happened!"

"What happened?" Sapper asked sharply.

"I told you, I don't know!" Banks cried. "We were out there on the tarmac trying to spot the direction they were flying when suddenly Major Carter let out a sigh and crumpled to the ground. He was

standing right next to me. At the same time Lieutenant Sloan, and three of the mechanics, just folded up. And . . . well, everybody seemed to be ripped wide open. It was God awful!"

Banks shivered and downed half of his drink in a single gulp.

"Bombs?" Sapper asked.

"No!" Banks said hoarsely and shook his head. "And it wasn't the splinters from archie shells our gunners were slamming up. We didn't find anything. It was just like they'd been hit by lightning."

Sapper scowled into his drink and wondered what next to say. And then he didn't have a chance to say anything, because out of the night sky came the throbbing drone of Mercedes motors. Every pilot in the mess, save Sapper, stiffened and sucked in air with a rasping sound. Then, with a shrill cry Banks cracked.

"Damn you all, I'll square it up!" he screamed and went barging out the mess door. "I'll get one of you, anyway!"

"Banks, hold it!" Sapper barked and made a lunge for the redhead.

He might just as well have tried to stop the Twentieth Century Limited in high gear. Banks tore himself free and went bounding down the tarmac toward his plane. Sapper gave it up then, and sprinted for his own plane. The throb of the Fokker engines was loud now. They were directly overhead, but a hell of a ways up. If they kept going, no Camel could possibly stand a hope in hell of catching them.

STILL there was always the one chance in a million of getting some action. And after all, to let Banks go tearing up alone after some mysterious ships might not look so good in the eyes of the others. So Sapper vaulted into the pit of his ship and savagely waved one of the mechanics to twist his ship.

As the mechanic reached the wingtip and began to circle around front to the propeller the poor devil let out a choked scream and went staggering off to the

other side for perhaps ten yards, before his feet went out from under him and he fell sprawling, to bounce once and then lay still.

Cursing, Sapper leaped from the cockpit and dashed over and knelt down. War hardened as he was, he had to swallow hard when he rolled the mechanic over. The mechanic had been ripped wide open from his left shoulder, diagonally down across his body to his right hip. His clothes were soaked in his own blood and more of it formed a small pool on the tarmac that glistened a dull red in the glow of the hangar lights. Tight-lipped, Sapper stared at the dead mechanic and then shot up straight as something close beside him made a hissing sound. Instinctively he set himself to leap wildly away before the bomb could explode. But there wasn't any explosion, because there wasn't any bomb. Just a sharp hiss, then a sound, like a stone bouncing on the tarmac. And then—nothing.

The back of his neck crawling, he looked about him but saw nothing. Nothing, but the dead mechanic at his feet. And then another cry smashed against his ears, coming from the direction of the mess. He snapped his eyes that way and saw a pilot stand for a second in the open doorway, before folding up like an army cot, then collapse silently to the floor of the mess.

At the same moment there came a wild shout to Sapper's right, from down at the far end of the line of Camels.

"Hey, help, somebody!" bellowed the voice. "He's dead! Skipper Banks is dead!"

Hardly realizing he was doing it, Sapper Smith got his legs in motion and went thundering down to Banks' plane. One glance was all he needed. Half of Banks' head had been torn away, and the interior of the cockpit was wet with his own blood.

"Oh, my God, my God!" the greaseball moaned and began running around in

crazy circles. "It's magic. It's magic, that's what it is. Oh God, let me out of here!"

Sapper grabbed the man and hit him hard across the cheek.

"Cut it!" he roared. "Get hold of yourself, man. Did you see how it happened?"

The mechanic looked blank, then his lower lip trembled and he started to cry. Sapper slapped him again and the greaseball managed to gain some control over himself.

"I dunno, I dunno," he mumbled. "I was waiting for his nod to twist the stick, see? I was standing there looking at him. And then—oh, it was horrible! His head just fell apart in two pieces. So help me, God, I seen it with my own eyes."

"Did you hear anything?" Sapper demanded. "Hear anything like a hissing sound?"

The mechanic's eyes went wide as he bobbed his head.

"By God, yes, I did!" he cried. "I forgot, but I did hear something hiss. It was like a snake hissing, maybe, I guess. Yeah, almost the same instant the Skipper died. Major, it ain't human. It must have been them Fokkers! But what the hell are they pulling on us?"

Sapper stared upward into the night sky where the diminishing drone of Mercedes motors was growing faint. But the sound came from the east, indicating that the mysterious German raiders had turned around, once they reached Thirty-One's field, and then gone back to their own side of the war. Yank searchlight batteries were still sending their beams high into the night sky. And as Sapper looked at them he suddenly let out a grunt of surprise.

"For God's sake!" he choked. "Are those Hun searchlights, or ours?"

"They're ours, sir!" the greaseball said in surprise that equaled Sapper's. "All three batteries. Whatcha mean, Major, huh?"

The new C. O. shrugged and said nothing. But his brain was spinning with thoughts. He didn't believe in fairy tales or miracles, so he knew damn well that those high flying Fokkers had been the cause of what had happened on Thirty-One's tarmac. Just what it was, he had no idea at the moment, although he figured he could make a pretty good guess. But until he was sure there was no sense in shooting off his mouth.

And so, leaving the greaseball wondering, he walked back along the tarmac toward the squadron office. But he was only half way there before the other pilots were grouped about him, their faces a pasty yellow in the hangar lights, and gnawing fear in their eyes.

"Two nights in a row!" someone said hoarsely. "I'm in favor we get the hell away from this cursed drome!"

"And me, too!" somebody else shouted. "L . . ."

"Shut up!" Sapper barked and his voice was like the crack of a whip. "Nobody's quitting this drome. Who was the pilot hit in the mess door? And were there any other casualties besides my mechanic and Captain Banks?"

A lean tow-head thrust himself forward. "Lieutenant Harris was in the mess door," he said. "There was also a corporal and two mechanics. And Flight Sergeant Wilentz. *He* was killed in his hutment. Get it? *In his hutment!* And you still think we should stick around and let that damn von Elb rip our guts open?"

Sapper stiffened and his eyes were agate. But not because of the tow-head's pugnacious attitude, but because of what the man had said. Sapper reached out and gripped the man by the arm.

"What's that?" he snapped. "Did you say, von Elb? Count von Elb? How long has he been opposite Thirty-One?"

"Three or four days, I guess," the tow-head said. "They're a night flying outfit."

"They would be!" Sapper grated.

"Stinking rats like von Elb seldom show their faces in the day time."

"You know von Elb, Major?" a short, chunky pilot asked.

Sapper hesitated, then decided that keeping secrets would not help any.

"Plenty," he said. "When I was with the French Flying Corps von Elb was in front of us. He's a louse from way back, with a yellow streak down his back a mile wide. Sure, he's got a record, but he got it picking off poor devils with jammed guns, after his tramps had shot them full of holes. And also by pulling stunts like he did last night and tonight. Off-the-record stuff that no decent fighter would try."

"But what was it?" the tow-head demanded.

"Maybe I can show you," Sapper grunted. "But first I've got something else to tell you. Mike Carter, your former C. O., was in that French squadron with me. He was the best pal I ever had. So now you know how I feel about stepping into his shoes. They're just about ten sizes too big for me, but I'll do my damndest, because that's what Mike would expect of me. Damn, von Elb! I wonder if he knew that Mike was here?"

"I guess maybe he did!" the tow-head cried excitedly. "The night before last, a Fokker came over and dropped a note. It was addressed to the C. O. but he didn't tell us what was in it. He just kind of swore some, tore it up and let it go at that."

Sapper nodded and clenched his hands.

"The rat's still vowing to get us both because Mike and I made meatballs out of his lousy gang that day," he whispered. Then, in a louder voice, "Well, let's go to the flight sergeant's hutment. I think we'll find the answer there. If not, then we'll wait until daylight and go over the tarmac and the ships with a fine toothed. . . ."

Sapper bit off the rest and whirled

toward the east. Even as he spun around, a Fokker came roaring over the edge of the field. The plane had glided down from altitude so that its approach would not be heard, and now with its engine hitting on all cylinders, it was streaking across the field no higher than the tree tops.

Like a winged comet, it whirled past in the faint glow of the hangar lights and then lost itself in the darkness on the far side of the field, its engine whining like all hell as it went zooming high up into the night sky. Instantly the three searchlight batteries shot their powerful beams skyward, sweeping them back and forth in an effort to pick out the lone raider. But they might just as well have tried to light up a moon crater, for all the good it did.

Sapper gave them an angry glance, cursed softly under his breath and then looked out onto the field where a message-dropper flare had hit the earth. A greaseball was already running out to the crumpled streamer and Sapper looked up where the sound of the revving Mercedes came out of the eastern sky. That Fokker had whizzed across Thirty-One's field in practically nothing flat, but not before Sapper had seen something he hadn't seen for many a month. The gold and black cobra insignia painted on the fuselage of a German Fokker—the personal insignia of Count von Elb!

And then the greaseball came running breathlessly back to the tarmac to skid to a halt in front of Sapper.

"Jeez, Major!" he panted. "The note's addressed to you, sir. It's addressed to Major Sapper Smith. That's you, ain't it, sir?"

Sapper's mouth went suddenly a bit dry and he experienced a clammy chill at the back of his neck.

"Damn clever, these German Intelligence bums!" he muttered. "Found out so soon, eh? Let's have it."

The greaseball passed over the note and Sapper ripped it open. The message ap-

peared to have been scrawled hastily and it read:

My dear Major Sapper Smith:

I write this hoping that you were not one of the unfortunates to be killed by our little surprise tonight, because I would like to have you live on and wonder for a bit before you meet your own end.

Your swine friend cheated me by getting himself killed last night, but when Intelligence informed me today that you were to succeed him as commanding officer, I accepted it as a good sign from the gods and felt less disappointed that he should die so soon. It meant, of course, that the revenge for which I have waited so long was to be doubly complete and sweet.

And so, history repeats, but in the reverse. This time you and your swine will be wiped out . . . a few at a time, but all of them in due time.

Count von Elb.

P.S.: If your new swine C.O. is dead, too, members of Thirty-One, you will do well to abandon your field at once. You are all doomed!

SAPPER read the letter twice and handed it to whomever happened to be next to him. Then, without a word, he walked down the tarmac and around in back of the hangars to the mechanics' and N. C. O. hutments. The third hutment he tried contained the gruesome sight. The Flight Sergeant lay crumpled face down on the floor and his back had been torn open so that Sapper could almost see his breast bone.

Steeling himself, Sapper picked up the dead Flight Sergeant and placed him on the cot in the corner. Then he returned to the blood-smeared section of floor where the man had lain, and knelt down. Because of the semi-congealed blood, it was a moment or two before he found the jagged torn hole in the floorboard. Once he had located it, he cast his eyes about the room, spotted a souvenir trench spade and axe hanging on the wall and pulled it down.

Legs spread apart he went to work rip-

ping up the section of flooring. By the time he had it pried it loose, some of the pilots had crowded into the hutment and were watching him, wide-eyed, while the rest of the pilots and the mechanics crowded as near the open door as they could. Ignoring them, Sapper pulled the section of board aside and then started digging in the dirt, about a foot under the floor. Two minutes later the trench spade struck something that gave forth a dull metallic sound. Tossing the spade aside, Sapper went at the dirt with his bare hands and presently grunted and stood up.

Facing the battery of popping eyes he wiped blood-soaked dirt from what he held in his hands and then held it out for the others to see. It was a metal rod about half an inch thick and from five to six inches long, and, at one end, the rod had been hammered into a four-edged, razor-sharp spearhead.

"My God, an arrow!" somebody gasped. "A steel arrow!"

"Its called a *flechette*," Sapper said. "And it's not made of steel, but of iron. Believe it or not, French pilots first used these things in 1914 at Metz. Flew over Metz and dropped bunches of them on the German troops occupying the city. Later, they were abolished as too inhumane, even for war. These things will damn near go through steel armor plate when dropped from only a thousand feet. You'll note there are no guiding feathers like on arrows, and so when a bunch of these things are dropped, they spread out and cover a wide area. And when they hit a man, they rip through him like a buzz saw. Look up there at the hole it made in the roof. It came down through the roof, tore down through the Flight Sergeant and still had enough speed to go through the floor and bury itself in the ground. That's why you didn't find anything yesterday. All these things were buried."

"Good God!" the tow-head mumbled and stared glassy-eyed at the hole in the

hutment roof. "You can't fight those things! They're more hell than bombs."

"No," Sapper corrected. "A bomb will do ten times more damage because only one out of fifteen of these things hits anything. Smashing morale is their work. And now that we know what von Elb is pulling this time, we know how to deal with him. And how!"

"Yeah?" the tow-head echoed. "Just how?"

"First to make the next raid a washout in case they raid again tonight," Sapper said. "And we'll do that right now."

Paying no attention to the questions hurled at him, Sapper elbowed through the group and went high-balling over to the squadron office. The others followed and crowded inside as he grabbed up the phone and put through a call to Wing.

"Smith, Thirty-One, sir," he said when the connection was made. "There's three searchlight batteries bracketing our field. Someone is dumb as hell. Will you please get through an order to their officers in charge to keep their lights killed until further orders? I haven't time to explain right now, but it's damned important. Yes sir, it's costing Yank lives. Eh? Okay, sir, thanks. I'll report in detail, later."

Hanging up, Sapper stepped over to the huge sector map tacked to the wall. Taking a pencil, he used it as a pointer.

"Here's our field," he said touching the map. "And here, here, and here are those three searchlight batteries. Notice how they form a triangle around the location of our field? Just plain dumb headwork on somebody's part, but this isn't the first time searchlight units and archie units have marked the location of a drome better than if you wrote it in a letter to the Huns."

"Holy smoke!" the tow-head cried. "You're right, and it never occurred to us. They don't need sights, or anything. And they can fly as high as hell, too."

"Right," Sapper nodded. "High enough

so that we could never get up to them. And so long as they stay in the middle of the triangle, formed by the searchlights trying to spot them, they can't possibly miss the general location of this drome with their damn *flechettes*."

For a moment there was silence, before the tow-head spoke again.

"You mentioned knowing how to deal with them," he said. "How do you mean?"

"What's your name?" Sapper suddenly asked.

"Wilson," the tow-head replied. "I'm senior pilot—now that Chick Banks is gone. Why?"

"I like a man who sticks to a point, that's all," Sapper grinned. "And how are we going to trim von Elb? At his own game."

Sapper stopped short and stared at the sector map for several minutes. Then suddenly he smiled and nodded his head.

"At his own game," he repeated. Then looking at the tow-head. "Wilson, I'm making you acting C. O. for awhile. I've got a little night flying to do, myself. I don't think von Elb and his gang will be over tonight, but keep your ears open. If you hear their engines, make tracks for the bomb dugouts. And that goes for the mechanics, too. And, oh yeah, while I'm gone, make arrangements for the burial detail tomorrow morning. I'll be back by then."

Wilson frowned, and then an eager light crept into his eyes.

"You wouldn't by any chance want company on your night flying, would you?" he asked slowly. "Chick Banks was my bunk mate, if you get what I mean?"

"I get it," Sapper nodded. "But you're getting ideas. When we turn the crank on von Elb and his gang we'll turn it all together, the bunch of us. Don't worry, I'm not trying to steal the play. I'm simply going to make a few arrangements . . . alone. Okay?"

Wilson bit his lip, then turned and

looked at the others. A few of them half nodded, and then Wilson turned back to Sapper.

"You're still C. O., so I suppose it's got to be okay," he said. "But . . . well, maybe, I'd better tell you this. I'm speaking just for myself. I'll wait until we bury the lads tomorrow morning. If you are not back then with a pretty good plan, I'm going over and take a solo crack at von Elb's drome. That is, unless some of the others come along with me."

"And by God we will!" several of them breathed in unison.

SAPPER grinned, but there was a hard glint in his eyes that no one failed to miss. "Check, it's a deal," he said. "And I'm not sore. I like guys who are determined to square accounts, and to hell with orders. But I'll be back by dawn. And then—" Sapper paused, and pursed his lips in thought. "And then," he said presently, "maybe we'll lay a few more cards on the table. Meantime, take it easy fellows, and keep your ears open for the sounds of Mercedes engines. See you later."

The sun was about an hour up over the eastern rim of the world when Sapper Smith glided his Camel down onto Thirty-One's field and taxied slowly up to the line. His face was a bit drawn and haggard from a trying night without a wink of sleep, but there was a satisfied gleam in his eyes. And when Wilson came trotting out of the mess to greet him, he managed a cheerful grin.

"None of them came over while I was gone, did they?" he asked the tow-head.

"Not a Fokker," Wilson replied. "Or anything else. And how did you make out? And what's the next move?"

"Made out, okay," Sapper said. "At least I'm counting on it that I did. And our next move is a day of hard work. After breakfast every pilot and mechanic is to turn out and get to work on the ships.

Ten to one a couple of those *flechettes* hit the ships, and repairs are in order."

"Correct," Wilson nodded. "One of them went right through my gas tank. But do you mean we're going to do some squadron flying?"

"Just that," Sapper nodded. "Every ship has got to be in top shape—for tonight."

"Tonight?" Wilson echoed with a frown. "This isn't a night flying outfit! What about today?"

"Tonight, and I'll tell you later," Sapper said. "Meantime, there's the burial detail, and a lot of work to do on the ships. Let's go."

All day long Sapper was questioned, first by one pilot, then by the next. But to all questions he simply shook his head and made the pilot go back to work on his ship. Then, sometime along the later part of the afternoon, a small truck drove up on the field and the driver delivered four small boxes to Sapper. He directed the driver to put them in the squadron office. And when that was done he summoned the pilots to the mess and ordered drinks all around.

"And now to put a few more cards on the table," he said when each man had a drink in his fist. "Tonight, von Elb and his rats will be over again, or else I'm a three-legged Chink. Anyway, we'll count on it that way, and the chances are he'll be over the same time as he was last night, and the night before. Now, we, the whole bunch of us, are taking off at dusk, and we're going to get ten or eleven thousand feet of altitude, a few miles south of this field, and sit there until they come over. Then. . ."

"Suppose we miss them in the dark?" Wilson interrupted with the question.

"That won't make any difference," Sapper said. "We'll know they're over once the searchlight units go into action. Oh yeah, I've given the searchlights orders to do their stuff tonight. Now, once the

Huns are over we will close in between them and their own lines and start doing our stuff. But get this, no Fokker is to be permitted to get back to his own side of the lines. If you lads are the pilots I think you are, no Fokker will. Keep after them hammer and tongs and just hang up a curtain of Vickers' slugs that they can't get through. And maybe I should remind you that Mike Carter and the others will be looking down and cheering for you. If you keep at them long enough, not one Fokker will get back, and von Elb and his brood will be wiped out once and for all."

When Sapper finished he took a sip of his drink and let his eyes wander over the faces before him. Disappointment stood out like automobile headlights at midnight, but he simply grinned inwardly and drained his glass.

"Well, have you all got it straight?" he asked presently. "And are there any questions?"

There was silence for a moment and then Barker, the short chunky pilot, made noises in his throat.

"I've got one," he grunted. "Do you think we're miracle pilots? Combat work at night is tough going. The chances are that plenty of Fokkers will slip past us in the dark."

Sapper looked him straight in the eye.

"If it's too tough for you, Barker," he said evenly, "you're excused from the patrol. And that goes for anyone else who feels the same way. I'm sure Mike Carter would give you the same chance to fly and fight . . . or stay home."

Barker's face caught on fire and he gripped his glass so hard his knuckles showed white under the skin.

"Don't worry, I'll do my share!" he grated. "And I'll stop all that you stop, too!"

Sapper looked at the others and saw the same savage determination on each face.

"Swell," he said. "That's all I wanted to know. You're going to be pleasantly surprised. Okay, let's have another and then get set for the take-off."

Some three hours later, Sapper Smith coasted his Camel through the air at the peak of a fifteen plane formation and kept his eyes glued on the inky sky a couple of miles or so off his left wings. His altimeter needle showed eleven thousand feet in the faint glow of the cowled light on the instrument panel, and the hands of the airplane watch were creeping past eight o'clock. Cursing softly he switched his gaze to the east and shifted uncomfortably in the seat.

"A horse on you if von Elb doesn't bite, Sapper," he grated. "And God help you as C. O. of Thirty-One if Wing Colonel Blair didn't do his stuff, too! He'll. . . ."

Sapper choked off the rest in a gulp of wild joy. Three long pencils of light had suddenly shot up from the ground and were swaying back and forth across the night heavens. Kicking rudder, Sapper rammed the throttle wide open and went thundering straight eastward with the rest of Thirty-One high-balling after him. No sooner had he reached a point over No-Man's-Land than he veered sharply toward the north, and then presently swung around toward the west. And then, when he was perhaps a mile or so east of the triangle formed by the searchlight batteries, he held the stick between his knees, reached down into the ammo boxes that were fitted inside of the cockpit, and began heaving over the side the contents of the boxes delivered to him that afternoon. They were parachute magnesium flares and he touched each one off as he sent it sailing out into the night.

In no time at all that entire section of the heavens was flooded with white light, brilliant as high noon. And as Sapper stared ahead he saw some eighteen Fokkers flying in a gigantic ring-around-the-rosey formation. The instant the night

was turned into day the Fokkers broke up their formation and each pilot started a long dive toward the Front.

"At 'em, gang!" Sapper howled and hurled his ship into a vertical dive.

NOT bothering to glance back to see if the others were following, he thundered straight down across the path of the nearest Fokker and drilled a long burst through the German's wings. In nothing flat the Fokker pilot pulled out of his dive, whirled around in a dime turn, and went frantically zigzagging back toward the west.

"And that's okay, too, you rat!" Sapper bellowed and let the German go without fanning his tail with another burst.

Cutting around and up toward the east he took a snap glance around, and grinned broadly. The pilots of Thirty-One were doing their stuff to perfection. Fokker after Fokker tried to break through the line of Yank ships and go hell-bending home to safety. But each attempt was met with a shower of blistering lead that sent the German spinning earthward in flames, or left him twisting around hopelessly for a means of escape.

"Wonder if they've noticed, yet?" Sapper murmured. "But ten to one they're too steamed up to give it a thought. They—"

He cut it short right there and let out a wild howl. Far off his left wings, a lone

Fokker was trying to sneak around the flank of the Yank line of Camels and speed unnoticed eastward. And what is more, that's just what the pilot was succeeding in doing. Another minute or so and he would be beyond the rim of the flare light and lost in the darkness.

"Anybody but you, rat!" Sapper bellowed and sent his ship rocketing down across the sea of magnesium flares toward the lone Fokker with its gold and black cobra insignia on the side of the fuselage.

Perhaps Count von Elb sensed Sapper's approach, or perhaps he actually heard the thundering Bentley engine. At any rate he twisted around in the seat and took a look. The look lasted maybe a split second, and then the German ace whirled toward the north and the darkness and at the same time went streaking madly down in a power dive. A harsh laugh spilled off Sapper's lips and memory pictures flashed across his brain. Memory pictures of poor helpless fledglings, or pilots with jammed guns, doing exactly what von Elb was doing now. Tearing frantically down in a power dive to escape the certain hell that roared in from behind.

"And are you thinking of them, too!" Sapper grated and slid his fingers up to the trigger trips. "Well, how do you like it? How does it make you feel? And, damn your lousy soul to hell—how do you like this?"

As the last word ripped off his lips



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Sapper jammed both trigger trips forward. The twin Vickers yammered and shook on their mountings and twin streams of hot tracers spewed straight down to rake the Fokker from prop to tail-skid. As though a comet had crashed into it from the side, the German plane lurched sidewise through the air and then tilted up vertically on its wing tips.

"Great sport isn't it, rat?" Sapper howled, and jabbed the trigger trips again.

The Fokker rocked and bucked around in the air like a leaf in a gale of wind. And then suddenly a sheet of red and orange flame streamed out from under the Mercedes. The slipstream caught it and wrapped it back over the entire ship like a blanket. And a moment later a mass of raging flame went spilling earthward, leaving behind a long trail of oily smoke and sparks that continually changed color in the white glare of the magnesium flares.

"There he is, Mike, old kid," Sapper breathed softly and pulled up out of his wing-howling power dive. "He's all yours, now."

SWINGING back into the magnesium flare area, he took a long look around and chuckled softly. There wasn't a Fokker pilot trying to break through the Yank planes and tear eastward to home. No, instead, every German in the air was striving to climb westward into the darkness, and right behind each was a pilot from Thirty-One closing in at top speed. And even as Sapper watched them he saw three German planes suddenly stop trying to climb, and go nosing over and down in a long glide earthward, with the prop motionless across the nose.

"And the rest will go down in a minute or so," Sapper murmured. "So the boys can have their fun while I go home and get a couple of drinks up on them."

As a matter of fact, Sapper had three good drinks under his belt by the time the rest of Thirty-One landed and taxied up

to the lines. A moment later, headed by Wilson and Barker, they came tumbling into the mess, wide-eyed with amazement, and a hundred and one comments spilling off their lips.

"Those we didn't get went down with dead engines!" somebody cried.

"We got every damned one out of the air!" shouted somebody else.

"They didn't have guns!" exclaimed a third.

"You knew?" Wilson cried. "You knew it was going to be like that?"

"Why the hell didn't you tell us?" Barker demanded.

Sapper held up his hand for silence, and then stared thoughtfully at his fourth drink for a moment. Then he looked at them and grinned.

"Yes, I knew how it would turn out," he said slowly. "At least I was hoping like hell it would be that way. But I didn't tell you everything, because . . . well, because I didn't know you all as well as I know you know. I mean, that even after what happened to Mike Carter and the others, some of you might still cling to your code of combat fighting ethics. But when you fight rats like von Elb and his brood, you fight them their way, see? Give it to them the way they give it to you, and to hell with the rules!"

Sapper paused and took a sip.

"I know something about *flechette* dropping," he continued. "Enough of them to do any damage weigh a hell of a lot. It means you must sacrifice other weight on your ship. And what? Three things. Your guns, your ammo, and your gas. Last night I flew to von Elb's field and dropped a note telling him to go to hell, and that the next time he came over we'd come up after him and shoot him out of the sky. Get that? I said we'd *come up*. That told von Elb, of course, that we weren't wise yet to what he was pulling, so of course he'd raid again. But while I was over there I got down close enough

to see that the Fokkers didn't carry guns, just as I expected. So that meant that they carried little gas, too. Enough to get them over at high altitude and back."

"But why keep the magnesium flares a secret?" Wilson demanded.

"I guess I'm just a careful guy," Sapper grinned. "There've been cases of Hun spies in Yank squadrons, so I decided until the right time that nobody would know we'd have plenty of light in which to see them. You see, even if a spy told von Elb we were wise to his trick, he'd still continue his raids, knowing that he and his gang could slip by us in the dark. And his *second* raid, which we wouldn't expect, would knock us dizzy, see? So I just made sure there'd be no second raid."

"I see," Wilson nodded. "But here's hoping that those we forced down after their gas was gone will be caught before they can sneak back through the lines to Germany."

"They'll be caught," Sapper said quietly. "Colonel Blair arranged for every Yank soldier and officer in the entire area to keep his eyes open for forced-landing Fokkers. And, by the way, using weapons such as *flechettes* is just as bad as being caught as a spy. In short, each one of those rats will be tried and shot. And if any of you lads care to be a member of the firing squad, I guess Colonel Blair can arrange it."

But Wilson slowly shook his head.

"I got two, and that's enough," he said. "And . . . to give it to you straight, Major—it wouldn't have made any difference to me even if you had told me they wouldn't be carrying Spandaus. Carter, and the others, didn't have a chance to shoot back, so why should those rats get a break?"

"That's the idea I had in mind," Sapper said quietly.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Barker cried suddenly and almost dropped his glass in his excitement. "The mechanics here at the field! They must have dropped those *flechettes* while we were closing in, and. . . ."

The chunky pilot stopped and stared bewildered at the grin on Sapper's face.

"But didn't they?" he gulped and let his mouth hang open.

"Sure," Sapper nodded. "I guess I didn't tell you about that, did I? That was also a part of Colonel Blair's job. I flew to Wing last night to get him to have the searchlight unit stationed south of us transferred to an equal distance to the north of us. If you look at the map you'll see that makes the center of the triangle the Issy swamp. That's where their *flechettes* are, if you want one for a souvenir. But, personally, I think I want a drink instead."

And he had several.

THE END

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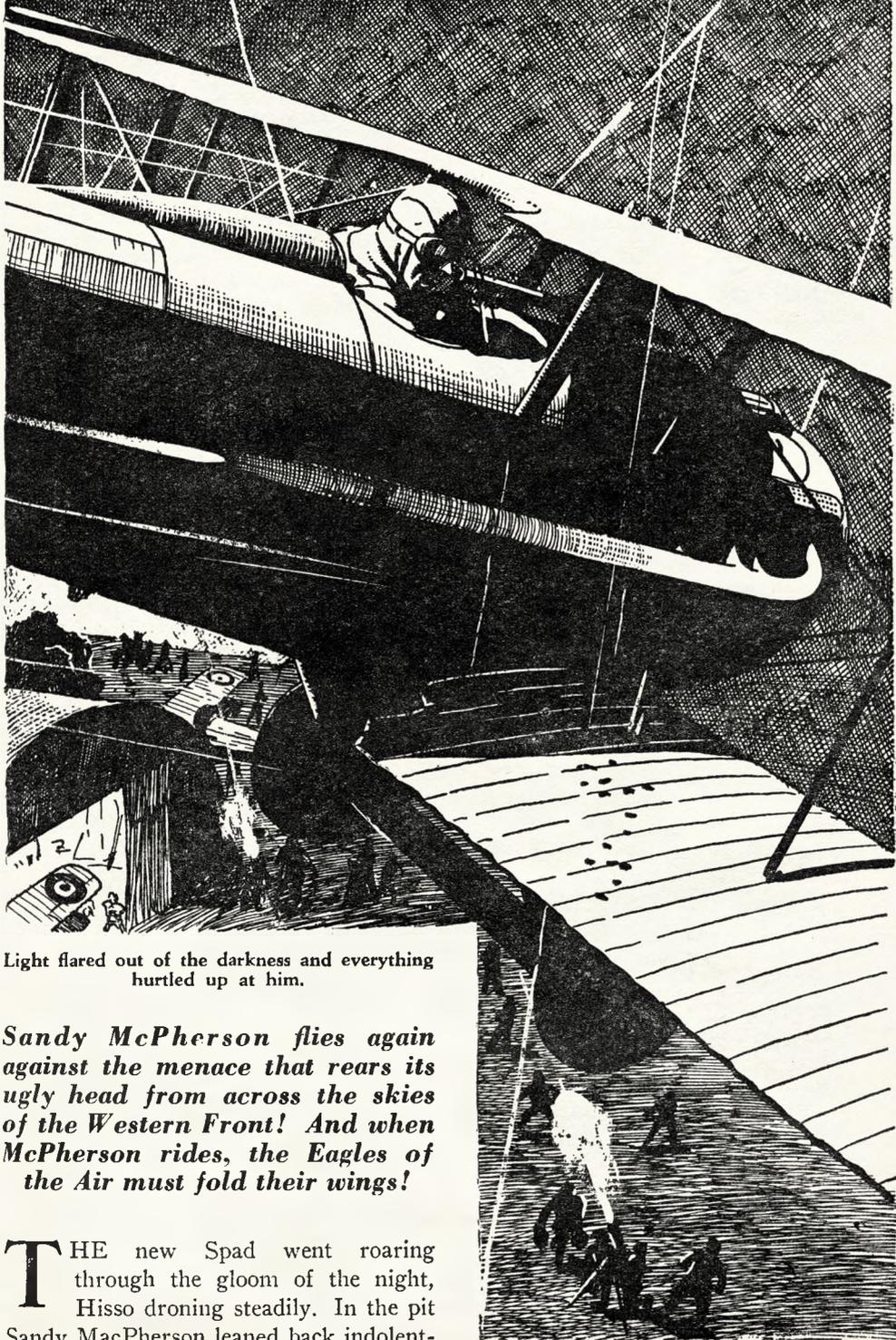
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TWENTY GRAND LEATHER STROPPED BLADES

WORLD'S PRODUCTS COMPANY, Spencer, Indiana

SOLO TO HELL by DARRELL JORDAN



Light flared out of the darkness and everything hurtled up at him.

Sandy McPherson flies again against the menace that rears its ugly head from across the skies of the Western Front! And when McPherson rides, the Eagles of the Air must fold their wings!

THE new Spad went roaring through the gloom of the night, Hisso droning steadily. In the pit Sandy MacPherson leaned back indolent-

ly, humming an old Highland ballad. From time to time he felt of a square box in the pocket of his flying coat, grinning contentedly. A careless glance overside assured him that he was on the right course. Below the Spad the Noire River lay, a thread of silver across the dark earth. Five minutes more, and he'd be slanting down for the landing at the 23rd's drome. Then, maybe, he'd get even with Captain Cabot—just for once.

MacPherson, better known to his flying mates as The Wild Scot, was coming back to the 23rd after two weeks spent in base hospital. The Fokker pilot who had put him there, however, had not lived to enjoy his triumph.

"'Twas luck, indeed, that I met that droonken ferry pilot an' persuaded him to let me fly this ship back," Sandy muttered. "As it is, I return to duty in the manner befitin' a MacPherson!"

He banked slightly, and below the Spad's wing saw the broad expanse of the 23rd's drome. Sandy shot the Spad howling down and flashed across the tarmac. He blurped the motor in the old signal for landing flares. For a moment nothing happened.

Sandy scowled. "'Tis a fine reception I get, comin' back covered with wounds an' glory! Hey, ye deaf limbs o' Satan, the MacPherson craves lights!"

At that moment the reception started. Sandy saw lights, also stars, fireworks and a few other things. It seemed to the dazed Scot as if all the machine guns in France had suddenly opened fire on him. Slugs whistled and crackled around his ears, and the floorboards danced beneath his generous-sized feet. On the ground the guns winked like the evil eyes of a dozen spitting snakes. Rifles and pistols joined in the din, and the new Spad fairly trembled under the impact of lead.

Without quite knowing how he got there, Sandy found himself circling the field several hundred feet higher.

"Fer the love o' Holy Loch Larnin!" he bellowed. "Ye black-hearted, dumb, deaf misfits, it's me!"

He shook a freckled fist at the ground, then glanced again around him. No, he had made no mistake. This was the 23rd, all right. That peculiar bend in the river just below the drome, and over yonder the stark ruins of the village.

"I'll try one more," he growled, "and Heaven help 'em if they make th' same mistake twice!"

Again he dragged the field, barking the landing signal from the Hisso's exhausts. If anything, the fire this time was even heavier than before. A slug creased Sandy's bare knee, and he jumped convulsively. Then, abruptly, the firing dropped off.

"Oh, so ye have seen the light?" Sandy roared. "Jest wait until I get my paws on ye! Oh, I'll make the miserable lot o' ye sorry, or my name ain't Sandy Frasier MacPherson. If ye think—"

He broke off weakly as his eyes picked up three shapes scurrying across the surface of the field. Red dots of flame came from exhaust stacks as the three ships below left the ground and zoomed upward. Sandy's bulging eyes were fixed on the wings of the climbing planes. A pale moon slid from the clouds, bathing the earth in a dim glow. What Sandy saw were Iron Crosses, distinct and ominous.

"Boches!" Sandy bellowed. "Th' field is over-run with bloody Huns!"

Simultaneously he whirled the Spad and dove at the nearest of the Fokkers. Breathing a thankful oath that the Spad carried newly mounted Vickers, Sandy pressed the stick triggers. A line of tracer stabbed out into the darkness. The leading Fokker dodged, but Sandy held the trips down and swung the Spad's nose gently. The burst of slugs hosed the Fokker from prop to tail skid and it jerked convulsively. For a second it hung in a stall, then fell off on one wing, and the

climbing Hun below it barely escaped a collision. Before the startled German could recover his wits, Sandy was sidslipping in on him. As the Fokker banked, the Scot snapped a short burst squarely into the exposed Mercedes. The Fokker staggered as the prop flew into a thousand fragments.

The third Boche was circling, firing wildly. "A shamefu' waste o' ammunition," Sandy growled. "If I had th' money yon berkie is throwing away with his crazy shootin'—"

He broke off, sent the Spad rushing straight at the last Hun. The Fokker turned and scudded away into the darkness, and a wild Highland battle song belled from Sandy's grinning lips.

"Hurray fer the MacPhersons!" he roared. "Long may they flourish! One guid Highlander kin lick the entire German army!"

Then, as he saw several more Fokkers rising to join in the battle, "Ah weel, maybe it would require two. An' now, my Prussian playmates, since the ammo seems about exhausted, I'll be joggin' along!"

With a mocking wave of his hand he whirled the Spad away into the gloom. "A fine welcome home fer a man just out of hospital," he complained. "Here I am, weak as a kitten, and the German Air Force kick me around. 'Twill be a wonder if I don't have a relapse!"

With every second the Spad was putting miles between the drome and what Sandy hoped was the American side of the lines. He realized now what had happened. During his stay in the hospital, the Huns had gained ground. The 23rd's drome, always too near the lines, had been abandoned, and the Huns had obviously established an advanced *staffel* there.

"An' they didn't bother to notify me," Sandy grumbled. "Left me to run my neck into a trap. I'll bet 'tis all the fault of that bean-eatin' son o' Boston, Captain Cabot!"

Scanning the ground now, Sandy could make out the slashes that marked the new position of the lines. He crossed into American territory and began cruising in a wide circle. The longer he looked for a field, the hotter grew his wrath and the lower went his gas gauge. For months there had been a feud of long standing between the MacPherson and the aristocratic flight leader, Cabot. But the thought of the box in his pocket brought a grin to Sandy's battered features.

THEN, just as the Hiss was beginning to spit warningly, Sandy made out the outlines of a field below. He cocked the Spad over and sent it slanting down, and a moment later his wheels kissed a rough stretch of earth and the single seater wobbled to a stop. A pair of mechs came running up to the plane. It was the 23rd's new drome, by a lucky chance. MacPherson recognized the greaseballs.

"Welcome to our new home, Lieutenant," one of them chuckled. Then he dodged as Sandy clambered from the pit of the Spad.

"Shut yer blitherin' yap, ye greas-smear'd fraction o' nothin'," the Scot growled.

MacPherson went striding across the unfamiliar field, ripping off helmet and goggles. His uniform, like the man himself, was far from orthodox. Bright tartan kilts flapped about his bare knees, and on his red thatch of hair perched now a checked Highland cap. Major Bradford, C. O. of the 23rd, had long ago given up attempting to make Sandy conform to the ordinary uniform.

He growled a question to a field sergeant, then, following the non-com's directions, he went on into the hutment assigned to him. A moment later a hideous clamor came from the tent. A shrill skirling broke out in the peaceful air. It rose and fell in a wailing crescendo, finally dying away with a despairing bleat. All over

the field men looked at each other and shuddered.

"The MacPherson is back; better hunt cover. When you hear them damn' pipes of his squalling, something's ready to break!"

From Major Bradford's office a bull voice roared: "Stop that damned caterwauling! Can't a man rest in peace around this joint? That you, MacPherson? Come on in the mess shack. I want to see you!"

"Aye, an' I want to see you too, Major dear," Sandy growled.

He replaced the bagpipes with loving care, then drew the cardboard box from his pocket. He placed it on the bunk and removed the cover. Inside, coiled in a circle, was a remarkably clever mechanical rattlesnake. Sandy prodded it gently, and the rattles whirred and the snake's head shot forward, striking. Sandy chuckled, re-wound the contrivance, and stuffed it back in the box. With the box in his pocket he hurried over to the building which did duty as mess shack. A room in the rear was used by the C. O. and the three flight commanders as sleeping quarters.

In addition to Major Bradford, a half-dozen pilots were draped over the little bar in the mess shack. Captain Cabot emerged yawning from his room as Sandy entered.

"So the Wild Scot is back," Cabot jeered. "Have any trouble finding our new location, Lieutenant?"

"Well, well!" Major Bradford said uneasily. "We weren't looking for you so soon, MacPherson. You're entirely recovered, I hope?"

"I ain't recovered from the trap I ran into!" Sandy burred angrily. "I suppose it would ha' been puttin' you to too much trouble to have notified me of th' change? I ran right into a bunch of Huns when I tried to land at the old field!"

"We hardly expected you to fly back," the C. O. explained. "But you were noti-

fied. You attended to that, didn't you, Captain Cabot?"

Cabot scratched his head. "Now did I forget that? Stupid of me, wasn't it?"

"I'll show ye jest how stupid!" Sandy roared.

He lunged forward, and one flailing fist sent Cabot sprawling. The Bostonian was up instantly, jabbing a hard left to Sandy's nose. As the claret began to flow Sandy drove both fists into the Captain's midriff. Cabot's breath whooshed from his lungs and he sat down weakly, holding both hands to his pajama-clad middle.

"I may be a puir, sick man jest outa hospital, but I kin still lick th' entire population o' Boston!" Sandy roared. "Up on yer feet, ye decayin' remnant o' aristocracy, and I'll finish th' job!"

"Here, here!" the Major roared. "That'll be enough of that!"

Pilots flocked between the two scrapers, forcing them apart. In the confusion that followed Sandy managed to slip into Cabot's room. Three seconds later he was back, grinning contentedly.

"'Tis fortunate that, as ever, I was fully on the alert," he began, "otherwise the bloody Huns might have downed me. I will now regale you with an account of me blood-chilling adventure."

"You guys can listen to his bilge if you want," Cabot sneered, climbing to his feet. "I'm going back to bed!"

He turned into his room and they heard the bed squeak. The next moment there came a horrible scream. Cabot came flying into the mess room, purple pajamas flying, his eyes bulging with horror. He was clasping his leg desperately, and his face was snow-white.

"A snake bit me!" he screamed. "I'm dying! Do something, can't you? You fools, can't you see—"

Sandy winked to the milling pilots and disappeared into Cabot's room. When he reappeared he was holding the psuedo rattler by the tail.

"Here's th' vile reptile what bit ye," he said, waving the thing before Cabot's glazed eyes. "A handsome specimen of the Americanus Rattelosus. Cabot, puir mon, I fear yer minutes are numbered!"

"Do something, you fool!" Major Bradford yelled. "Can't you see the man's dying before your eyes?"

"I ha' me doots," Sandy drawled, producing a key from his pocket and winding the snake vigorously.

As the light dawned on the others a roar of laughter nearly lifted the roof. Cabot straightened up, his face scarlet. "I'll get you for that, MacPherson, if it's the last thing I ever do!"

"Undootably it will be," Sandy chuckled. He replaced the snake and tossed it on the table. "I trust ye brought along all of my effects when ye changed base?"

"I packed everything," a pilot said. "Everything except that old pair of boots in your tent. They weren't worth it."

"Whaaat?" Sandy yelled. "Ye dinna mean to say ye didn't bring those boots?" Ah, losh! I'm a ruined man! Five hoondred frons—gone!"

"What're you talking about?" Bradford scowled.

"My money, my five hoondred frons!" Sandy moaned. "They were stuffed in th' toe o' one o' them boots. Left to the gros-pin' paws of th' bloody Huns. A vurrible fortune. . . gone!"

CABOT leaned against the wall, roaring with laughter. Major Bradford scowled impatiently. "Never mind your money, MacPherson. That isn't what I called you all in here for. Now if the horseplay is all over, maybe I can get down to business. The fact is that an important paper is missing since we changed base. The day that Sandy went to the hospital, Colonel Raines of Staff brought me a list giving the location of every squadron in this sector. He left it with

me, so that a means of cooperation could be worked out for the coming counter-attack. Now I can't find the paper. We've searched everywhere, but it's gone. The Colonel will scalp me if it's lost. Now, has anybody seen such a paper?"

Heads were shaken and there was a chorus of muttered noes. Only Sandy was paying no attention. He sat, holding his head in his hands.

"Five hoondred frons!" he moaned. "That day I was wounded I sat in the Operations office, waitin' fer transportation to th' hospital. Well knowing th' light-fingered tendencies o' hospital orderlies, I wropped th' frons in a paper from the desk, an' takin' it to me quarters, stuffed it in the toe o' them old boots. Now it's gone. I'm ruined, I tell ye!"

"What?" Bradford roared. "You wrapped your damned money in a *paper from my desk*? Oh, you hollow-headed, damned, useless ass! Don't you realize what you've done? That paper is in your damned old boots in your damned old Nissen at the damned old field! The Huns are there now! They'd give plenty for that list! MacPherson, you rattle-headed Scotchman, you've raised hell! Now the Germans know the location of every squadron in the sector!"

"Puirhaps they haven't found it yet," MacPherson said hopefully. "D'ye suppose they'd send my money back if they found the paper? Foosh, mon, ye needn't strike me!"

Bradford struggled in the grip of two pilots. "Oh, if I only had a gun!" he gasped. "If Colonel Raines ever finds this out, MacPherson, I'll kill you by inches!"

"Come, come, puir mon! Pull yersel' together. I'll go back fer my money, and if th' paper is lying around hondy I'll gladly fetch it back. Ye dinna seem to realize the long, hard hours av honest labor with loaded dice I spent accumulatin' that five hoondred frons! Ah weel—"

He paused as a car skidded to a halt outside. Feet clattered, and through the door came three staff officers. At their head was fat, pompous Colonel Raines.

"As you were, gentlemen," he rasped. "Only have a moment, Bradford. Stopped by to pick up that squadron list."

Bradford gulped. "Yes, sir. I'll—I'll send it in the morning—"

"In the morning! Damn it, man, I want it now. Snap it up, will you? What are you choking about? Say, you haven't—lost—that—list, have you?"

As the Major floundered, Cabot spoke up. "This idiotic Scotchman here, hid his money in it, and left it in an old pair of boots back at the old field!"

Sandy wet his lips nervously as the Colonel's fiery eyes swung to him. For the next five minutes the silent pilots were treated to an exhibition of catch-as-catch-can cursing that made them blush enviously.

"You're under arrest!" Raines blared at Sandy. "Bradford, I'll have your neck if those papers aren't recovered! If the Huns find them it means we'll have to re-base every squadron in the sector. If we do that, we can't get aerial cooperation in the attack. We can't call off the attack now!"

He paced the floor, fuming. "Here's what I'll do. The man who returns that list gets two weeks in Paris—after the attack. Yes, and I'll add a further inducement. He'll get a thousand francs, too! But if it isn't recovered, I'll raise so much hell with this outfit you'll all wish you'd never been born! What'll the General say when he hears—I'll give you twenty-four hours!"

"A thousand francs," murmured Sandy. "A handsome sum. Five hoondred and one thousand—"

"You aren't in this, MacPherson!" the Colonel yelled. "I'll attend to you later!"

He turned to the door, glaring. Noticing the box on the table, he idly lifted the

cover as he fumbled for a cigarette. As the snake buzzed and struck, Colonel Raines squawked hoarsely and neatly jumped backward the length of the room. Sandy could not repress a sick grin. Raines, his gun wavering in his hand, suddenly tumbled to the fact that the snake was a toy. He turned a terrible glance on Sandy.

"That thing yours?"

Sandy nodded unhappily. "A fun lovin' clan, us MacPhersons," he croaked, stowing the snake away again.

Raines reluctantly shoved the gun back into the holster. "Just wait!" he whispered. "Just wait! Oh, I'll remember all this, Lieutenant!"

Sandy decided suddenly that his popularity was on the wane. He ambled disconsolately to his quarters, and a moment later the mournful wailing of the pipes smote the air.

LATER the following afternoon Cabot returned from a trip to the sizable town of Renault. He stopped to jeer at MacPherson, who stood, deep in thought, at the bar.

"Just wanted you to know that I'm off tonight to collect that thousand francs. And of course, if I should happen to find five hundred extra, that comes under the head of buried treasure. You know—finders keepers. But maybe I'll buy you a drink, Mac, old chap!"

"And don't forget, you're to stay here on the field." Bradford warned Sandy later in the day. "You're strictly out of this treasure hunt."

Long after dark that night Sandy heard a Spad take off with a roar. He scowled. That would be Cabot, he felt sure.

"The blitherin' bean-eater will be sure to gum th' works," he growled. "This job requires the delicate touch of a MacPherson!"

For an hour Sandy fumed and fretted. Then abruptly he came to a decision. He

couldn't be in much more trouble, no matter what he did. He darted out of his tent, noting that lights still flickered dimly from Major Bradford's office. He made his way to the hangars and gave a gruff order to the sergeant in charge.

"But," the non-com stammered uneasily, "I thought—"

"No, ye didn't," Sandy growled. "Ye dinna have the equipment. Will ye have my ship rolled out quietly, or will I twist yer scrawny neck?"

Muttering something about the lesser of two evils, the crew chief gave the order. A moment later Sandy sat in the pit, anxiously watching oil pressure and tachometer. He kept one eye on the Operations office, and in a moment Major Bradford emerged and came trotting toward the hangars.

"What ship is that, Sergeant?" he called. "I've given no orders—MacPherson, is that you?"

"If it ain't I've been foolin' myself fer years!" Sandy roared. "So-long, Major! I'll see ye in th' sweet bye-and-bye!"

As Bradford cursed and broke into a run, Sandy poured the gas to the warning motor. The Hisso choked, then broke into a full throated roar. Like an arrow launched from the bow, the Spad shot down the field and clawed heavily into the air. Once off the ground, Sandy wasted no time. Hedge-hopping across the river, he lined toward the Front.

He had no plan; he only knew that in some way he must beat Cabot to the recovery of the lost papers. The pride of the MacPhersons demanded that. As he approached the lines he swung in a wide curve, one that would bring him to the old drome of the 23rd from German territory. He shivered as the icy cold bit through his clothes. His bare knees turned blue and Sandy swore.

"Th' kilties are a grand garment, but they were no' exoctly designed fer sub-zero flyin'," he muttered.

There was a small field within a half mile of the main drome now occupied by the German *staffel*, and toward that field Sandy gunned the Spad.

Through the faint gray light that hangs always in the sky at night, the MacPherson stared alertly. He had his landmarks well located, and in any event he could have found the old drome with his eyes shut.

Abruptly a wild shout cut through the clamor of the straining motor. A gray shape slid past the Spad's nose so closely that Sandy instinctively ducked. He whirled the scout around wildly, his eyes sweeping the gloom. There it was again, the familiar outlines of a Fokker. At that instant Sandy forgot all the need for secrecy. The old battle urge rose in his blood and he tripped both Vickers and charged in.

The Fokker whirled on one wing, and Sandy shot the stick forward and cut around in pursuit. Up went the Boche ship in a dizzy climb. Sandy jerked the Spad's nose up and sent a long burst stabbing out at the Fokker. He missed the pilot's head by inches, but gained his purpose. Instead of continuing the climb the Fokker rolled, slipped to the left. Again Sandy sent slugs pounding down. The Fokker reeled and made the fatal mistake of attempting to outdive the Spad. Sandy, roaring his battle song, fastened like a leech on the Fokker's tail. Motors screaming shrilly, they went plummeting down.

Suddenly the thunder of the Mercedes rose to a maniacal screech as the flailing prop dissolved in a hail of fragments. Then, as the Hun pilot cut his switch, Sandy closed his own throttle. In a sudden silence both ships slanted toward the small field adjacent to the drome. The Fokker leveled at the last moment and struck hard. The wheels bounced as the black-crossed fighter rolled on, then abruptly they dropped into a ditch and the Fokker pitched forward upon its nose.

Sandy jockeyed the Spad in nearby and coasted to a halt beside the tilted Fokker. The Hun pilot was in the act of dropping to the ground when Sandy charged up.

He seized the enemy flyer in steel fists. "Just a minute, me square-headed night owl!" he growled.

THE next moment he relaxed in dumfounded surprise at the stream of good American oaths that greeted his ear. Moreover, those oaths were in the cultured tones of Captain Montgomery Cabot!

"You utter, asinine damned fool!" Cabot snarled. "You've gummed the works for fair now! Here I go to the trouble of borrowing this captured Fokker from the 39th, of getting forged credentials and everything set for a try at the papers, and you come barging in and spoil everything. Now we'll have to—"

He broke off abruptly, snatching a Luger from his pocket. "You are my prisoner, *Mein Herr!*" he snapped in German.

"Th' hell ye shout—" Sandy began.

He was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a squad of Huns, a pompous officer at their head. The two Yanks were surrounded instantly. A dozen gun muzzles were lined at their hearts. Cabot turned calmly to the officer.

"I was on my way to your field when I was attacked and shot down by this crazy American. I am Lieutenant Ulm-hof, from Intelligence."

He pointed to the wrecked Fokker. "I'm afraid my ship is a total loss, but the Spad, I believe, is uninjured. I suggest you send a pilot to bring it to the main field."

The *unter-offizier* saluted, but still kept a watchful eye on Cabot. "Very good, sir. Now if you will please accompany us to the field, I will take you to Major Schacht."

With bayoneted Mausers prodding his back, Sandy was marched toward the 23rd's old drome. Beside him, Cabot swung along without a word. Ten minutes later they reached the drome. Several pilots appeared, and at the non-com's explanation one of them set off after the Spad. Cabot and Sandy were escorted across the tarmac to the commander's office. A moment later they were confronting a fat German Major across a battered desk. Cabot repeated his story.

"I was sent here by Intelligence to make a thorough search of the drome and buildings," he explained coolly. "The General thought that in their haste the Americans might have overlooked something that would be of value to us."

He tossed identification papers on the desk and Major Schacht glanced at them casually.

"Everything seems in order," he grunted. "We have searched, but possibly we missed something. You may look around."

He turned to the guards. "You have taken this prisoner's gun, of course? Then you may go. I will question him myself."

"Alone, *Herr Major?*" the non-com hesitated. "I know these crazy Scotchmen. They are dangerous—"

"I said get out!" the Major roared. "Do you think that I, Major Schacht, cannot take care of myself with one of these skirted *schwein?*"

As the guards went out, Major Schacht laid a heavy Luger pistol close to his hand.

"Now, *mein freund,*" he snapped. "Empty your pockets, please! And remember, at the first sign of trouble I shall shoot!"

"Ye're a hopeful berkie," Sandy muttered, "expectin' anything from a Scot's pockets! However," as Schacht scowled, "I'm only too glad to oblige!"

He carefully drew watch, money and odds and ends from his pocket and placed them on the desk. Suddenly he paused.

His fingers had encountered a familiar box in his side pocket. Of course, the mechanical snake! He laid it carefully on the desk.

"Aha, what's this?" the Major snapped, reaching forward.

"Jest a moment," Sandy said swiftly. He had a vision of Schacht shooting him in cold blood after being startled by the snake. "'Tis only fair to tell ye—"

"Shut up!" Schacht snarled. With a quick motion he snatched off the lid. The next moment the German stood poised in horrified amaze at sight of the mottled green body in the box. There was a muffled rattle, then, with a hoarse cry, Schacht jerked back. Too late! A sinuous shape lunged at him. Gleaming fangs nipped his hand.

Sandy's heart was in his mouth. That was a real snake! Not a toy, but a live, healthy rattler! In a flash he remembered Cabot's trip away from the tarmac that day. Cabot had switched snakes to get even! Torpid with the cold while in the plane, the snake was now warmed up and lively.

With a swift step Sandy was at the desk. As the bulging eyed German fumbled with the Luger, Sandy caught his hand.

"Quiet, ye fool! Ye have been bit by th' deadly American rattler! If ye yell I won't tell ye how to save yerself!"

SCHACHT, his face turning green, sank in a quivering heap of panicky flesh. "Only I can save ye," Sandy went on swiftly. "I can tell ye th' antidote."

"*Mein Gott!*" Schacht groaned. "Tell me, man! Can't you see I'm dying?"

"First, I want to know something," Sandy snapped. "When ye took over here a few days ago, did ye find a pair of old boots in a tent? Boots with money in 'em? Okay, where are they?"

"The boots, I don't know," the German gasped. "The money, it is in that drawer.

I have taken none of it; it is still wrapped up. For *Gott's* sake, hurry!"

Sandy dug into the drawer and rummaged. A second later he was clutching his roll of francs. The innocent looking paper was still wrapped around them. It was obvious that as yet the Huns had not realized that paper's true value.

"Noo fer th' antidote," Sandy snapped. He twisted a tourniquet around Schacht's wrist, and mumbled the formula in the Hun's ear. As he finished, to Sandy's disgust the Major fainted.

For the next five minutes the only sound in the office was the monotonous drone of Sandy's voice. "Four hoondred ninety-seven, four hoondred ninety-eight . . . ah, I've been robbed! Two frons missin'! Why, th' dishonest dogs!"

Indignantly he fumbled in the unconscious Major's pocket and pulled out a ten franc note. "Interest," Sandy told him, "at th' legal rate!"

Jamming money and paper in his pocket, he turned toward the door. As he passed the desk something stung his hand sharply. He looked down into the beady eyes of the rattler, at the tiny drop of blood pulsing from his hand.

Sheer horror gripped him. He had entirely forgotten the snake. In a burst of fury he seized the reptile and crammed it into the box.

"I'll throw ye so far, ye slimy, murderin' creature, ye'll never chew on another mon!"

Jamming the box in his pocket, he lurched through the door. "MacPherson," he moaned, "Ye're proctically a dead mon! Aweel, at th' least ye can go out like a true Hielander!"

As he lurched toward the hangars, he heard hoarse voices approaching. Sandy saw no cover in sight, and did the only thing possible. Seizing one of the hangar guy ropes, he swung himself desperately up upon the sloping canvas roof. Looking down he saw a forlorn figure being

marched past by two soldiers. The prisoner was Cabot.

"So they got wise to ye, ye bean-eatin' numbskull!" Sandy grunted. "Ah weel, I suppose 'tis up to th' strong to protect th' weak! Here goes nothin'!"

With the words he launched his body recklessly into space. His full flying weight plummeted down upon the guards, and they collapsed with a yell as Sandy's fists swung furiously.

"This way!" he snarled at the stunned Cabot. "Up on th' hangar roof!"

Just in time the two Yanks drew themselves up out of sight as soldiers appeared below. Then came a new yell from the office.

"The Yankee *schwein* has overpowered the *Kommandant!* Guard all hangar doors!"

Sandy cursed as he hitched his way toward the top of the hangar. Suddenly he paused and drew a handful of matches from his pocket. Snapping them into flame, he thrust them against the oil-soaked canvas. Fire spurted up instantly, and ahead of it the two Americans climbed up the slippery slope. The flames spread with terrifying swiftness, shooting across the hangar roof.

"The hangars are afire!" a harsh voice roared. "Get those planes out!"

Beneath them the two fugitives could sense a hurly-burly of frenzied haste. Motor after motor burst into life as mechs and pilots gunned them from the burning hangars. At the peak of the roof Sandy fumbled until he found one of the posts that supported the canvas. With the flames crackling at his heels, he gruffed an order to Cabot. Desperately they jammed a hole in the rotted fabric. Then, like two fantastic firemen, they slid down the pole into the inferno of the hangar.

In the smoky bedlam they passed unnoticed. Sandy practically flung Cabot into the pit of a Fokker. Leaping around to the nose, he twisted the prop. Cabot threw

on the switch and the Mercedes caught. As the Fokker lurched forward, Sandy hurled himself at the nearest plane. He had just time to note that it was his own Spad, which had just been brought in, and that the Hisso was turning over, when a grease monkey lunged at him.

Sandy swung a knotted fist. The mech went down, screaming. The next second Sandy was in the pit, gunning the Hisso wide. He shot through the dimly seen doors like a meteor. Down the field, Cabot was just taking the air. Rifle fire slapped at Sandy as he hurtled past, and Fokkers moved forward as comprehending pilots leaped into the pits. Cabot was in the air now, and roaring back to strafe the field.

With slugs whining close to his shrinking ears, Sandy shot into the dark sky as behind him the Fokkers whistled in pursuit. For a moment Sandy had forgotten, but now he remembered suddenly. He had been bitten by a deadly snake; he had only minutes to live. He motioned violently to Cabot.

"Go on! I'll hold th' Huns back. I'm dyin' anyhow, ye might as well save yer skin!" He gulped. "I even fergive ye, Cabot, ye black-hearted hell-cat!"

He whirled on the Fokkers with the fury of a berserk eagle. Before that reckless display of daring two Huns went down. The others, stunned by the swiftness of their companions' deaths, pulled back uncertainly. In that moment Sandy banked and thundered toward home.

HE LANDED beside Cabot a short time later, back on the 23rd's new drome. Staggering over to the Bostonian, he drew back a cocked fist.

"Plant a deadly riptile on me, will ye?" he snarled. "Get me bit to death, will ye? I'll—"

"Wait!" Cabot begged. "It was only a joke, Sandy. I bought that snake from the little museum in Le Blenault yesterday. But they'd taken the poison from his

fangs. Understand? The snake won't have any poison for a couple of weeks yet. Maybe just enough to make a man a little sick if he got bit, but nothing dangerous—"

A grin spread across Sandy's craggy face. "Then I ain't dyin'? Ah weel, I'll live to be court-martialed for this, then! Just on general principles, Cabot!"

He swung a blow from his heels and Cabot went over backward and stayed there. Sandy swaggered into the Operations office, and nonchalantly tossed the snake box on the desk. Colonel Raines was pacing furiously up and down, roaring at Major Bradford.

"So it's you!" both officers bellowed at once. "I'll have you fixed for this!" the Colonel went on. "Disobeying orders and everything! I wish Cabot would get back!"

"Ye didn't expect that berkie to accomplish anything, did ye?" Sandy remarked nonchalantly. "Why, right now, th' puir felly is asleep out on the field! But if this is what ye want, here it is!"

Both men pounced on the papers he tossed on the desk. "Furthermore, th' Heinies didn't know what was in it," Sandy went on. "Noo, Colonel, I'll trouble ye fer that pass an' th' thousand francs!"

Colonel Raines stuffed the paper in his pocket. "Francs?" he scowled. "That

offer didn't apply to you, MacPherson! You'll be lucky if I decide to forget the general court!"

His eyes fell on the box. "That damned thing again! I'll fix that!"

Sandy watched happily as Raines flung off the cover. For the third time that time the rattler hit his mark.

"Nice work, Chauncy," Sandy commenced.

"A real snake!" Raines gasped. "I'm bit! I'm dying! Do something, men!"

"If ye could see yer way clear to pass over the leave and one thousand francs, I feel sure I can fix ye up," Sandy offered to him.

"Anything, anything!" Raines babbled. "Here!"

He tossed a roll of bills at Sandy. "For God's sake, don't wait to count 'em!"

"A thousand francs," Sandy murmured. "A verra neat profit on five hoondred! An' remember, Colonel, I have a witness in Major Bradford. If ye renege ye'll be th' laughing-stock of th' Corps. To put it briefly, th' snake is harmless. I have na' doots but that a quart of castor oil will fix ye fine!"

He walked out, and a moment later the mournful wail of the bagpipes drifted across the drome. Again God was in his Heaven, and all was right with the MacPhersons.

THE END



FLIGHT OF THE DEATH BATTALION!



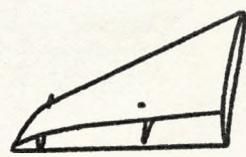
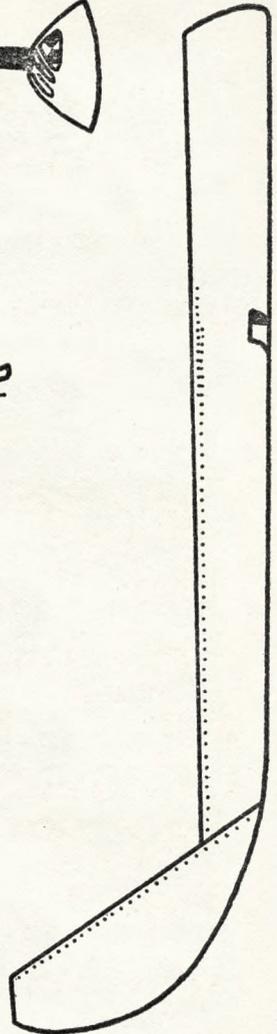
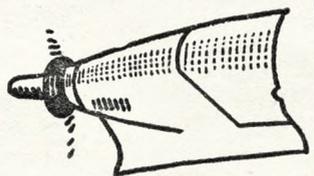
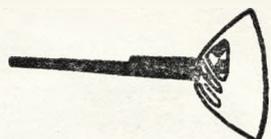
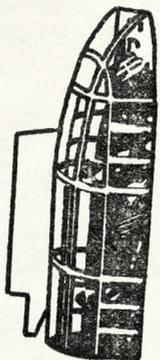
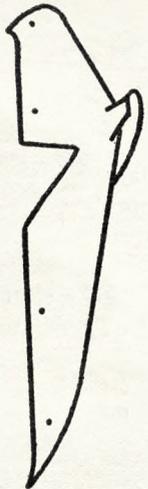
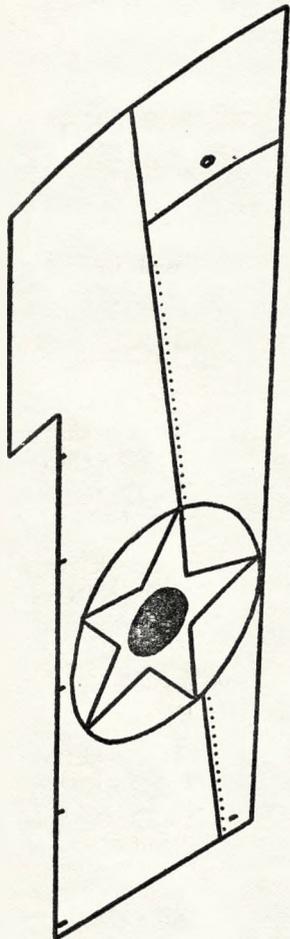
Once again G-8 flies in Battle Skies, but this time against a foe you've never met before; this time G-8 flies not to conquer, but to die! For only Death waits beyond, in the lonely patch of air where he must spread his wings, and Death, instead of medals are to be awarded by the Gods of War. And yet a fighting man is not dead until the last spade of earth is patted firm into his grave, and a man is not dead while his Battle Aces fly beside him—their hot guns speaking bravely, their torn flesh bleeding life, in the face of Doom—as they ride to a rendezvous with the FLIGHT OF THE DEATH BATTALION!



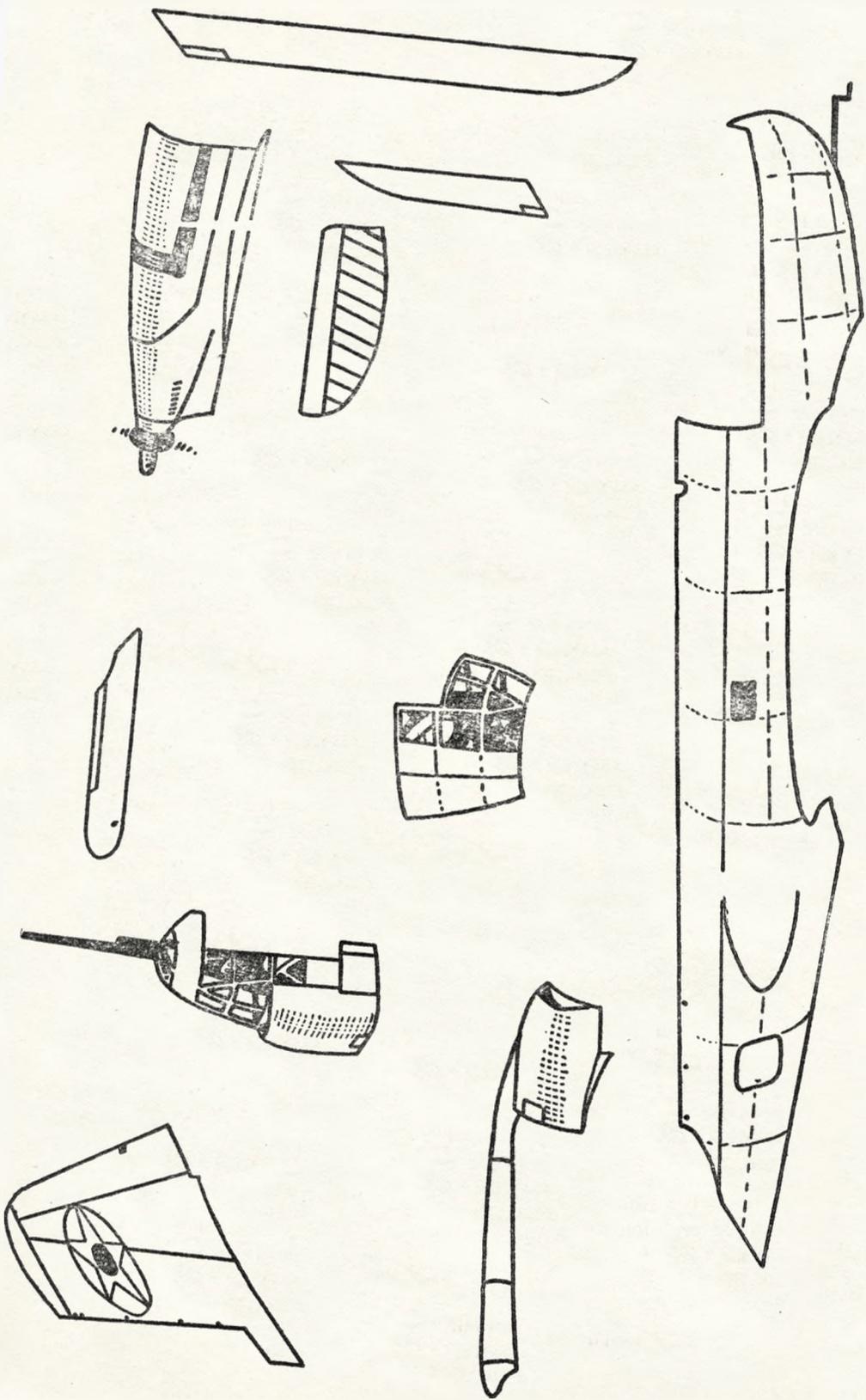
JUNE ISSUE ON SALE APRIL 29

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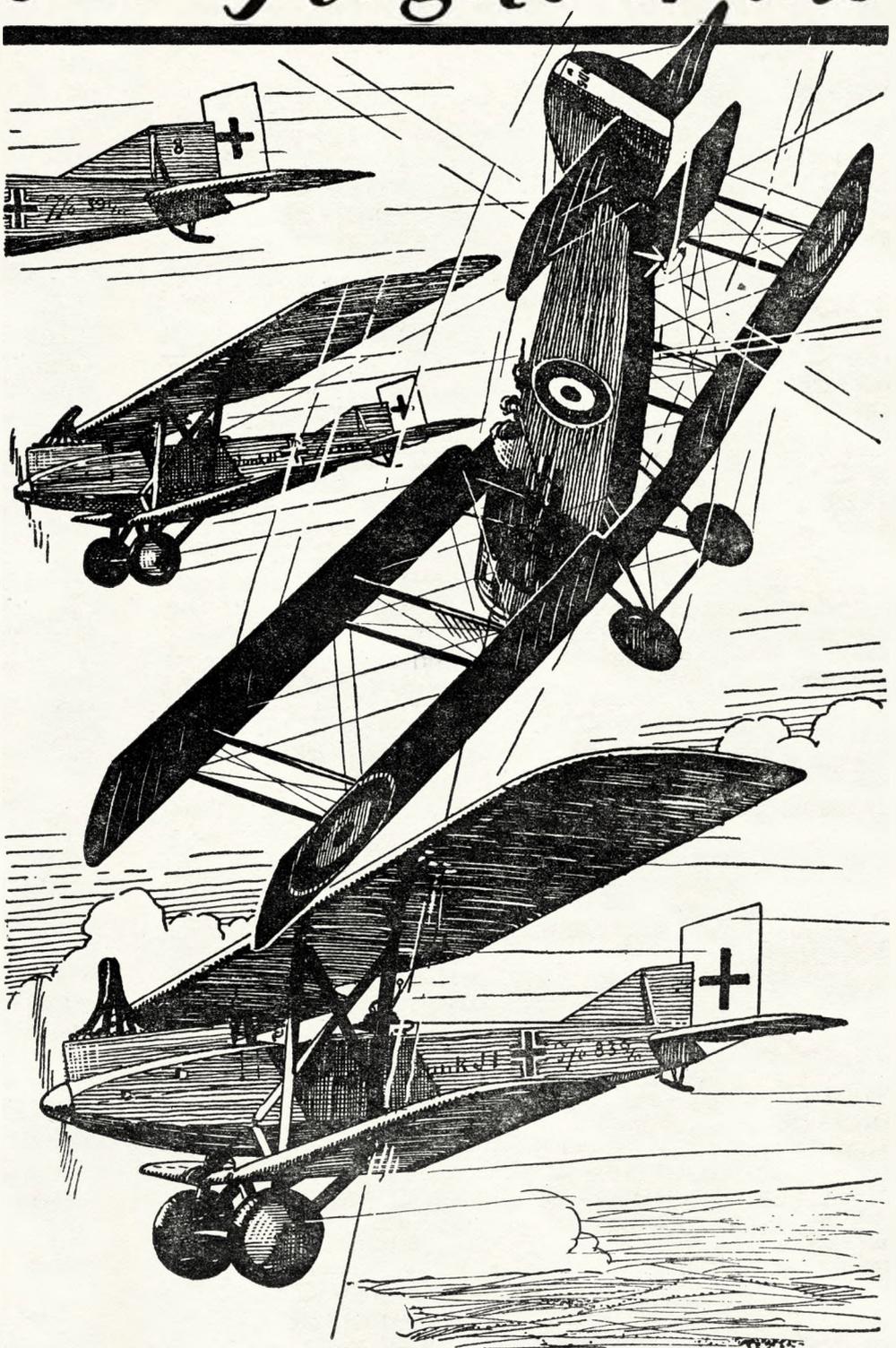


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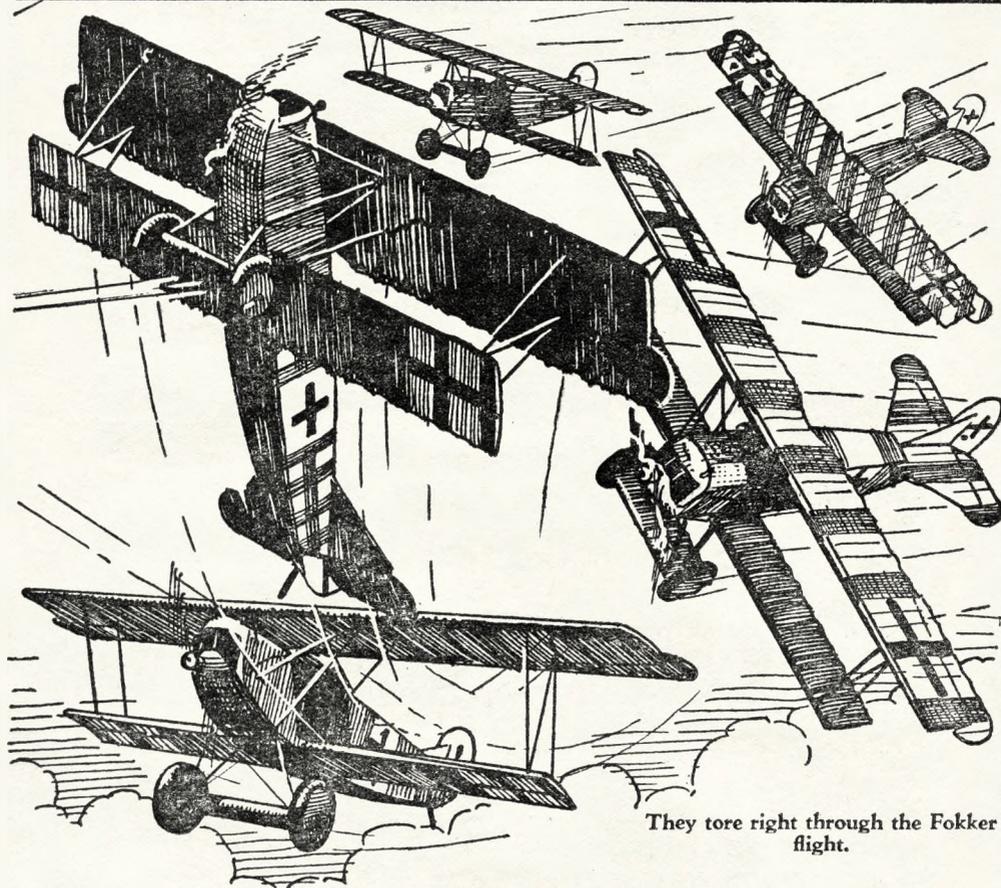


B-25

The Flight of the



Branded Ace BY O. B. MYERS



They tore right through the Fokker flight.

Back from the dead he came, this soldier of the sky. Back with the stain of blood on innocent hands, to a world he'd never known before! Jarret Falk flew and fought with a curse upon him, and with the unspoken scorn of his comrades eating the flesh of his heart. What could he do but fight? What could he do but blaze his own trail of bloody retribution, until some day he would meet the Vulture who had brought him this living death?

CHAPTER ONE

Grounded

IN EVERY direction as far as the eye could see stretched a limitless expanse of sun-baked rock and sand. It was not level, but rolled in a repeated succession of naked crests and desolate depressions, where the hot winds had drifted the sand into weird patterns. There was no

sign of life, other than a few isolated spots where clumps of stunted, thorny bushes defied the arid air. On this landscape, parched and barren as the grave, the blazing sun beat down with malignant intensity, so that the very atmosphere quivered with the appalling heat, turning the horizon into a vague blur. A breeze that was like the breath from a furnace sent dry dust swirling along the ridges with a faint



sound, fantastically like the rustling of stiff reeds.

A stifling August noon, in the middle of the Syrian desert.

In the awful stillness a gentle moan gradually became perceptible, and grew steadily to a throaty roar. Against the brazen glare of the sky two specks appeared, moving purposefully into the southwest. They had been clinging close to each other, flying side by side at the same level. But now one dropped below the other, sliding lower and lower in fitful, uneven steps. The drone of its engines was no longer a solid, smooth ribbon of sound, but cracked into a choking sputter; behind it trailed a fragile streak of dark-hued, ominous smoke. The planes were both Farmans, of French manufacture, but bore on their wings British insignia. This marked them as coming from one of Allenby's aerodromes near Beersheba—many, many miles to the westward.

The lower ship slipped lower still, now, and began to wheel in a wide circle. Its motor grew painfully worse, gasping horribly, back-firing in staccato barks. Suddenly, as it banked, the ground below erupted flame and smoke with a terrific roar; four times in succession, as four light bombs wasted their destructiveness on the barren, sandy floor of the Sirhan.

Immediately the plane gave up the futile struggle to stay aloft. Its exhausts softened to a rasping hiss; its glide steepened. The pilot, perforce, made preparations to land.

With a swoop and a flutter it levelled off above the earth. To the pilot's anxiously searching eye one spot looked just the same as another. For a few moments of breathless suspense it lost flying speed, then it settled gently and was rolling. For several rods it jounced along safely enough, slowing down, but then the wheels came to a spot where the sand was looser and deeper. They bit in, sank, and halted abruptly. The rest of the ship still had momentum, however; with a mild crumpling noise the tail rose as the plane upended itself on its nose.

The Farman was a pusher type, with the motor slung between upper and lower wings and the passengers sitting in a nacelle which stuck out in front like the prow of a boat. The nacelle therefore took the force of the half-completed somersault, and telescoped upon itself like paper. Luckily the shock was not great enough to tear the engine loose from its mountings. After a brief silence there was some scrambling, punctuated by a breathless curse or two, and a man tumbled to the ground. He was short and stocky, with a round, boyish face and a chubby figure, and was decked out for desert flying in helmet and goggles, khaki shirt and shorts, and a pair of brown sneakers; nothing else. He caught his balance and turned at once back to the plane.

"Falk! I say, old man, are you hurt?"

There was a grunt of disgust. "Hell, no! I'm caught in this blasted tangle. Lend me a hand, will you, Watley?"

Watley, the observer, started to obey. But then his attention was drawn upward. The other plane was circling low above him, and he could see two heads peering anxiously downward.

"No!" he yelled at the top of his lungs,

and waved his arms toward the west. "Go on, you fools! Don't try it! . . . No, go on home!"

For a minute it seemed as if his advice was going to be followed. The other Farman straightened out into the west, until it was distant enough to become indistinct in the heat haze. But then it banked again, and from beneath it came the shattering roar of exploding bombs, four times in quick succession. Watley knew well enough what that meant. The other pilot was getting ready to land.

He ran out in front of the plane, which was gliding now, and continued to wave his arms. But the ship dropped closer and closer, paying him no heed. As he saw its wheels touch, he stopped in his tracks. In another instant he was gasping with dismay.

From the sky the desert appeared like a floor, level enough almost to cast back the rays of the sun like a reflector. It was only when standing upon it that the surface irregularities could be perceived. The plane had hardly started to roll when it came to a shallow, drifted trough, invisible from above. The wheels dug in, throwing up a spray of sand, then they struck the other side—hard. The violent lurch threw the ship up into the air again, perhaps eight or ten feet. But with flying speed gone it could not stay there, and down it squashed, with force enough to crumple the undercarriage. In the next second it piled itself in an ugly heap of wreckage, splintering noisily.

Watley dashed toward it. One of the occupants had been hurled out, twenty feet away, but rose to meet him apparently unhurt.

"You all right, Herrington? Where's Coper?"

THEY found him quickly enough. He was dead. Coper had occupied the rear seat, and the heavy motor, breaking away from its moorings, had crushed him

like an eggshell. His own mother would have had difficulty recognizing him now. Herrington, who was tall and lean and brown, wiped sand from his eyes as he turned away.

"How's Falk? Did he get it, too?"

Now Watley remembered his own companion. "No. He said not. Let's go haul him out; he's stuck in there somehow."

It took only a few moments to free the other pilot, who was uninjured but cursing. The three stood and gazed at each other in mute consternation. Watley had unselfishly signalled the second plane not to land; his signals had been disregarded. But there were no reproaches uttered, either way. All realized, more or less, the desperate nature of their situation. By mutual consent Herrington took charge; in addition to the natural attributes of a leader, he was known to have had previous experience in the desert.

"Do you know where we are, Watley?"

The observer's round face was like putty beneath his mask of tan. "Somewhere east of Damascus," he said uncertainly. "We've been in the air more than two hours. It's hard to tell exactly where we are. We essed a devil of a lot, looking for that Turk relief train."

"And a hell of a lot of good it did," growled Falk. "After lugging these bombs



a few hundred miles, we drop them in the sand!"

"Well, that's neither here nor there," said Herrington impatiently. "We have to think of getting out of this, now. How is your ship, Falk? Can we fix her up?"

The pilot shook his head. "Bearings burnt out. This ghastly heat makes the oil run through like water. I kept her going as long as I could. She's a washout now, short of an overhaul."

A few minutes' inspection confirmed this definitely. The nacelle was only slightly damaged, and might have been patched up by using parts from the other. Only a complete overhaul would make that motor run again, and with but the usual small emergency kit of tools they were powerless to refit bearings. As a means of escape the planes were plainly out of the question.

Herrington said little, but his face was very serious. A growing horror was visible in Watley's eyes as he grasped the full extremity of their predicament. Falk only lighted another cigarette and cursed softly under his breath.

"It's my opinion we're a bit south of Damascus," said Herrington gravely. "At any rate, we've got to work west. The oasis at Azrak is probably the nearest objective to head for."

"How far do you think that is?"

"Herrington scowled. "Not more than two hundred miles."

"Good God!" whispered Watley in shaking tones, his eye glancing fearfully around the shimmering horizon.

Herrington hurried them through the preparations to start, issuing curt directions as to what to take with them, what to leave behind. Although already a vulture was wheeling overhead, they left Coper where he lay. To extricate his body would require time, and time had suddenly taken on a vital meaning. Besides, burying it in the sand would be a waste of effort anyway, since the first windstorm

would probably uncover it. Herrington took the compass from Falk's plane; each man saw that he had his revolver and ample ammunition. Herrington inspected all the canteens, including Coper's, and began drawing off the water from the radiator of the first Farman into an ammunition drum emptied of its contents.

"Hey, what's the idea?" expostulated Watley. "You don't think I want to drink that rusty stuff, do you?"

Herrington regarded him with dark meaning. "You'll wish to God you had more of it, in a few days. You'd better drink as much as you can hold, before we start."

Watley refused with a grimace, but Falk drank as deeply as he could of the warm, brackish liquid, though it nearly turned his stomach.

In less than half an hour after landing they were starting the long trek toward the west on foot. In addition to their canteens, each had a packet of iron rations. Herrington carried Coper's supply of food, and the extra drum of water; Falk carried the compass. They were three specks, lost in an immensity of space; three tiny evidences of life, surrounded by death. The sun beat down on them mercilessly, and its burning heat was reflected up into their faces by the rocks over which they trod. The hot sand burned through the soles of their shoes; each step raised a little cloud of dust to choke them. After an hour's plodding Herrington began to look around anxiously.

"If we find a patch of shade we'll stop and rest," he said. "It will be cooler going at night, when the sun is down."

But they found no shade. There was no vegetation but the burr-grass and the gnarled thorns, and none of the humped ridges was high enough to cast a shadow in the middle of the afternoon. Gasping for breath, streaming with sweat, they pressed on. It was nearly sunset when they found a hollow where lay a pool of

grateful shadow, and threw themselves down exhausted. Within twenty minutes Herrington had them on their feet again, driving them stubbornly onward.

SIX days later the three wanderers were hardly recognizable as human beings. Their clothes were in rags, their shoes falling apart, their feet blistered and swollen. The sun had baked their skin to leather, shrivelled and crackling like parchment. Not one of them could open his bloodshot eyes against the mid-day glare for more than a few seconds at a time. The food was gone. The water, rationed drop by drop, was running low. They walked with slow, creaking steps; occasionally one fell. They spoke but seldom, and when they did their voices were dry and ghastly, like the croaking of vultures.

"Oh, God!" moaned Watley. He had stumbled to his knees; the others halted quickly, as if glad of the excuse. "Wouldn't you think we'd meet someone—anyone? Not even a blasted Arab. . . ."

Herrington had to lick his lips twice, laboriously, before he could speak. "You'd better be thankful we haven't," he said grimly.

He knew well that an encounter with the Druse meant only to exchange one slow death for another. To the wandering tribes of this region uniforms meant little or nothing. Three helpless strangers were simply three opportunities for loot and ingenious torture.

"Let's rest," groaned Watley. "Just a while. My feet—"

"No," said Herrington firmly. "In an hour, when the sun goes down, we'll sleep in the cool. . . . Not before."

Watley struggled to his feet and they reeled onward. Up one slope of the trackless waste and down another, in endless, hopeless succession. Three bits of jetsam on an ocean of sand and salt and rock.

Into the cruel face of the declining sun

they fought their way up a low collar between two ragged crests. With head down, Falk kept his lips pressed tight together to keep the stifling dust out of his mouth, and glued his eyes to Herrington's heels. Suddenly the other's steps halted. Falk stopped too, and raised his head. He blinked through narrowed lids, lifted his hand to rub his eyes, and blinked again.

At first he felt like cursing. For several days now he had been seeing things like this, but purposely had said nothing about it. Doubtless the others, too, had been seeing mirages. But instead of vanishing into the quivering hazes of the distance, this one persisted. He was looking over a flat ridge into a valley of sand where already a lake of shadow was spreading invitingly. On the floor of this valley he saw a number of moving figures, men and camels. The men, the billowing folds of their *jelabias* muffling their faces, were struggling with a small tent and jerking at the animal's packs, obviously either preparing or breaking up an encampment.

Falk was too stunned to move or speak. His brain had all it could do to grasp the fact that those were human beings like himself, in the midst of all this barren desolation. Who they were, why they were here, did not register yet. It seemed years since he had seen anyone but his two companions. Suddenly from behind his shoulder came a hoarse scream. Watley, his face working spasmodically, dashed past Falk's elbow and down the slope into the valley at a shambling, drunken trot. Herrington clutched for him, but missed.

Falk was on the point of following, when he saw one of the Arabs raise his head. A yell rang out. Watley ran on, staggering from side to side. There were hurried movements down below; a rifle banged, and a puff of dust appeared on the slope. Watley was still running when the second shot roared, but he halted, reeling, when the third bullet crashed.

"Come back, you fool!" shrieked Herrington. "They'll kill you!"

Two shots cracked out together. Watley turned, his face a mask of terror and despair. Dropping behind a rock, Falk watched his observer labor back toward him, bullets chipping at his heels. When he pitched forward at Herrington's feet, the two of them dragged him, sobbing curses, back out of sight from the valley below.

"Out with your guns," snapped Herrington. "They'll be coming."

But Falk, revolver in hand, peered past his rock to see that the Arabs were scattering like chaff. Leading or riding their beasts, they were making off in the opposite direction at top speed. Falk tried half a clip at long range, but hit nothing, and wisely saved his cartridges. With the effect of magic men and beasts vanished over the next ridge, leaving the hollow empty and silent.

"Maybe they left some water down there," he muttered.

"If they did," retorted Herrington, "we'll never get near it alive. They haven't run off; they're just taking shelter, before looking us over. If they find out there's only three of us, they'll attack."

He had hardly finished speaking before a shot came from the crest on the left, and the rock splinters flew. He barked some more orders in a hoarse voice. If they hid behind the folds of the rocks and held off those devils until dark, another hour or so, there was a chance. Hastily the three jammed themselves into cracks or tiny hollows, barely big enough to shelter their bodies, and began firing. There were no targets to be seen, but the shooting made them feel better, prevented them from being rushed, and gave the impression that their numbers were larger than was actually the case. They were still trying to make a maximum of noise with a minimum expenditure of ammunition when night fell with character-

istic suddenness. The night had come.

CHAPTER TWO

Dine With the Dead

THEY held a whispered conference, with Herrington doing most of the whispering. There was, he said, no hope of fighting these Druse. They must attempt to escape. The Arabs would guess that they were heading west, and would search for them in the morning in that direction. Therefore they must slip away to the east.

"But that's the wrong way, for us," croaked Falk.

"Can't help it. If those fellows lay hands on us, we're gone. Might better die of thirst, it's pleasanter. Come on now; softly."

Only then did they discover that Watley, who had uttered no word for the last hour, was wounded. A bullet had pierced his calf. They cursed feelingly, but ended by pulling him erect and half carrying, half dragging him with them. Stifling his pain, he did his best to help, but it was tough going. They were desperately weak, the footing was vague and uncertain in the darkness, and they had to be prepared at any moment to drop their burden and fight. But by heroic efforts they somehow pressed on, driven by the thought of what capture would mean, and toward dawn had put a number of miles behind them. In the lee of a stony ledge they halted, drank the last of their water, and fell into a fitful, restless slumber.

Toward noon Falk awoke. When he sat up, blinking, he felt light-headed and dizzy; his mouth was full of dry-rot. Close by lay Watley on his side, with one leg curled up; his eyes were wide open, motionless, mirroring dull terror and despair. Herrington was awake, too, but making no effort to get them into motion.

Stretching his aching limbs cautiously,

Falk stood up. Why weren't they starting along? Why did everything look so ominously strange, as if he were peering through smoked glasses? Were his eyes going to pieces completely? The sun was high in the heavens, strong as ever, but it was an angry crimson in hue, and the whole sky appeared tinted a dirty brown. On the southern horizon it deepened to black, and he thought he could see a lifting swirl.

"A storm!" he croaked.

Herrington nodded apathetically. "It'll be here pretty soon. We'd better get close to the rock."

They had scarcely time to shift Watley, and themselves crouch as close as possible against the jut of the shelf, when the wind struck them with a rushing moan. Instantly they were enveloped in a blinding cloud which hid everything. The air was filled with flying grit that stung like needles, and choked them as they breathed. The howl of the gale was dismal, terrifying. Toward night it grew worse.

For forty hours the sandstorm continued without let-up, chaining them to the spot. To travel was out of the question; even to stand erect was for their weakened limbs a feat of strength. If they slept, they woke strangling, their parched throats clogged with dust. Every so often they had to dig each other free of the sand that eddied and piled up around their bodies, even in the shelter of the rock ridge. The remorseless, hissing roar threatened their sanity.

When at last it ceased, they were sunk in sullen dejection, hardly able to move. Forty precious hours gone without a foot of progress; no water left, and growing weaker every hour. One of their number, Watley, no longer able to keep his feet, his wound caked with sand and festering badly.

Herrington stared rigidly at Falk for several minutes, a strange gleam in his

sunken eyes. Then he rose stiffly and clambered up to a flat place on the outcrop, where he stood with the rising sun at his back, peering at the horizon. He gazed steadily at one spot for so long that Falk wondered if he saw something. He forced himself to his feet and reeled toward Herrington's side.

"What is it? You see anything?"

Herrington shrugged. "A damned mirage, of course."

Falk gazed fixedly into the west, where the surging sea of sand melted imperceptibly into the leaden sky. Nothing. . . Nothing.

His voice was like the rustling of leaves on a grave. "Do you think we'll make it, Herrington?" he asked.

"No," was the reply. Nothing else. Simply a flat, "No."

The utter, complete finality of the word was indescribably chilling. Falk felt it rest on his brain like a leaden weight. Through rimmed and rheumy eyes Herrington was peering at him oddly, as if to gauge his thoughts. The stare was disconcerting; Falk turned aside, and his eyes came to rest on Watley. The observer had once been plump and jovial and ruddy in complexion. But he must have lost thirty or forty pounds in the last week; he was thin, leathery, his blackened skin stretched tight over his protruding joints; only his eyes seemed alive.

"It's not far," Herrington was muttering in Falk's ear. "Forty miles, I figure. Maybe fifty. But that's too far for us. Even if we left Watley, we haven't the strength, now. We've got to eat. . . Meat; one good meal of meat, then we could do it. Juicy meat. . ."

Falk felt his throat contract painfully. "Those camels," he hissed. "I tried to hit one, but—"

"I don't mean camel," grunted Herrington.

Falk stared at him. Herrington's face was distorted, his cracking lips drawn back

so that his teeth gleamed very white. Was he going mad? Falk recoiled, stumbling.

"Come on," he said hurriedly. "We must get started."

AFTER the storm the air was clear, which only meant that the sun beat down with redoubled brutality. Watley was unable to support his weight at all, so that the other two had to carry him bodily, and they were so weak that they could not hold him longer than five minutes at a stretch. After a fearful day of torture, they had covered scarcely three or four miles. As the sun set, looking back, they could plainly see the rocky outcrop they had left, silhouetted on the horizon.

Herrington did a peculiar thing. At the cost of considerable effort, he gathered handfuls of withered burr-grass and thorny twigs until he had a sizable heap, to which he carefully set a match. A fire; the first one they had made. There was nothing they needed less. Its heat was repulsive, there were no beasts to frighten away, and certainly they had nothing to cook.

Herrington sat watching the flames crackle gustily. Watley lay on his side without stirring; his eyes were distended and shone horribly in the ruddy light. He had hardly spoken a word all day, but suddenly he sat up. His voice was hoarse, but steady and strong.

"Go ahead," he said. "Why don't you do it? What are you waiting for? 'It's all right; I understand. Without food, none of us will get through. I'll never make it anyway. My leg is poisoning me. I'll die pretty soon. But if you wait for me to die, the food won't do you much good. My blood will be cold, dried up, no good. You'd much better kill me first. Shoot me. For God's sake, aim for my head; that's all I ask. Why don't you shoot me? I'll turn around. . . You're not afraid of me, are

you? Here, I've got no gun now. See?"

He pulled out his revolver and hurled it into the desert, where it clanked dismally against a stone. The stone must have struck the trigger, for the gun went off with a loud roar and a single bullet whined off into the bottomless dark. Then utter silence.

Falk shuddered and turned his head. Herrington was climbing slowly to his feet. He said nothing, but his eyes rolled horribly.

Falk clutched for his revolver. "No!" he shrieked. "No! . . . Herrington, leave him alone! Don't touch him, or I'll shoot!"

Herrington swayed on his feet. His lips were working convulsively, but he got forth no sound. His hand rested on the butt of his gun but did not move. After a moment he turned and walked off, vanishing almost at once in the outer darkness.

Watley sobbed once, and fell on his face to lie still. Falk squatted in the sand, his head sunk on his chest. The fire slowly died down to embers. Herrington did not return. Once Falk got up and called, but there was no answer. He lay down then, and almost immediately drifted off into a drugged sleep.

He woke with a start, the echoes of a shot ringing in his ears. For a minute he could not pull himself together. He had been dreaming of swimming in a tiled pool surrounded by leaning trees; he could feel the water streaming off his eyelids. With difficulty he threw off the illusion and pulled himself to a sitting position.

The fire had been replenished with a handful of twigs, just enough to supply a feeble light. On the other side of it a figure crouched over something that lay flat on the ground. There was a dull flash, as of a knife blade at work. He heard Herrington's voice, panting madly. It spoke to him—something that

sounded like, "Come on! Come on, Falk!"

Falk reeled to his feet. For an instant he was drawn by an overpowering desire that rose from the depths of his being. The sheer strength of that desire terrified him, though his brain cried out with repugnance. His limbs were turning to water.

"Damn you!" he croaked. And clapping his hands to his eyes, he turned and ran staggering into the desert.

He ran until he fell down; then he got up and ran again. After a short while he could only walk, but he never let himself look back. Heedless of direction, he drove himself on, wishing only to put distance between him and that horror. It was dawn when he finally turned. Behind him nothing was to be seen but the limitless, sandy floor of the Sirhan. Not even a tiny wisp of smoke.

He lost track of the days and nights after that, knowing one from the other only by the presence of the scorching sun. Having left the compass, he travelled mostly at night, when the stars gave him direction. But his progress grew slower and slower. When he tried to walk erect, he fell too often, and every fall wracked his shaking bones. He crawled most of the time, and the skin wore off his kneecaps. At last he was merely dragging himself on his belly. A human worm, lost in the desolation—sun-blind, parched, and stark, staring mad.

CHAPTER THREE

The Branded Ace

IT WAS one of Lawrence's raiding patrols that found him. They were riding between Bair and Muaggar, a few miles east of the railroad; thus he must have passed the oasis of Azrak on the south, unknowing. To the casual observer he was a corpse, a gaunt huddle of rags and skin. But they perceived a spark of life, and with Arab wisdom fed him

little. On a spare camel they carried him in to their encampment; from there he was moved a few days later to an outpost near Tafleh, and later still to the British hospital in Cairo.

There for a month he hovered between life and death. But eventually the miracle occurred; he began to recover. The flesh thickened on his shrivelled limbs, his bloodstream quickened, his eye cleared. It took a long time for his throat to soften enough for him to speak; at first his voice was only a cracked whisper, begging for more water. But at last he was able to hold a conversation with the major of Intelligence who had been following his recovery.

"From the remnants of your uniform we got enough to know that you were one of the four who disappeared on the 8th of September. But we couldn't tell which one. Your appearance, you know; so altered."

"Jarret Falk, I am. Lieutenant, 46 Squadron, at Beersheba."

"Ah, yes." The major scribbled a note. "And what can you tell us about the others? I suppose. . ."

Falk described in brief sentences the forced landing, and Coper's death in the crash. Their trek toward the west, the encounter with the Arab *harka*, and the heart-rending but necessary reversal of direction, capped by the sandstorm which obliterated their hopes.

"Watley was done in. We tried to carry him, for one day, but it was hopeless. He begged us to shoot him; I swear he did. Quickly, while the—the food would do us some good."

"The *food*?" repeated the major, rigid with loathing.

Falk nodded. "Herrington was ready to do it, but I stopped him. I was pretty far gone, but I couldn't stand that. But I couldn't stay awake, and he did it in the night; Herrington did. He shot him."

The major gulped. "And—you ate? . . ."

"No!" rasped Falk. "No, I swear. I didn't touch him. Herrington—I might have killed Herrington, I suppose. But what then? I was afraid. You can't understand the—the temptation. So I ran away. As fast as I could run. I never saw Herrington again. . . That's all."

The major, pale with horror, kept his eyes on his pencilled notes. "Let's see; that would be the 18th. You were picked up on the 24th. You must have travelled a week, alone. Yet Herrington, who had some—er—nourishment, never made it. That's right?"

"I don't know. I lost track of the time, and I know nothing about Herrington. You say he was never found?"

"No, never."

The major folded his notes and slipped them in his pocket. He glanced at Falk, and his eyes were cold and hard, the lids narrowed with suspicion and disgust. Falk shuddered and opened his mouth to protest. But what could he say? He saw plainly the grounds of that suspicion. He had survived, Herrington had not; therefore, he must have been the one who had fortified his strength on human flesh. Denials? Protests? They would be useless. There were no proofs. If the major chose to believe that, no possible denials could change his opinion.

The major rose and left the ward without a salute.

From that day on Falk noticed the difference in the attitude toward him. The doctors made curt examinations in silence; the orderlies no longer gave him a cheerful greeting; in fact, they gave him no greeting at all. The other patients avoided speaking to him, and when they looked his way their faces were rigid with a kind of hostile curiosity.

When he was discharged from the hospital he tried to look up his squadron. It had moved to an outpost; he sent up word from Beersheba. The C.O. sent back a message that they did not need him for

the present; he had better report to the personnel officer of the division for reclassification. He must have sent a message simultaneously to the personnel officer, too, for that captain brusquely suggested a discharge.

"The American army is coming over now. You're an American, aren't you? They'll probably accept your enlistment without too many—er—embarrassing questions. . . Right?"

Falk needed no stronger hint. He saw plainly that he had no future with the British, even insomuch as a pilot in war time can be considered to have a future. The stigma that had fastened upon him would be with him always. But in the American army, perhaps. . .

"Right," he said with a shrug.

IT WAS a blustery day late in January when he strode into the impressive doorway of No. 45 Avenue Montaigne. He was in unadorned British uniform, wearing no insignia of rank or regiment whatsoever. His skin was very brown, and he still had a gaunt look; there was something in his expression that distinctly repelled advances.

"American Air Service Headquarters?"

A dapper lieutenant behind the desk glanced up wearily. "Good guess. You must believe in signs."

"I'm an American. My home is in St. Louis. Been a year or so with the British. I want to transfer to the A.E.F."

"Well, I can't stop you from applying. There's a pile of blanks on the corner there. That doesn't mean you'll be accepted, though. The Air Service is pretty choosy, you know. What makes you think you'll pass a pilot's tests?"

Falk bent over a blank, wielding a pen. "Been flying in Syria."

The lieutenant's brows flew up. "The hell you say! You've flown already, eh?" It was quite evident that he himself had

not. "What kind of ships were you flying? Have any exciting experiences?"

The answer was like a slammed door. "No."

The lieutenant appeared annoyed at the rebuff. "How come the British let you out? I hadn't heard that they had too many pilots."

"I insisted on transfer. There's my discharge."

Falk tossed a paper to the desk, which the other picked up and unfolded. It was the briefest discharge he had ever seen. The space after *Reason* was quite blank, as was the one marked, *Qualifications*.

"Hm-m. Seems to be in order, all right. Is your Paris address on that application? Good. You'll be notified when and where to report for examination. That's all now."

He slid the completed blank into a drawer, and frowned after the departing Falk thoughtfully. After a minute he drew the paper out again and studied it in detail. Still frowning, he hunted through his pockets until he found a dark green pencil; after a moment of hesitation he used it to make a small mark in the upper right hand corner of the sheet. A mark like an inverted letter L; the Greek letter *Gamma*.

That tiny symbol, unknown to Jarret Falk, was to exercise the most profound influence over his career. It meant that in the eyes of the lieutenant, one of whose duties was to size up all applicants, he ranked as doubtful. Not suspicious; in that case the symbol would have been in red, and the applicant would have been subjected to intense and constant scrutiny. Merely doubtful. A man to keep an eye on, to be watched for possible, but not probable, hostile sympathies.

The first result was that a cable went off to the States, and all of his answers as to birth, parents, schooling, early life, and so forth were quietly checked up. The replies being satisfactory, he was sworn in

as a cadet and shipped to Issoudun; the C.O. there receiving among other things a confidential tip. The fact that his progress through the training course was startlingly swift—he flew better than most of the instructors—heightened rather than lessened the mystery of his background, and he never said a word that shed any light on his previous experiences.

In consequence, after completing Field 8, he was detailed to Paris defense for a month, and his correspondence closely watched. But he wrote only to his father and sister; never a single letter to or from anyone in Europe; he seemed to have no friends. So the vigilance relaxed, and in July he was sent up to the Front as a replacement.

RED DABNEY was Intelligence officer of the 66th Pursuit. Crossed off the active flying list after a crash that crippled his left arm, he could still handle a plane in an emergency, and he welcomed any assignment that permitted him to stay with his old outfit. The duties were simple; combing over the pilots' reports and sending in any information that appeared to have value, and transmitting the latest data on enemy activities.

Within two hours after Jarret Falk's arrival on the drome, a confidential envelope was handed to Red by a courier. In it he found a carbon copy of the newcomer's assignment orders, nothing else. But up in one corner was that lone, odd symbol.

"Oh-oh!" murmured Red. It was the first time he had ever come across that cabalistic sign, but he knew its meaning well enough. "So they've got this bird tagged with a green Gamma, have they? I'll have to parley a bit with him, I guess."

He found the new pilot dragging his own bed-roll into the barracks with the assistance of an orderly.

"My name's Dabney. Guess why they call me Red."

"Mine is Falk. You couldn't guess why they call me Jarret, so I'll tell you. It's my first name."

They shook hands, grinning at each other. Falk was the taller of the two, and the leaner, although his body had filled out in the last few months to its former muscular solidity. He still carried traces of a heavy tan, and when he spoke his voice had an odd huskiness. His eyes, though deep-set, were clear and steady, Red noted.

"Located a bunk yet? No? There's one over here, just under mine. When I lean over the edge, I can spit in your eye."

"You'll be surprised to find how I can spit upward."

Together they opened up the bed-roll and disposed of the trunk in its proper position, chatting easily.

"Steve Furniss still at Issoudun when you came through?"

"Yeah. The acrobatic instructor? Cursing because they won't send him to the Front. He was All-western quarter at Michigan, wasn't he?"

"Yes. You go to Michigan, too?"

"No. Northwestern. Played against him, my senior year."

Red found direct questions almost unnecessary; Falk talked freely of the States, and of his training period in France, showing familiarity with many places and persons that Red could identify as authentic. But after a while Red discovered that there was a gap about which no information was disclosed; the fourteen months from the late fall of 1916 until January of 1918. No matter what questions Red put about that stretch of time, they were deftly parried, half answered, or ignored. Falk did not refuse outright to reply; he merely managed to turn aside the conversation when it approached that period of his life. It was as if a bit more than a year had simply been cut right out of his existence.

Red tried again, tactfully, after lunch, but with not the slightest success. Falk was wholly friendly, in fact seemed to appreciate his interest and cordiality, and talked freely of all the subjects that usually occupied a pilot's mind. But the calendar year of 1917 was a blank, into which Red could not drag him, no matter how hard he tried.

Red's suspicions stirred faintly. "If a guy has nothing to hide," he thought, "he doesn't try to hide it. I wonder. . ."

But two days later his suspicions went back to sleep again. For on his very first patrol Falk shot down a Boche two-seater, with the doubtful assistance of one other Spad; and later in the same day got tangled up in a running dogfight and sent a Fokker down in flames before the eyes of all B Flight.

That settled it, as far as Red was concerned. A man whose sympathies were German did not go out and shoot down Germans. That was out. The green Gamma? A mistake, probably, or at most an exaggerated precaution on someone's part. Red shoved it to the back of his mind. He did not forget it entirely; he simply disregarded it. Jarret Falk was all right. There was no question about that.

And Falk, as time passed, proved conclusively his worth to the squadron. He had just that admixture of reckless daring and shrewd wisdom that makes a good pursuit pilot. He showed no inclination to throw his life away, and yet he accepted risks, and faced long odds, with an icy kind of joy. He never neglected an advantage or allowed himself to be caught napping, but he flew and fought with a cool disregard of personal safety that said plainly, "I'm nobody's cold meat, but if you do knock me off, it won't matter much." If sometimes he pulled comrades into combats from which they did not return—well, war was not a Sunday school picnic, was it?

IN A week he had his third victory; in three weeks he was an ace. By the time the Boche drive reached its crest, in July, and the field-gray wave was virtually knocking at the gates of Paris for the first time since 1914, he had his ninth confirmation. After the scrap above Jaulgonnes on the 5th, when Falk single-handed went to the rescue of a couple of Salmsons beset by a Fokker patrol, Major Raible wrote out a citation for a D.S.C. In the course of questioning the pilot about some of the details, he inadvertently let drop what he wanted them for, and got quite a surprise.

"A citation? You mean I'd be decorated, my name published in orders? No, major, I'd much rather you didn't."

The C.O. naturally put this down to modesty. "What the hell, Falk, you needn't be such a blushing violet. American generals don't kiss you on the cheeks, like the French, you know. Any man with nine confirmations, and more in the making, certainly deserves recognition."

Falk's jaw set stubbornly. "No, sir. I don't want it. I'll refuse to take it. It's no use, major; you can't make me. I won't show up for the ceremony. I'll go A.W. O.L., and never come back."

"But for God's sake, man—why?"

Falk scowled darkly, "I've got a prejudice against decorations, that's all. Can't I refuse if I want to?"

The major shrugged. "Hell, I suppose so. You're the first one I ever heard of with such ideas. All right, I'll hold it up awhile and see if you don't change your mind."

For the next week the major thought no more about the citation; he was too busy. In fact, every able-bodied man within a hundred miles was busy; desperately busy. For the German thrusts continued to press on—southward and westward. A few miles here, few miles there, a town taken, a road crossed; the pressure seemed irresistible. Nearer and nearer to Paris,

and closer to catastrophe for the Allies.

The striking feature was the timing and placing of the individual assaults. The Boches seemed to have an uncanny foreknowledge of the terrain and conditions in front of them. Was there a weak spot, where tired troops were filling in? They were sure to attack it. Were the roads clogged or impassable, so that reserves could not be rushed up? That was the precise sector where their strength was exerted. Were there fresh reinforcements coming in to brace the river bank? No assault would be delivered in that region.

It was as if they knew definitely just where to strike, and what to avoid. With the consequence that one success followed another for the German arms. A salient flattened out here, another driven forward there; inch by inch, foot by foot, and mile by mile they rolled inexorably forward. They reached the Marne; they crossed it, and obtained a foothold on the south bank. The Allied forces, British and French and American crazily intermingled, resisted desperately. But they were beginning to feel as if there were a knife at their throats and a gun pressed into their backs. Against an enemy who knew precisely where to strike—and when—even heroism seemed useless.

It was the morning of the 12th when Major Raible sent for Falk.

"Got a special here, Falk. Looks like you'd be the man for it. That Rumpler that's been coming over south of Soissons for the last week or so; Colonel Molloy has an idea it may have something to do with the excellent reports the Jerries have been getting. Damned if I can see it, myself. From five or six thousand meters a man can't learn much, even with binoculars—unless he happened to know the terrain like a book before he started."

"You want me to take a crack at it, major?"

"Not so fast. It's always protected, you know. Six to ten Fokkers; only instead

of flying above, they screen it from below. Guess the Rumpler flies at ceiling, and the Fokkers can't get any higher anyway. The way it works out, any ship climbing up to go after the Rumpler is intercepted by the Fokkers first, and kept busy long enough for the observation bus to escape back into Germany."

"I won't go alone, then?"

"No. We can't spare a patrol from our regular assignments, here. So the colonel has got a promise of co-operation from the British." He did not notice the change of expression that flickered across Falk's countenance. "They've got a Camel squadron at Le Cranche. When the usual Jerry formation shows up, the Camels will heave into action—they climb like hell, you know. They'll go up and engage the Fokkers, see? Then if you were up around five or six thousand already, somewhere in the neighborhood, you'd have a chance of catching the Rumpler alone."

Falk nodded solemnly. "I see. And when do we try this?"

"Tomorrow morning. That outfit almost always shows up in the mornings, if it's clear. The Camels will be on alert. But I think it would be a good stunt for you to hop over to Le Cranche this afternoon, and get all the details lined up, so there'll be no hitch."

The major stopped talking, his brows lifting in astonishment. For the first time he saw Jarret Falk shaking his head in the face of an assignment—and not a tough assignment, either.

"Could you get someone else, sir?"

"Why—why—" the major spluttered. "Someone else? Why, what the devil is the matter with you? Rumplers give you gooseflesh?"

"It isn't the Rumpler, sir. Le Cranche—I'd rather not go over there. Those British—that is—there's a fellow there; he's looking for me. I don't want to see him. Just a personal matter—"

Falk, his face crimson, was floundering

awkwardly. But the C.O.'s next words brought him relief.

"Catfish! You don't have to go over, if you don't want to. I can arrange the details over the phone, if you say so. Only, I thought—they have damned good Scotch, those British squadrons—"

"Oh, that'll be okay, major. You'll let me know what time I'm to be on deck, then?"

After he had gone out, the major stared after him curiously. "Damned peculiar!" he muttered. "He's got guts enough to take on a handful of Germans at top altitude—yet he's scared pink of some blighted Englishman, probably over a woman." He shrugged and reached for the telephone. "Aviators are sure funny people!"

CHAPTER FOUR

A Dead Man's Guns

AT EIGHT-THIRTY the following morning Jarret Falk was nursing his Nieuport 28 through the crystal-cold air of five thousand meters. It was still capable of a little more altitude; just how much he would not know until he tried. Five hundred, anyway; perhaps a thousand. It was doubtful if he could get more than six thousand. But he wasn't going any higher for the time being. From above he was less likely to be spotted than from below, and he wanted to see without being seen until the right moment came.

Far below, the earth was a vague bowl, rimmed by the smoky horizon. Woods were dark blotches, roads mere scratches, the river a ribbon of blueish-gray. Knowing the country as he did from closer acquaintance, he could pick out a few familiar features; the slender line of a railroad, the W-shaped conflux of streets in Mareuil, the irregular outlines of several aerodromes. Otherwise, to the naked eye, it was an unintelligible blanket of confusion.

He wheeled out of an ess, stared over

his shoulder for a moment, and then opened his throttle toward the east. Just above his own level a flock of specks had appeared, moving swiftly out of Germany in a southerly direction. They were well behind him, but he increased the distance rapidly. They must not know of his presence too soon, lest the Rumpler, that most important speck, take fright and flee.

When he was sure that they had passed beyond him into Allied territory, he turned slowly. They were not in sight, but he could calculate their approximate position pretty well. He began to climb, heading back toward the southwest. The needle of his altimeter inched up the scale; 5500, 5800. At 6000 it shivered, dropped back, then held steady. His coverall and lined gloves, which in the sweltering heat of mid-July on the ground had stifled him, now felt like tissue-paper against the bitter, knife-edged cold that struck through to his bones. He shifted hands on the stick, and gripped and ungripped his fingers a dozen times, so that they would be able to close on the triggers when it became necessary. He hoped they weren't frost-bitten.

After a minute he saw the specks. They were angling deep into Allied territory, away from him. He did not follow, but aimed for a point between them and the Front. He watched them closely, however, and pretty soon he saw the regular outline of the formation break up. It became a swirling welter, and there were a lot more specks than before. A lacy effect of smoking streaks was visible; that would be tracers. The Camels had come up and were tangling with the Fokkers.

At the reduced distance Falk could now plainly distinguish the larger speck that floated above all the others. It seemed to circle for a few moments, as if waiting to see what the outcome of the scrap might be. Then apparently it decided that the safest course was to run and try again

later, for it pointed straight back for the lines. Falk shifted his course slightly to the right, calculating sharply.

The Germans must have been surprised to find him cutting them off, but their surprise did not rob them of their wits. Falk saw the nose of the Rumpler cant upward in an attempt to outclimb him. He swung his Nieuport into a gentle bank and let off a hatful of tracers. Any plane moves at its slowest speed when climbing, and no man likes to sit and be shot at when practically in a stall. The Rumpler slid off into a curving turn, gaining speed.

For more than a minute Falk attempted no more than to keep his antagonist ducking from one turn into another, driving the scene of the engagement thereby down to lower altitudes. His Nieuport would not maneuver properly at six thousand meters, and he knew it. A quick turn, a steep bank, and it would swoop into a spin almost without notice. And by the time he got it out, the Rumpler would be out of reach. So he handled the controls with exceeding care, and merely jockeyed around, keeping the German plane jockeying to, until the resulting loss of height had brought them both down to five thousand. Then he attacked in earnest.

A coughing blast across its path sent the Rumpler into a right hand bank. But this time Falk did not pass behind its tail. Instead he whipped sharply around, and a second blast coming on the heels of the first crackled through the broad, black-crossed wings. The Rumpler hastily nosed down and curved away. Falk's plunge in pursuit brought him close to its flank, but it also gave the observer a free shot. That observer had a keen eye, as Falk found out then and there. He had a pair of Parabellum meat-grinders mounted on the Rumpler's tourelle, and they spat a vicious stream of steel-jacketed lead. Some of that lead buried itself somewhere in Falk's ship; he could feel the faint but disturbing jars of impact. He found

the slugs, some time later, embedded in his under-carriage struts. But at the moment he got a rude jolt; for all he knew, they might be in his crankcase. He whirled off before another burst should find his gas tank.

AFTER another few moments of jockeying, he tried a thrust from above. Flipping the Nieuport on its back, he curved down in a renversement, raking the Rumpler from end to end as the Nieuport whistled down past its tail. That blasted observer—he could even fire those Parabellums from a crouch! Falk saw the spaced gashes that appeared in his left wing; they were uncomfortably close to the cockpit.

Damn it, he could handle a two-seater without help, couldn't he? Or could he? All the plans had been laid with a view to merely getting him into combat with the Rumpler; it had been assumed that after that he would be capable of finishing it off without trouble. His jaw tightened. He could finish it off all right. The trick was to keep out of that observer's zone of fire while he did it. The fellow had an eye like a micrometer—and the pilot was no slouch, either.

Falk tried a stab at the belly. The Rumpler tipped into a bank with startling agility, and the rear guns were raining slugs down on him savagely. He swept up outside the bank, and darted in at right angles. The observer reversed his movable mounting in a flash, and met the Nieuport with belching muzzles. Falk slammed home a burst that punctuated the Rumpler's empennage, and curved off in a casual bank. With a sudden twist he was back again, hoping to catch his foe off guard. But the big two-seater lifted its nose to meet him, and the pilot's guns crackled into a rataplan. A bullet that might have been ear-marked for his skull ricocheted off one of Falk's Vickers, leaving a terrifying dent.

It was like fighting a two-headed snake; one end was more dangerous than the other. Both those Germans were crack shots, and cool; he dared not give them time to aim. He began throwing the Nieuport quickly from one maneuver into another; firing, swirling away, darting back again, biting off another brief burst. His continuous motion prevented him from offering a target; it also spoiled his own aim, but it kept them busy, and worried. They never knew where he was coming from next, and some time he might catch them napping.

He coaxed the Rumpler into a right bank, kept it there by repeated volleys. Without telegraphing his intentions, he whipped abruptly into a left wing-over that ended with a plunging rush. Thinking that he had caught them in an awkward spot, he held the lunge until his nose was within point-blank range. But that German observer moved like greased lightning.

It was too late for Falk to change his mind. Anyway, he was angry, determined to end it one way or the other. He shunted in closer still, his fingers clamped hard around the trigger grips. His bullets were clawing at the Rumpler's mid-section. But the observer had somehow whirled his tourelle into action, and was returning a deadly hail of steel that fairly splattered about Falk's ears. A brief two seconds told the story.

The Rumpler gave a violent lurch. The Parabellum slugs, which had been rimming Falk's cowl, careened off into space. The lurch changed to a drunken slide. The observer gave up firing until he should have a steadier platform to fire from. But he never got it. The German pilot was hit, fatally wounded, slumping in the front cockpit. The big Maybach motor was jerking, stuttering, coughing out its 240 horsepower in gulps of black smoke. The Rumpler was going down.

For perhaps five hundred meters it spun

slowly, heavily. But it was surprising how quickly that observer seized control. He dropped his guns, shoved his emergency stick into place, and hauled the ship out into an unsteady glide. It was pointed toward the northeast.

"Oh, no, you don't!" growled Falk.

He swooped close on the quarter, and waved angrily. He could see the helmeted figure of the observer looking at him.

"The other way!" grated Falk. "Or I'll finish you off, you—"

Of course his words were inaudible, but his intentions were plain enough. Slowly the Rumpler wobbled into a turn. After approximately 180 degrees it straightened out unsteadily, and glided toward the Allied back lines. Falk, certain that it would reverse its glide and try to reach Germany if he let it alone, clung to its trail. Four thousand meters is a long way, especially in a gentle glide. To Falk it seemed to take an endless time. But at last they neared the ground.

He was surprised to see, now, that the observer apparently knew enough to keep the ship under control, but knew nothing whatsoever about landing. It started to flatten out too soon, ducked again, then bucked and staggered like a wounded horse. Perhaps it would have crashed anyway, for the country there was all small Rolling ridges with ravines between them, the few cramped fields cut up by ditches or rows of trees. The Rumpler waited until the last minute, made a half-hearted, futile attempt to zoom one of those ridges, and only succeeded in spreading itself along fifty yards of boulder-strewn earth, the way a lump of butter is spread across hot toast.

Falk circled once, then opened up toward his drome.

"Whew!" he muttered, drawing the back of his glove across his chin. "Good thing he didn't know both my guns were conked out by that last burst of his! He could have glided to Berlin!"

IT WAS a couple of hours later that Red Dabney found Falk in the barracks, stretched out on his bunk. His ship was so badly punctured and gashed that it would not be ready for another trip over the lines until the next day, and Falk was taking his ease.

"Say, you know that Rumpler you knocked down this morning?" demanded Red. "Well, I've just had a phone call from the artillery outfit that was bivouacked near where it hit. The pilot is dead; he had a bullet through the chest, and the crash killed him. But the observer was hardly scratched. The battery Intelligence officer says he's a queer sort of duck. He speaks English perfectly; must have lived in England at some time, he thinks, from his accent. But they can't get much of anything out of him; nothing of military value at all. He thought we might have better luck. I told him sure; we'd bring him back here to the field and see if we couldn't loosen him up enough to spill something. I'm driving up now; you want to come along, don't you?"

Falk sat up wearing an expression of distaste. "Good Lord, do they expect us to do that, too? Isn't it enough that a fellow goes out and shoots down Germans, without asking him to stare at the corpses, and pal around with the survivors? I don't know how other guys feel, but I'd feel like a hypocrite. For Pete's sake, Red, don't bring that Jerry back here to the mess to face me all evening. After all, we were trying to kill each other only a few hours ago."

A little comprehension mingled with Red's surprise. "Well, now that you put it that way, I see what you mean. I don't *have* to bring him back, of course. But I do think you ought to go up and help me interview him. He might make some crack to you that he would never make to me. After all, he may feel differently than you would."

Falk rose reluctantly. Posed as a duty,

he could hardly refuse. "All right, come on. Let's get it over with."

The car, with a driver and a sergeant in front and the two aviators in back, followed a main road for three or four miles. Although crowded with traffic, it was at least surfaced. But after that it crawled across fields and jounced along muddy lanes for a couple of hours before it finally slithered up a stony slope and stopped before a ragged hole in the side of a hill. A crudely chalked sign said, 'P.C.—312th F.A.'; Red jumped out and disappeared inside.

Falk, waiting in the car, gazed about him with indifferent curiosity. At the foot of the slope some men were washing out their underwear in a stony pool. Around the rear curve of the hill some 155's were ranged, their trails sunk in pits, their slender muzzles protruding through a netting of camouflage. There was no sign of the wrecked Fokker; it was either out of sight over the crest, or else this was the wrong place entirely.

Suddenly Falk felt a tingle creep up the back of his neck. He had seen nothing, he had heard no sound; yet he had a distinct and disturbing sensation of foreboding. He could almost feel eyes boring into the back of his head; he knew, without knowing why he knew, that someone was staring at him with the most intense concentration.

He turned his head slowly, and his bloodstream froze.

A group that had been clustered about one of the gun positions had opened up and was walking toward the car. In the center of a number of khaki-clad officers was a figure in field-gray; obviously the captured German observer. Falk stared at that face, and even while it was still thirty yards away knew that he could not be mistaken. It had changed in the last year, but no more than he had changed himself, probably. It was the face of Clifford Herrington.

Red emerged from the dugout. "They tell me he's out here—oh, there he comes now. I'll talk to him first, shall I?"

Fortunately, Red kept his eyes on the prisoner as the group approached, otherwise he could hardly have failed to notice Falk's agitation. The pilot was pale and rigid, his hands clenching and twisting, his eyes narrowed to glittering slits. His lips parted as if to speak, then closed again in a firm, grim line. Herrington recognized him, that was plain. But he gave no sign. Falk's stunned brain tried to think clearly, but he was too unnerved to analyze the situation. He could only sit stiffly while someone muttered grotesque introductions, and nod woodenly in acknowledgement.

Herrin—Hugo Herrin? So that's what he called himself now? He listened mutely to Red's questions, and the replies. He was with *Staffel* 92, as observer? Yes; his identity card showed that. He had been with that *staffel* a long time? No, not long. . . He had flown in other ships than Rumplers? Perhaps. Had he ever been in England; his accent was excellent? No; he had learned the language in a German university. . . *Lies*, thought Falk; *all lies. Naturally; he has to. But how the devil did he get out of the Sirhan?*

"You understand—this is the pilot you fought with?"

The man in field gray smiled faintly. "I had guessed that. But if he thinks that our getting better acquainted will gain him any military information, he is mistaken."

Red glanced questioningly at Falk, who only shrugged in reply. Red saw that he wasn't getting anywhere, and was ready to give up. Then Falk spoke curtly. "Red, get in here a minute." When the other man was close by his side, he whispered, "I've changed my mind. Let's bring him back to the field and hold him overnight."

Red gave him a surprised look, but then nodded. He climbed out and made the

necessary arrangements for putting the prisoner in his custody, which only took a few minutes. If Herrington felt any surprise, his mask-like countenance did not betray it. He stepped into the tonneau when directed and took his place in the middle. The car started off.

CHAPTER FIVE

Aces High

FALK had never enjoyed a ride less. There wasn't much conversation; the two men sitting so close that their shoulders touched at every lurch of the car did not even glance at each other. Although their minds were probably dwelling on the same scenes, there might have been a mile-high wall between them. It was Red who proffered cigarettes; they each took one, and each lighted his own in silence.

As the car swung onto the field of the 66th, the first thing Falk noticed was a two-seater Bristol fighter with British insignia, standing in front of A hangar.

"Oh, you brought him back with you?" said the major. "That's fine. Here are Leftenants Colby and Withers from the Camel squadron; they dropped over to congratulate us on the way it worked out."

Falk could not vanish into the earth, as he would have liked. He shook hands uneasily, but noted that they were both youngsters, and that his name meant nothing at all to either of them. After all, the whole British army had not heard the tales from Syria.

The dinner, and the long evening, were a nightmare to him. There was plenty of champagne, which the guest of honor in field-gray drank sparingly, with no loosening effect on his tongue. The two British officers got well plastered, and had to be put to bed. At last Major Raible suggested that the rest of them follow suit.

"If you'll give us your parole, I'll bunk you down on a cot in the supply room behind headquarters," the C.O. suggested

to the prisoner. "Otherwise we'll have to lock you in the gasoline shed, I guess."

Herrington inclined his head in a stiff little nod. "I should be glad to give my parole to Lieutenant Falk, personally."

"That's okay, then. Come on, we'll fix you up."

Falk lay down on his own bunk without undressing; he knew perfectly well that he would not sleep. One by one the candles were blown out, and the barracks relapsed into faint snores and the creak of uprights as sleepers turned restlessly.

After an hour or so Falk could wait no longer. He slipped quietly to his feet, but heard a movement at the level of his shoulders. He wanted no company, so he leaned close to whisper.

"Red? You awake? I can't sleep. I'm going down to that bistro at the crossroads and celebrate. See you in the morning."

He tip-toed out without waiting for a reply.

Bright moonlight lay like a silver blanket over the deserted field and the silent hangars. It streamed in the window of the supply room, so that he could plainly see Herrington, sitting up on the cot.

"That you, Falk? I expected you'd be calling on me."

Falk shut the door behind him. "I hardly expect the truth," he said. "But I'll listen to any explanation you want to give me."

Herrington grunted. "You might as well have the truth. It's no worse than anything you might guess."

HE TOLD it at considerable length. After they had parted company, he had worked north instead of west, having no desire to see a British uniform again. After four or five days he had run into a Turkish patrol, and had been just sane enough to tell them he was an Austrian. They had carried him into Damascus, where he had slowly recovered in a hos-

pital. By a series of bluffs and lucky confusions, he had gotten hold of a German identity card, been assigned to a regiment in Constantinople, and eventually shifted up to the Western Front. For the last month he had been flying, on special reconnaissance; they had found his reports on the area behind Soissons uncannily exact.

Falk told his own tale with unconcealed bitterness. "They wouldn't believe me. I told them just what happened. But because I made it, and you didn't, they thought that I must have been the one who—who did poor Watley in. Maybe they thought I made a few meals of you, too; I don't know. But that cursed suspicion followed me everywhere. I was a pariah, an outcast. I got out, and joined up with the Americans. It hasn't caught up with me yet, but it will some day, I suppose. I'll never live it down, because I can't possibly prove it's untrue."

Herrington laughed shortly. "You should have kept your mouth shut about that part."

Falk ground a curse between his teeth. For some time he stared out the window in silence. Finally he turned.

"I suppose you realize that if I identify you as a former British officer, you'll face a firing squad in the morning?"

"Of course I realize it. I expected you to pop off this afternoon, and I'm still puzzled why you haven't spoken."

"I hardly know myself. Unless . . . Look here, Herrington. I can destroy you by a word, if I choose. On the other hand, you're the only man in the world who can supply the proof that will restore my respect in the face of that story. Why don't we trade?"

"What's your idea?" asked Herrington cautiously.

"I'll keep mum about who you are. Further, I'll help you escape back across the lines. In return, you sign a statement swearing that you are the one who killed

Watley, and that I never touched him, either before he was dead or afterward. Especially afterward. . . Well?"

Herrington considered in silence. Then he cursed. "You don't give a man much choice, do you? Still, I don't mind your blasted threat. A half a dozen times I've put a revolver to my head, but never quite pulled the trigger. You've been living with a suspicion hanging over you; you ought to try living with my conscience for a while. . . Well, never mind that. Write out your statement, Falk, and tell me how the devil I'm going to get across the lines."

"A plane, of course. The hangars are full of them."

"You forget I'm an observer, not a pilot. I can't fly myself. You saw the landing I made with that Rumpler, this morning, didn't you?"

That jolted Falk at first. But then he remembered the Bristol two-seater. There was no other way out of it.

It was the fresh, cool hour before dawn when he slipped out of the door of the supply room. "Softly, now," he hissed over his shoulder. The moon had set; it was opaquely dark. He could just make out the silhouette of the British plane, against the background of the hangars.

"Hold it, there," said a voice sharply. Its owner stepped out from a shadow; he recognized Red Dabney. "The game's up, Falk. I saw you writing out something at the major's desk. But you'll never get across the lines with it. They were right about that green Gamma, after all, I see. I'm glad I remembered it."

Falk saw the Colt in his hand. "What do you mean? I—"

Herrington sprang like a panther from the darkness. Either Red saw him too late, or hadn't seen him at all. The revolver roared, but Herrington struck the hand down, and the bullet buried itself in the dirt. It was a matter of seconds for the two to disarm him.

"No, don't shoot him, Herrington!"

cried Falk. "There's been enough killing, and he's a friend of mine. I won't stand for it."

"All right," growled Herrington, clipping the prostrate Red deftly into unconsciousness with the flat of the automatic. "But you'll be the one to regret your soft-heartedness."

That one shot had roused more than one sleeper. They worked frantically to get the motor of the Bristol started, but there were running figures on the path from the barracks when it finally turned over, and Falk took it off half warmed, fearful lest Herrington should open up with the Colt against more of his comrades.

THE sun was beginning to streak the eastern sky as he wheeled to set a course toward the lines. The air ahead was empty, the Bristol climbed strongly as it warmed; it looked as though he was going to be able to carry out his bargain with Herrington after all. . . . Yes, and what then? What would he do afterward?

He scowled through the tiny windshield at the German horizon. Their departure had been witnessed; it would not now be possible for him to cook up that story about finding the prisoner gone and setting out to search for him. His own treachery could not be denied, when he returned. And he realized that his treachery would strike a vital blow to the Allied cause, for he recalled Herrington's words. The German staff had found his reports most helpful—naturally. Herrington had seen service in that sector before going to Syria; he knew the back areas like a book, of course. As an observer, he must be priceless to the Boches; his services meant the difference between victory and defeat.

With the front lines under his wheels, Falk uttered an oath between his clenched teeth and threw the Bristol into a sudden bank. Throttling into a flat glide, he jammed his left hand into his pocket and

brought out a folded paper on which the ink had but recently dried.

"Here!" he shouted over his shoulder. "Take it!"

Herrington's hand closed on it, though his eyes were amazed.

"It's all off!" added Falk. "I don't give a damn whether you like it or not, we're going back. To hell with it!"

Without looking back he gunned the Bristol wide open again and pointed it southward. His jaw was clamped grimly shut and his eyes were dark, but inside he felt suddenly freed of an intolerable weight. He was going back to face inescapable disgrace, but at least Herrington was going back with him.

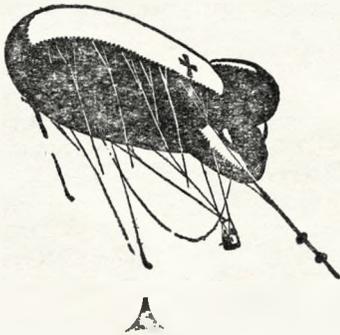
He was so deeply sunk in his thoughts that the double wedge of thick-winged ships was less than a mile away before he saw them. A flight of day bombers, escorted by half a dozen Fokkers, was converging on his course. They were probably heading for the big dump outside of Mar-euil, doubtless spotted earlier by Herrington himself. Of course they saw him; but why should they fear a lone Bristol?

Falk stared at them a moment. The leading Fokker waggled its wings gently, perhaps in warning. That decided him. He throttled again, so that Herrington could hear his words.

"Might as well end up one way as another! There's some of your friends, over there, just itching to shoot me down! I'm going to give them the chance, but I'm going to take some of them down with me! Fold your hands in your lap, or fight; I don't give a damn which!"

Herrington yelled something that sounded like, "Where does he store the extra drums of ammo in this crate?" but the last words were half drowned as Falk jerked the throttle open.

THE Bristol leaped forward eagerly, as if impatient. A sheaf of stabbing lines sprayed from its nose as Falk



warmed his guns; the Fokkers split in two groups. Three would be plenty to handle this madman intent on suicide; the other three could stick with the bombers. But Falk double-crossed them. He charged right through the first group, not swerving an inch in their criss-crossing fire, and fell upon the nearest bomber like a demon fresh from hell.

The German plane, heavy with load, lumbered into a bank. The observer, aghast at this unlooked for attack, decided to get rid of his bombs before manning his guns. A bad decision, for he never did get a chance to man his guns at all. The Bristol bored right in from the flank, and Falk got a square broadside burst. He didn't need more than one like that; the bomber tipped up, hesitated, and then plunged with a welter of flames boiling from its cockpits.

Falk wheeled into a bank; as he did so, he saw a Fokker spin down past his wing-tip. He remembered hearing the yammer of guns from his rear cockpit, while he was lunging at the bomber, and he also remembered the startling marksmanship of the man in the rear cockpit of that Rumpler. The same man who now sat behind him.

"By God, this is going to be hot!" he croaked happily.

It was hot, but the heat struck in both directions. His daring assault had already accomplished its first purpose; the German formation was broken wide open.

The remaining bombers were circling warily, trying to keep behind the screen of Fokkers. But the Bristol charged just as if it had a dozen reinforcements at its back. It got close to one bomber, was driven off by a blasting curtain of fire, and sprang unexpectedly upon another. Falk missed, because a Fokker forced him to swerve to avoid collision. But Herrington's guns hammered joyously as the Bristol rushed past its target, and the bomber toppled into a spin.

"Say, this is some two-seater!" muttered Falk. He had thrown caution to the winds long since; why play safe when you know you can't live through, anyway? He had never tried a roll with three foes on his tail before, but he tried it now. The unexpectedness of the crazy maneuver non-plussed the Germans; two of them overshot and were in front of him when he levelled out. One fell immediately in front of his first well-directed burst, and he chased the other through the milling melee as if he were chasing a dog through a herd of sheep.

It was too good to last. The sheep turned to wolves, and closed in on his trail. The first shock of surprise had worn off, and the Boches set about the serious business of destroying him. There was never any question about their ability to do it. One plane cannot fight ten, and get away with it. The age of miracles ended long ago.

A long minute passed before Falk even got a target to fire at again. And in that minute his wings were torn to ribbons, his fuselage riddled, his cowl dented in a dozen places. Herrington must have located the spare ammunition drums, because the din from the rear cockpit was continuous. Falk met a Fokker head-on, and it was the Boche who turned out. With a desperate wing-over, Falk put the Bristol on its tail. The Fokker writhed and twisted. It was suicide to stick there, with the sky around him full of others.

But knowing that it was suicide, Falk stuck. His guns crackled and spat venomously.

His bursts brushed the Fokker's cockpit; another, and he would have it. He was suddenly aware that the din behind him had let up.

"Keep 'em off me a minute more!" he shrieked drunkenly.

Swing over—kick! His ring sights caught a black-crossed cockpit. His fingers closed, and tracers made a sieve out of dark fabric. In a rain of steel he swooped up and away, twisting his head backward as his hand corrected the controls.

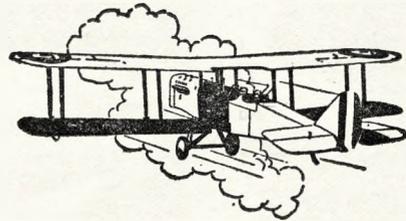
Herrington still had his hands on the guns, but the guns were not firing. That was because Herrington's chest was spouting blood in three or four places, his eyes glazing. His mouth twisted in a grotesque grimace that might have been meant for a smile; then he slowly slipped out of sight beneath the cockpit rim. A stream of tracers poured in after him from above; if he hadn't been quite dead when he collapsed, he was three seconds later.

"Why, you damned corpse-killer, I'll get you!" Falk shouted.

He never knew whether he got that particular Fokker or not. He got one, but it may have been the wrong one. Then he found that his left arm was useless, a sticky warmth was running down his leg, and his motor was belching black smoke from under the cowl that came back in his face and blinded him. He struggled for control, but he was too weak and dizzy to know up from down.

"The ground will come up and find me," he muttered sleepily. "I needn't worry—it always does."

The funny thing was that instead of Fokkers he seemed to be seeing Nieu-



ports, first on one side and then on the other.

"I'm slug-nutty—cockeyed," he thought. "Maybe I'm dead now—"

But he wasn't dead, because his weary, battered body distinctly felt the jolt when the Bristol plowed into a tree-top and left its fuselage neatly jammed in a crotch, with him in it, unconscious.

RED was trying to explain things to him, sitting alongside his cot in the hospital, a week later.

"Sure, those were Nieuports. The boys were after you. They followed you down, and Tilton landed immediately. Herrington was dead, of course. In his pocket he found that paper. We couldn't make head or tail out of it until we got in touch with British Intelligence; then we got the whole story. Incidentally, we were able to correct their version, from what the paper said. They're talking about a D.S.O., I understand. Ever since Herrington's Rumpler was wiped out, the Boche observation hasn't been what it used to be. The enemy lines were pushed back a couple of miles last week, and they're still sagging. Who knows; maybe it's the turning point of the war?"

He didn't know it himself at the time, but he was right.

AIR ANGLES

BY DUSTY DOWST

ALL you mugs know the old saying: "Any landing is a good one —if you can walk away from it."

Well, strictly speaking, that's true enough. Still, if you own the crate or have any feeling for the gent who does, you are going to set it down with as few splinters as possible. I might add, chums, that you can walk away with a broken nose, a couple of fractured arms, plus other and sundry casualties. It therefore behooves you to maintain a state of unity regarding both plane and person. (Anyone with any arguments to offer will kindly step into the crying room and blow his brains out. This means you, too, Nosedive.)

You will have gathered by now, I hope, that old Uncle Dusty is going to prattle on for a few moments on the subject of landing.

What maneuver does a student pilot practice more than any other in the book? What maneuver must any pilot execute every time he leaves the ground? (You are wrong, Nosedive. The answer is *not* the slow roll. You have a one-track mind shaped like a corkscrew!) What did you say, Charlie Piedra, from 'way down there in N'Orleans? Kee-reck. You said "landing," and well you should know. What-ever goes up, comes down. Ah, yes—what about the take-off? Of course there must be one take-off per each landing. But I'm sure that Charlie, as well as all you other cloud-dusters, will agree that under ordinary conditions, a take-off is a pushover compared to a landing.

In the first place, you never actually have to leave the ground unless you want to. Whether you're an air line pilot or just one of the boys trying to build up a little time, nobody can *make* you part company with dear old *terra firma* if you're not satisfied in you own mind about everything: weather, engines, ship and

load. But once you're up there, you are bound to come down sooner or later, and sometimes you don't have much choice about it.

If you buck a head wind and run out of gas, down you come. If you're delayed until after dark, then you've got a night landing on your hands. If you get lost in fog and your range is limited, then you must execute a blind landing. Then's when you begin to wish you'd been living right. There are a great many things to call your hand and make you sit down, so it is obvious that no matter how long you fly, you will never know *too much* about landing. All the old-timers will tell you that; and some of the most exciting minutes of any veteran's logbook concern renewing that all-important contact with Mother Earth.

A HIGHLY colorful and expert airman was Bon-Bon De Arcy—and as far as I know, he still is. He put in a lot of hours horsing the U. S. Mail between New York and Boston back in the old days. Bon-Bon (a nickname, I've been told, derived from De Arcy's craving for candy) was pushing a Fokker Super-Universal, a veritable parasol if ever there was one. He got into thick fog just after he passed in Massachusetts, flew around hopefully looking for a hole. He found none. Darkness set in and the gas got low. Bon-Bon sat there waiting for the inevitable, and he didn't have long to wait. Came that *sput-sput-plop* which causes duck bumps to sprout from the soles of the feet to the nape of the neck. Bon-Bon rocked the ship, fiddled with the choke, wobble pump, and so forth, doing everything humanly possible to coax another jet of juice into the motor. But there simply wasn't any more. He turned off the switch, eased back on the stick

until the old boat was mimicking an elevator; no airplane ever out-mushed a Fokker Super-Universal. And he sat there biding his time.

Presently the mist swirling him about took on a faintly luminous glow. Desperately Bon-Bon sought to penetrate the eerie haze, wondering whether he were approaching a blast furnace or a church carnival. But there wasn't anything he could do, anyway, except perhaps kick a little rudder one way or the other. The opaqueness became still brighter, yet the mail pilot could discern no definite object. He drew the stick a trifle further back, braced his feet firmly on the pedals, and brought his left arm up across his face.

Flying speed fell away—and so did the ship. But not very far. There was a solid jar as wheels and tail struck the ground simultaneously, and Bon-Bon was down. No rending crash; no splintered roof or tangled foliage. Bon-Bon peeked around him. Thirty feet away a street car clattered slowly through the fog; an auto's headlights picked out the airplane and the driver steered a course around it.

Bon-Bon was sitting in a motionless airplane, smack in the middle of Framingham Square! A million-to-one shot in the dark! He lighted a cigarette, grabbed an armful of mail pouches, and took a cab to the post office. They had to remove the wings to haul the ship to Framingham Airport.

MY chickadees, as far as I am concerned, Mr. De Arcy is welcome to that experience. I am quite satisfied with a couple of my own, although I am forced to admit that some kind fate has as yet refrained from dishing me up motor failure. I have been caught in rain, hail, snow, fog and pitch-black darkness; but there has always been sufficient activity in the power plant to enable me to "wish" into a right-side-up landing somehow. I have been completely lost for hours; I

have watched gasoline gauges flicker toward the zero mark and even knock against the last pin and stick there—with nary a field in sight. But something turned up while there was a gasp or so remaining.

Once I was flying over a turbulent river in which huge chunks of ice were plunging and pitching end over end. The banks of the stream were thick with wooded growth. I was cruising along at five hundred feet, just beneath low-hanging, menacing clouds. Every now and then I passed through snowflurries in which fine flakes seemed to be traveling toward me, nearly parallel to the ground. It was during one of these squalls that the Challenger motor coughed alarmingly. I was in a Curtiss Robin, burning fuel from the right wing tank, and I had neglected to keep an eye on the gauge. But I had instructed mechanics at the point of departure to fill both tanks. Hastily I switched on the left one, at the same time glancing at the indicator for that tank—and I had a vivid picture of yours truly being mashed to a pulp, ship and all, in the seething torrent. The left tank gauge said **EMPTY!**

The motor was strangling, popping once or twice for each half-dozen revolutions of the prop. Any minute, now. I stuck the nose down, praying for a pasture which wasn't there. Had the boys failed to fill the left tank? Or was the indicator busted? Only one way to find out: sit there and wait. Oh, for a field! Just a little woodlot, a tiny clearing. . . . Not a prayer. Now I was twenty feet above the river . . . now ten, five. Chunks of ice crashed against each other, sending spray up over the windshield. I began to raise the nose, gently, to pancake. Hold her off—off! In desperation I gave her three jabs with the Lunkenheimer gas pump on the instrument panel—and the old Challenger burst into a full-throated roar. Much prettier than angel music on

a harp!—the very best music I know.

I let out an exuberant oath which Grandma never taught me, and I cancelled the curses I had heaped upon the heads of the mechanics. They had filled both tanks, all right. The gauge had merely failed to function. Needless to say, I make a careful check on both gas *and* gauges, after that; the toughest landing I ever avoided. . . .

NIGHT landings aren't difficult in decent weather, on fields with which you are familiar, or when you have ample lighting facilities. My first night hop was only a ride. My instructor was at the stick, and there were no dual controls in the airplane. He took me up over Bridgeport, Connecticut, and I doubt if I've ever had a more exhilarating flight—as a passenger. The moon was brilliant; the stars were bright. But even more striking was the beauty of the town itself, nestling like a vast cluster of living, twinkling diamonds. Boys, I really did get a boot out of that. But don't let me get poetic.

My sense of direction vanished; I hadn't the least idea of the location of the airport. Not until Grevvy throttled his motor to glide in could I pick out the boundary lights. We had just installed a new set of landing lights, so we didn't signal for the floods. Grevvy flipped a little tumbler switch, and two bold beams pointed out the runway. Still, it seemed as though Grevvy had to be a magician to know when to level off and sit down.

I was never "checked out" on night flying. Later, when I owned a ship, I logged a little night solo time by moonlight, operating out of a Maine hay field. I had to come in between two giant elm trees about sixty feet apart—the ship's wing spread was thirty-six. And I had to stop rolling before I reached a row of apple trees. Wonderful experience. Perhaps it saved my useless hide several years later.

A pal of mine suddenly acquired the flying bug without ever having had a minute's time at the controls. And after one hop in a demonstrator, he purchased a ship—an Arrow Sport. He took out a student pilot's permit and I renewed my license, the idea being that I would give him a little dual to supplement his instruction from a bird who was a better instructor than I. I hadn't been in a ship for a year or two, and if you think you don't forget anything about flying when you lay off, you're wrong. It took five hours of dual for me to feel right about that ship—and the worst flaw I had to iron out was, of course, *landing*.

Our vacations came together and my pal, a guy named Ham, wanted to fly to Florida. That was okay with me, and off we went, pulling out of Teterboro in fine spirits. At that time Ham had the idea that flying was merely a matter of doing what you damn well pleased, with everything working out automatically. He changed his mind after that trip. We took turns flying and navigating. The most distressing thing we learned was that the ship did not have as wide a cruising radius as we had been told, which meant that we could not make some of the longer legs of the scheduled airline route. That's why we had to land at Lumberton, North Carolina. We couldn't make it from Raleigh clear into Charleston.

We hit Fayetteville on the nose, picked up a railroad track and lit out for Lumberton. All we knew about the field there was what we read in the Airport Guide: "One-way field, N. W. by S. E., sand spot in center, one small hangar . . . etc." A head wind came up strong, and a rain squall. We ran out of the squall into dusk, but we were still over the railroad track. Only it was the wrong track. We didn't realize it until we reached the next town, Maxton, when we should have been over Lumberton. We had expected to identify Lumberton by the fact that the track we

were following ended there. Not so! At Maxton, the track ran straight on through the town. Nuts! We turned south-east, hoping the gas would hold out.

AT last we picked up Lumberton, but in ten minutes of low circling over the little town we failed to locate the field. Having about five minutes' fuel left, I decided to choose the best farm field available and land while we still had the motor to help. We dragged the town once more, searching intently in the dark. It was then that we saw a flashlight waving on the ground. And nearby, there was a small T-shaped hangar. We saw what we judged to be the sand spot in the center of an area that seemed forbiddingly small to me—with a river at one end and some sort of factory near the other. There was a water tower above the factory; there were some pretty high trees opposite the tower: My mind went back to those tall elms on the edge of that Maine hay field. I cut the gun and glided low over the "airport." Then I gunned it suddenly and climbed.

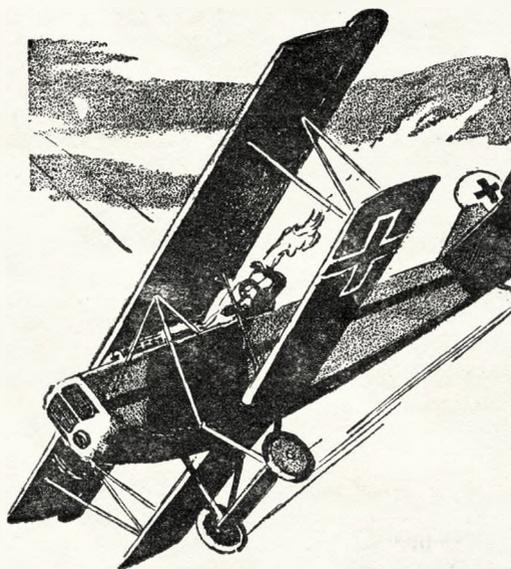
"What's the matter?" Ham yelled. And I hollered that I didn't like the looks of

something I thought I had seen. I took another shot from a slightly different angle, almost power-stalling around the water tower. Then I closed the throttle and hauled back the bungee. My heart was knocking louder than the idling motor. She began to sit down—like a rock. I saw the sandy spot looming up fast; I eased back on the wheel, goosed the motor briefly—and we were rolling smoothly toward the river. The brakes checked us with ample room to spare; we taxied back to the tiny hangar where a crowd had gathered, cut the switch. To me, it had been pretty tense; to Ham, just a routine landing. Ignorance is bliss!

A tall, gangling bare-footed youth shouldered his way toward us. "Y'all sho did come in pretty," he said, "an' jes, right. Where y'all first started to set down is a row o' high tension poles!"

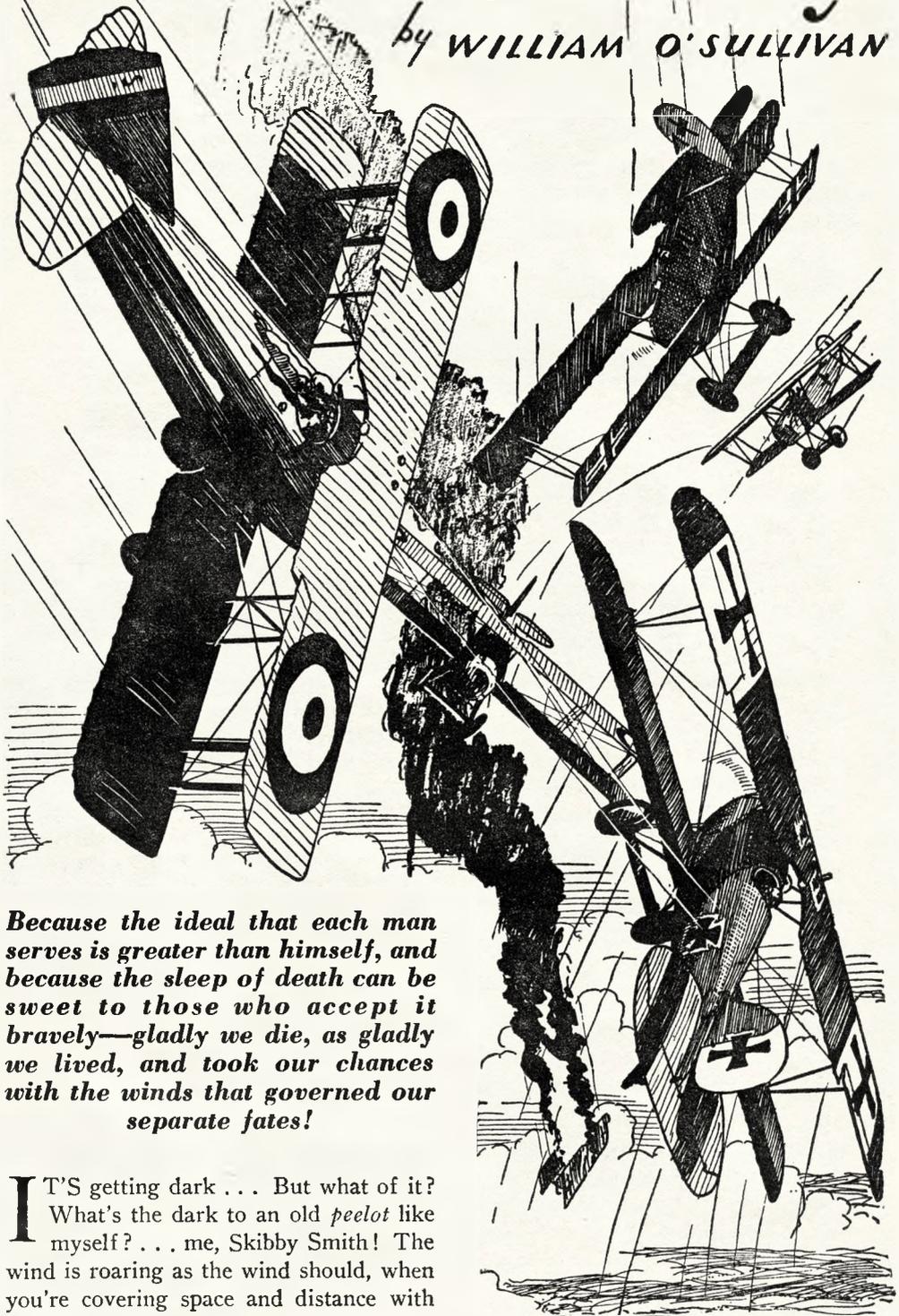
Ham is now a very competent pilot. He knows just what his ship will do—and what it won't. And he knows that if he lives to be a hundred, there'll always be something more he can learn about landing.

Keep your nose low on the turns, pal-lies, and—*Happy Landings!*



We Die Gladly

by WILLIAM O'SULLIVAN



Because the ideal that each man serves is greater than himself, and because the sleep of death can be sweet to those who accept it bravely—gladly we die, as gladly we lived, and took our chances with the winds that governed our separate fates!

IT'S getting dark . . . But what of it? What's the dark to an old *peelot* like myself? . . . me, Skibby Smith! The wind is roaring as the wind should, when you're covering space and distance with the speed of life. The scream in my ears

He went blazing towards the grave.

is the scream of the wires, and the flame I see belching from the darkness ahead of me is flame from the short and rigid stacks of my good old Hisso-220.

That's what I'm telling myself.

The gas is wide open, now, and I'm zooming along, and it's getting dark. But what of it when I'm going to be home and see Mike Muller any minute now. . . ?

You see, I suspected Mike Muller almost from the first, when those kids coming up to Squadron 83, Yank Pursuits, started getting theirs. And now I've got him, and I want to get where he is and finish it out with him! . . .

IT WAS the Spring of '18 and the Huns started their drive with a roar and a smash on the ground, and in the air the Fokkers and the Rumplers and the Halberstadts and the Hanoveraners and the Gothas and all the rest of the sky carrion screamed overhead.

Gaps showed in the line-up of every squadron on the Western Front. Our bunch, good old 83 Squadron . . . the bunch with the insignia of the black-and-gray eagle with a yellow mouse in its beak . . . 83 Squadron was no exception. Replacements were coming fast and green; and they were going fast and red—red and flaming. The Old Man, Major Gitz Northrup, stirred around until he wore a hole through the seat of his pants on that swivel-seat chair of his.

I didn't wonder. Nobody knew better than I did how vanishing replacements will wreck the morale of a bunch of kids. It causes them to talk, at the squadron. You know the fanning bees, when the candles are lit in the mess shack, and the *cognac* is flowing, and the jittery boys begin to see ghosts in the dim corners of the place, where lights flicker fitfully?

It causes talk back at Pool, where the other replacements are squatting around waiting for assignments.

"Squadron Eighty-three is a hoodoo

bunch," it would go. "They're marked lousy."

"Hell, this whole business is a hoodoo," another kid would put in. "Look how fast they're going!"

It doesn't take much of that to wreck morale. Finally, the Old Man sent for me, and I went in hardly knowing what to expect.

"Lieutenant Skibby Smith reporting, sir," I told him, with my best cocky-Yank salute.

Major Northrup got his beef off his mind fast. And then he nearly floored me with what came next. "We're losing more replacements than we should, Smith," he told me. "Plenty more. I'm making a change in our system. From now on, I'm going to give our new boys more time on simple duty patrols, before they go out with the mob."

"How will that help, Major?"

"As you know, Smith . . . the Huns have an uncanny faculty of spotting our new boys in formation, and of jockeying them out of place to cut them down."

"The kids are jumpy," I hazarded. "They stand just so much of flying in a bunch and then they jump out. Don't ask me why, sir. That's a replacement for you, that's all."

"Exactly," Northrup said after a moment. "So I'm going to give them enough time flying with an experienced man, and *then* send them out with a full flight. When I'm sure they won't jump out of place after ten minutes or so of dog-fighting. This is a most important thing, Smith. The efficiency and the recognition of the entire American Air Service is at stake here!"

"I hope it works," I told him.

"I hope you can work it," he answered dryly. "You're the man who is going to season them. You and Mike Muller."

"But—why *me*? I'm a *chasse peelot*. I've got a good score up front, sir!"

"Sure; you have. Eleven planes."

"Yes, sir. Eleven officially," I told him.

Northrup nodded and said, "Muller sort of thought you'd be a good man to work with him."

"Leave it to a Dutchman like Muller to go around making his suggestions about a man who has been up here eight months longer than he has himself," I laughed.

Northrup nodded absently. "Good luck, Smith."

I snorted. "I'll need it!"

TWO days later, Muller and I hopped off with our first charge, an apple-cheeked lad named Dick Bolton. He was fresh up from Pool, but it showed in his eyes what he'd been hearing in the mess shack and elsewhere. Honestly, I felt sorry for him, looking at Mike and me with a game grin; but with a look in his eyes that told lots about what he was really thinking but had too much guts to say.

"You tell him, Skibby," Muller said to me, when we came out to our *chug-a-lugging* single-seaters in the golden-red dawn.

"Okay." I grabbed the kid over where the throb of the warming motors wasn't so loud. "Stick close to us," I told him, "no matter what happens. We're not liable to have any scrap this morning. But I want you to grab your slot between me and Mike Muller here, *and hold it!* Don't get out, no matter what. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," Bolton said in a husky voice. He cleared his throat nervously, and when he said it again, it was almost a scream. "*Yes, sir!*"

"Good!"

We climbed in, and twenty minutes later we were cruising along at 10,000 and staring down at the patchwork-quilt squares that were the earth. We angled up a twisted ribbon of silver that was the *Ourcq* river and headed for *Courcie*. I whipped my wings and stomped the rudder every now and then, ripping off at a new tangent to see if I could catch the kid napping.

He missed once or twice; but after that, he was closer than the next rev of the motor.

On the way back, I saw a gang of five Fokkers winging high up and to our right, circling and circling like hungry buzzards. I slammed off to the right and angled low to keep clear of their vision. When we plunked down and rolled along the tarmac to the hangars, Bolton got out of his ship with a huge grin.

"Boy, that's fun!" he said. The scared look had cleared from his eyes.

I felt sorry for him.

Next morning, we jumped off again. This time, we were to dig into some sort of cold meat if we could find it: a hard-working Rumpler two-seater, or maybe a couple of lone-wolfing Huns. I gave Bolton his orders again . . . and after he had climbed into the pit of his ship, I came back and howled to him:

"No matter what happens—stick! Don't get out of line!" I drummed on the insignia-marked linen of his fuselage as I told him. Then I called Mike Muller over with a jerk of my head and repeated what I had said.

Muller stared at me, then nodded to the kid. We both went to our ships and climbed in and the mecs pulled the wheel chocks.

Nothing happened until we were on our way back from *Courcie*. And then I saw something winging along to my left, near the lines. Something alone. I looked up above that ship and blinked at the huge cream-puff cloud that floated at about fifteen thousand. We were at about eight, ourselves. The crate under us was maybe at five thousand; close enough to see it was a Hun photog ship.

I looked at the cloud again and decided maybe it was best to pass this one up; and just then the *rat-tat-tat* burst of machine-gun fire came from our rear ship. I turned and stared back at Mike Muller. Muller was pointing at the Hun speeding

away below, his goggled face frankly questioning.

I shrugged and wig-wagged the office to them both. Then I slammed into a twisting dive and we three went after that lone Hun, hell-for-propellor.

That was that; but not for long. The Hun saw us coming and twisted *in*. Inside our lines! That should have been the tip-off; but we were on his neck now, and it seemed a shame to pull up. I bent my trigger trips back and thrilled again to the short, stuttering shocks that rippled up my arms and into my chest and shoulders.

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat

My racers ate a seam up the backbone of the plane; but the pilot eased away, and the gunner in the rear pit could shoot. He blasted me off, the other two sticking in tandem with me. And it was then I saw them coming.

Five Huns . . . single-seaters . . . were streaming down from that puff cloud like huge, glinting raindrops. I fired a signal burst and pointed. But it was too late to get clear. We pulled level at the last possible minute and whanged our way farther behind our own lines. Archie puffs blossomed around us; but the Huns came on.

I knew it would be suicide to try a Lufberry circle: a chase-your-tail movement that doesn't let the other fellows in. A Lufberry circle maneuver with three ships would be like a wheel with only one spoke. Instead, we jumped for home, and when the Huns hit down at us from behind, we snaked it hard to the left . . . then to the right . . . then to the left.

One crate overshot us, and Muller and I cocked up our planes and blasted lead into it. I gulped when I thought I recognized the high, bullet-head of Baron Ago von Schmitzerhoff—83's pet hate—weaving around in that pit. But the varicolored ribbons that a Hun squadron leader sports flying back from his helmet were not there. I knew I wasn't wrong!

That made us four to three. But still I couldn't take a chance with a raw rookie among our own number. We snaked hard again and dipped and zoomed by turn, when the remaining Fokkers fingered their tracer fire all around us.

Then I snaked right, at the top of a zoom, and doubled back. And then it happened. Bolton missed his step and there he was out in the very front of it, with the Huns twisting in on him. I came around in a snap *Immelmann* sighting along my guns; and I let out a yell. Slamming down the sky lane, coming nearer with each look, was a gang of our own outfit!

But it was too late.

Something had gone wrong, and there was only one Fokker left in front of me, where there had been two! I beat on my cockpit coaming and opened up with both guns. But the Huns were lamming it for home. Our gang streamed past, and I recognized three lads from my old flight when I twisted in my cockpit.

We didn't follow. I had two aileron wires hanging loose on my left wing; and Muller seemed to be having trouble of some sort. He looked back at me as I ranged up fast, and I saw that he was throttled away down. He waved to me to go ahead—but I swung off and climbed up back of him in a guarding position.

MULLER had got a slug through his oil lead, we found. But we didn't bother about that. We went right to Northrup and gave our reports. The Old Man was a bit white around the gills, I could see.

"How did they get Bolton?" he asked tensely.

I shrugged. "I snaked off when the fire got too heavy," I told him. "Bolton missed my signal, somehow. The last I saw, Mike Muller was right behind the kid. When I came around again, the kid was gone."

"Right *behind* him?" Northrup barked.

"And slightly above," I added as casually as I could.

Muller flushed and said, "That's right. But—er—two Huns got in and picked him off. He was right out there in the open."

"Oh," I said. "Maybe it was my fault, huh?"

"Did I say so?" Muller asked heavily.

"No," I told him. "And you'd better not—*Dutch!*"

We might have tangled then and there; but the Old Man stuck in his oar and salted us down flat. "Attention!" he roared. "I happen to be doing the questioning."

But he wasn't. He was through. So were Muller and I for a couple of days. That was another of the eagle-and-yellow-mouse replacements marked up for Kaiser Bill. But at least 83 had something to show.

"I think it was Baron von Schmitzerhoff," Muller insisted.

I just laughed at that. "Get credit for it if you can," I told him. "I didn't even see what happened to the crate. Anyway, I've got all the Huns to my credit now that I want."

And then, two days later, we got a chap named Harry Melvis. Melvis was older than Bolton had been; but he went the same way. Only it wasn't in a trap, this time. It was in a tangle with two Rumpplers and a Fokker. Those Rumpplers were tough, for sure. We got shot up plenty, Muller and I, and I had a new respect for the man when we came in. But I didn't have my replacement.

What happened was this: The Rumpplers were at us . . . and then we at them. That went on for ten minutes. The gunner in my ship—the ship I had singled out—was a honey! But the Fokker, which had been in and out of things for the whole of the time, more or less, made a sudden, headlong drive at the rookie Melvis.

Melvis seemed to try and hold his line of flight while Muller cleared the German plane off; but he couldn't do it. He swerved off and ran for it, at the last possible second, when either he or the Hun had to change direction. Melvis was the one who changed. The Rumpplers slammed up and joined the Fokker. And Melvis was going down a flamer and the Huns were off for home.

We went after them, but a big enemy flight dug in and we had to turn back. Major Northrup raised hell when he got the report. "You didn't instruct the man right!" he screamed.

I shrugged. I knew better than to answer a major when he was in a temper like that. Any major. After all—

But Muller flushed. "I told him myself," he said, with heavy emphasis on the 'I'. You'd think the guy thought he was Von Richtofen, returned to life, giving the lads a bit of good advice! He went on: "And further, sir, I stood next to Smith," he nodded at me with a cool clip of his head, "when he stood alongside of the rookie's cockpit and gave him last minute instructions."

"They must have been thorough," Northrup grunted sarcastically.

"They were," Muller said, with a funny little frown. "They were very thorough. Smith drummed the fuselage with his hand, emphasizing each word as he spoke. I remember that very well."

I had to turn my face away. "Thanks, Dutch," I chuckled.

Northrup told us we both stunk, and I tried to return the compliment, with my eyes. But the strain was telling on me. I had trouble sleeping that night. The next night—there was no job for us the following day, after we lost Melvis—I saw the futility of lying on my straw mattress at last, so I got up and took a walk out in the open.

There were plenty of stars, and I thought it might help me to count them.

Sort of get my mind off my tough job, and how I was handling it. I counted and counted, my eyes following in a line down to the edge of the dark blue bowl that was the sky; and then I jumped. There was a star far below the horizon line—a star that shouldn't have been there!

I jumped back in the shadow of a hangar when I saw that the pinpoint of light I had seen ahead was moving down the hangar road. It stopped and turned in the hangar just beyond where I was hiding. *My hangar!*

It seemed hours while I waited, wondering what to do. Then it reappeared, swung along the road near me. It bloomed into a full glare for a fraction of a second and I crouched farther back at the curse I heard.

It was Muller who had been prowling around my hangar!

The man came on, and I realized that he had been up to something. I had been only suspicious before. But now I knew. Further, what sort of trick lamp had Muller supplied himself with—? A lamp that could be turned from a pinpoint to a full glare . . . and that he had accidentally turned full on, out there in the black of night, so that I saw him clearly?

I stood a long time wondering what to do. Finally, I went back to my bed and—strangely!—slept soundly for once.

It's one thing to suspect. It's another to know. It's a *relief* to know! Muller was definitely a man to watch!

A DAY later we got Carter Harmish. Somehow, Harmish looked hard and able, the sort of stuff that you knew would get along, somehow. But I wondered . . . The Eagle-and-Yellow-Mouse Squadron was good at losing replacements. Tough as this man looked, I had a hunch he'd go, too . . .

I looked my ship over carefully before I pushed off. *Very* carefully! I tested wires, bolts in the landing gear, control

cables, the controls themselves . . . everything. My grease monkeys looked hurt. But Muller just looked. He stared at me and a frown drew his brows together.

For a moment I was urged to smash the man full in the face with my ring hand. That big signet ring that I wore on my left hand would have made a nice dent in his face. It would just about have killed him!

But all I did was to turn and give the old routine to Harmish. While I talked, I wondered if the replacement wasn't just sort of half-listening . . . he had that far-away look in his eyes. Then he asked me to repeat. I did.

"Stay close with us! Don't break away, no matter what comes up. Watch my signals"—I gave him the routine again—"and above all don't lose your head!"

We stood close to the man's cockpit, Muller and I. Carefully, I drummed my words into the man's memory . . . rapped my hand against the fuselage as I spoke. "Don't . . . *rap* . . . break . . . *rap* . . . away . . . *rap*." And the rest of it.

It was getting into my own ship when it occurred to me I might have a little talk with Muller, before we got off. Just to see if I could surprise something in the man's eyes. *I had to know!* So I swung down and went over and stood alongside his fuselage.

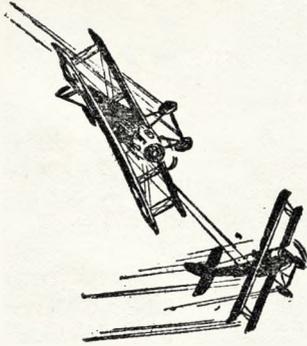
"Nice night, last night. Wasn't it?"

He stared down at me, but he said it before he could stop himself. "You ought to know," were his words. "You were prowling around, weren't you?"

"I thought I smelled the stink of your pipe in my room," I told him. "I'm going to have a word to say to you and the Old Man, when we get back!" I tapped the side of his fuselage thoughtfully, turning the thing over in my mind.

"What about?" he asked after a minute. "*You're* going to have a talk about *me*?"

I thought some more. "Well, maybe I'm wrong," I stalled him. "I guess we



won't talk about things, after all. Happy landings . . . Dutch!" I gave his fuselage linen a final punch and went back to my ship.

But as I drew my gauntlet on over my ring hand, I wished again that I could have smashed him with it. I had a feeling, you see . . .

And I wasn't wrong, as events turned out.

We jumped a patrol of three Boche down the other end from *Courcie*. And what a patrol! My heart jumped when I saw the vari-colored ribbons that streamed from the helmet of one of the Germans . . . a man who sat tall and straight in his pit, and whose bulletlike head was unmistakable.

Von Schmitzerhoff . . . the greatest of the living Hun pilots!

We were at it in a fury of firing from the start; and I nodded my head when I saw how the new man, Harmish, handled his crate. He was a superb pilot, for any experience. For a rookie, he was a miracle!

The lads must have stared from the trenches this day! Such a six-man fandango was never staged in the air as it was over that spot, today! Twenty minutes we went to it . . . and then, after a short breather, we went back at it again. Suddenly, two Yank planes had one of the Huns dead to rights.

And it was von Schmitzerhoff! Ago von Schmitzerhoff! The greatest living Hun pilot!

I screamed into the slipstream and waded in, my sights trained carefully. The other two Huns left off with playing around me and hopped for it.

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-iat-tat-tat.

My tracers streaked for their mark. The great German ace came taut in his pit and stretched back, his eyes going skyward as the nose of his plane went up slowly. He was finished.

And so was Harmish! The man we had flown out with tumbled forward in his pit, an arm staying up above the coaming. Then the arm, too, slid ahead after the Yank's body and disappeared from sight.

Muller swung his plane as I raked in. I zoomed over him and made a snap turn. Both the other Huns were lamming for it. With a feeling of unutterable weariness settling over me, I swung the nose of my crate for home.

I forgot everything . . . forgot the Huns who were fleeing . . . the downed Yank replacement . . . forgot, even, Muller in that ship near me. I never should have forgotten Muller in that ship!

WE LANDED and Muller sat for a long moment in his ship. I swung down and came over near him. And then he stood and peeled his gloves off, looking down at me there. He slid over the side of the cockpit and dropped to earth, his hand sliding down the linen to steady him. He was very tired . . .

But he came erect suddenly, his eyes staring at his hand in stupefied wonder. It was red, the fingers of it. Blood red, almost. He said: "Huh? Was I clipped by a slug?"

And then his eyes strayed to the fuselage . . . to the insignia . . . and a stupid grin with nothing in it of amusement crept over his face. "The mouse!" he gasped. "The mouse in the insignia! It should be yellow, and it's blood red! Blood red!"

I stared at him, fumbling with my flying jacket. I cursed myself for my clumsiness. But I managed to say, "So *that's* how you fixed it! Ha! Your trip to the hangars last night! You colored the mouse on the replacement ships *red* so that the enemy could pick out the rookie's and work them . . . could cut them loose easily and smash them!"

The man stood in stunned disbelief, then said, "Oh, my God! My God! Those rappings on the fuselage! That ring you are wearing must be hollow, must have some of your damned German dyestuffs secreted in it! You color that mouse as you stand and give your last instructions to the men you are taking to their death!"

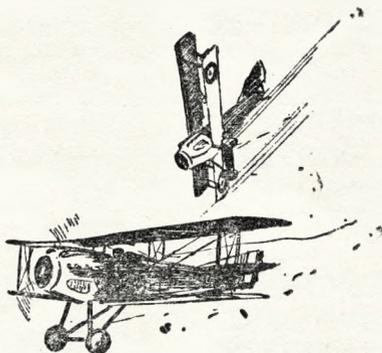
I had my gun out then . . . but Muller was still one up on me. He carried his in a shoulder holster, and had drawn almost as soon as I had. But I fired first.

The slug of my forty-five ripped him back and smashed him into the fuselage. But he had guts, had Muller. He cut two shots out of his own service automatic after I'd thought I'd got him proper! Then I gave him the finisher. But not before I knew that two lumps of big, hot lead had crashed through my belly and torn me beyond repair.

Sure, I killed Muller. And sure, I was a Hun spy. But Muller had killed my own brother, Ago von Schmitzerhoff, right under my very eyes, hadn't he? My own brother—Germany's greatest pilot? Further, Muller was a Yank spy, and a damned good one. And we spies sort of expect this sort of thing. We are, perhaps, doing what some call dirty work. But it is necessary work, and we do it gladly. And we die gladly.

We die gladly . . . as I am dying now . . .

It is getting dark, but what's that to a pilot? What's the dark to an old airman like myself? . . . me, Skade von Schmitzerhoff, to use my right name for a change.



The wings of death are sending roaring noises into my ears, and why shouldn't the wind roar, when you're traveling the space from the world to the Outer Dark? The scream in my ears is the scream of the wires, and the flame I see belching out from the darkness ahead is the flame from the short and rigid stacks of my good ol' Hisso-220.

That's what I'm telling myself, anyway.

The gas is wide open, now, and I'm zooming along, and it's getting dark. But what of it when I'm going to be home soon and see Mike Muller any minute now . . .

Good ol' Mike Muller—I suspected him almost from the first; but I didn't finish him off because I couldn't . . . couldn't . . . after all, I liked Mike . . .

Maybe, where we're going, we'll be on the same side . . . and then . . .

* * *

From: Captain Hawkins, Field Hospital, American 83rd Squadron.

To: Major Gitz Northrup, Commanding.

Subject: Ex-Lieutenant Skibby Smith, alias von Schmitzerhoff.

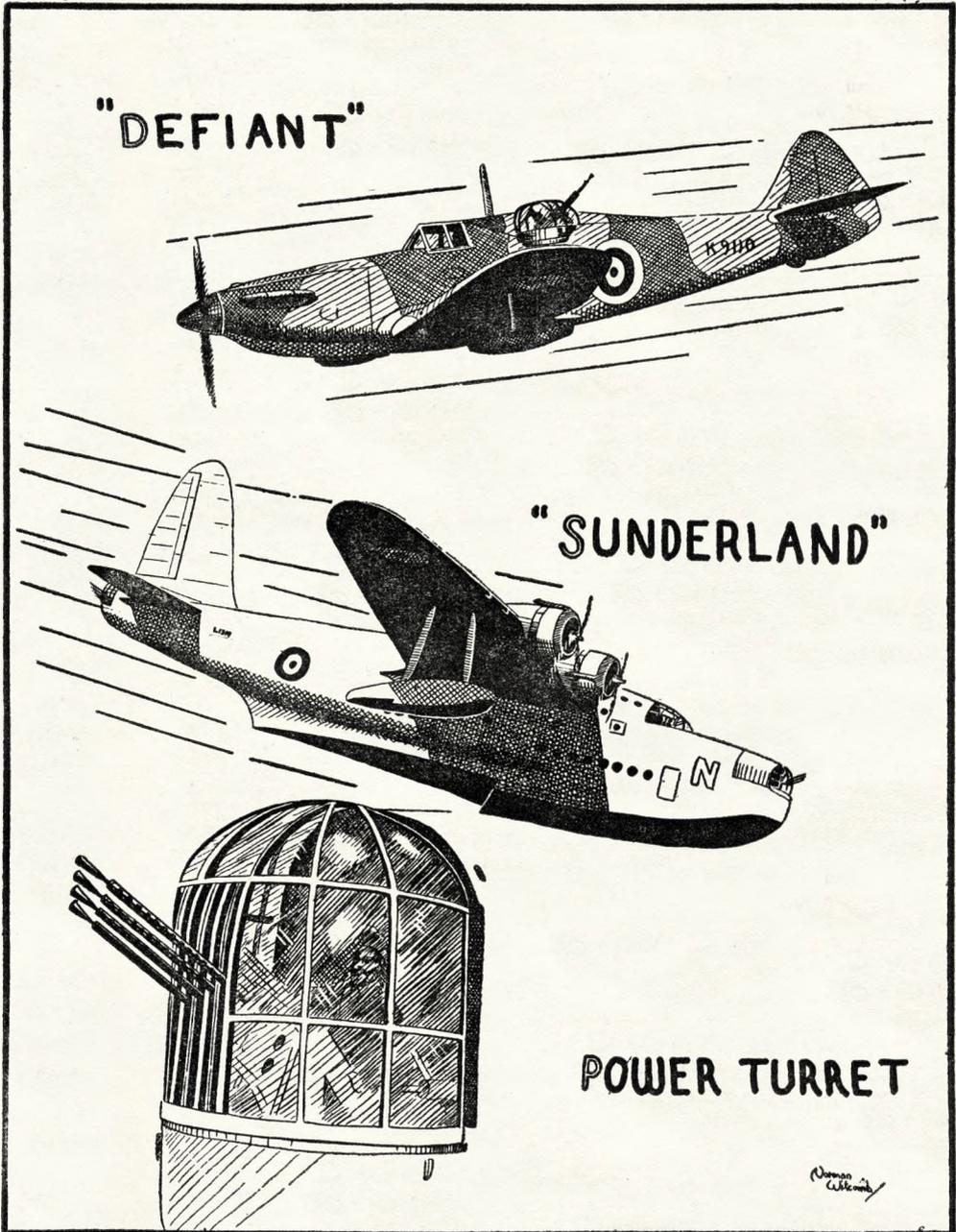
1. All foregoing document is last statement of the above mentioned man.
 2. Deceased showed remarkable stamina, living six hours. Document appended is in his own hand.
- Respect'f'y, A. T. HAWKINS.

Flying Battleships

A GLIMPSE AT BRITISH SKY POWER

NUMBER one turret swung round and a shattering broadside smashed the diving enemy plane from the sky.

It reads like a naval encounter, doesn't it? Still, this imaginary combat takes place anywhere from ten thousand feet up. The



By Norman Witcomb

turret in question is aboard a plane, which might carry several of them, or only one, according to its size. In the drawing, two of these machines are illustrated. Both are standard equipment in Britain's Royal Air Force. The first is the Boulton Paul "Defiant" a low-wing, all-metal, two seat fighter. The Defiant is the replacement for the now obsolete Hawker Demon. This interesting job is powered by a Rolls-Royce Merlin—the same motor that gives Spitfires and Hurricanes such meteoric properties. While this machine, being larger, does not reach their speed, it does over 300 m.p.h. The design is aerodynamically clean and is stressed-skin and flush riveted throughout. A controllable pitch airscrew is used, and split flaps on the wings facilitate landings and takeoffs. The undercarriage retract inwards, and all the latest instruments and radio are carried. The turret amidship is power-driven and carries exceptionally heavy armament which, at the moment of writing, is an official secret. This plane is designed for the express purpose of giving enemy bombers a hot time if they should ever happen to tread on John Bull's toes.

The second plane illustrated is the Short "Sunderland" flying-boat bomber. This huge machine is quite literally a flying battleship. It weighs some twenty-two tons, and Bristol engines developing some 4,000 h.p. carry it around the blue at something over 200 m.p.h. This boat can carry a heavy bomb load and defend it until it wants to drop the eggs on whatever its objective may be. There are four gun positions: one power-driven turret in the bow, another turret in the tail, and two machine gun stations amidships.

The guns are of a quick-firing type which use a shrapnel shell to discourage attacking aircraft. Depth charges against submarines are also carried, and the operational range is over three thousand miles, which gives this formidable plane quite a useful roaming quality.

At the bottom of the opposite page, one of the turrets is shown. This is only one type out of a considerable choice, and is used on large flying-boats or big bombers. As can be seen, the armament consists of a multiple battery of four heavy machine-guns. The power-driven turret has come into general use in the R.A.F. It was found necessary to employ power, because the high speed of modern planes created such a strong air pressure that the gunner had a hard time swiveling his weapon, let alone sighting it. Now, the air gunners of the R.A.F. sit comfortably enclosed in a transparent turret and handle their guns in a slipstream up to 400 m.p.h.

The turrets are turned with the gun and offer no additional resistance. In fact, they are much easier to work than the old war-time Scaarf mountings.



Conducted by Nosedive Ginsburg

WE HAVE on our hands today, dear friends, as fine an assortment of feathered sky-mice as I have ever been privileged to exterminate in my swift and merciful manner. Nevertheless, they shall have their say, and if they are not mobbed by the Loyal Defenders of Ginsburg, then, most certainly, they shall die by way of the baseball bat that Louie the Lush keeps locked in his iron hands for just such an occasion as this.

The first talented squirt to instruct and amaze us is Member John Wolfe, poet extraordinary from 4731 A. Kahala Ave., Honolulu, Hawaii. Here is John, dear members, and you may do with him what you will:

Dear Fourflusher:

Last year I sent you something nice in the form of "Thanks For the Magazine." I finally got the buck, but you complained and said I was too sweet. (Ginsburg is always amazed and set speechless by kind words, and therefore suspects them. Go ahead, Johnny) I did my best to satisfy, and what do I get? A card! (Whadda ya want, ya gorilla, a twin-motored Boeing?) But if you'll play ball, you may have my permission to print the following sentiment. (This sounds very much like a shake-down to Commander Ginsburg, but we'll listen to your poem)

AMBITION

Oh, I'd like to be a flyer,
To soar into the blue;
To get a pilot's license
Is what I'd like to do.

To go up with a teacher,
And then to go alone,
To fly an airplane solo—
A thrill I've never known.

To be an airplane's master,
To make it climb or turn;
The way to fly an airplane
Is what I'd like to learn.

To hear the whine of wires,
While in a headlong dive;
A zoom, and then you're saying,
"Why it's great to be alive!"

To go into a loop,
And then a barrel-roll;
To fly as though your airplane
Were a really living soul.

To get away from the heavy dirt
Of a crowded city street;
To glide among the zephyrs
Where you and the clouds could
meet.

Just another private pilot
Is what I'd like to be;
To fly alone sounds perfect—
Like paradise to me.

Oh, I'd like to be a flyer,
To soar into the sky,
To wander through the heavens—
Oh, how I'd love to fly!

Please, lads, send one airplane to John Wolfe, along with Ginsburg's latest book, "Six Ways to Soar Swiftly and Serenely and Inexpensively."

The above is a mighty fine book, dear

members, which I have not written, but will one day write and make fifty million dollars, not counting the foreign rights. And because you are my dear buzzards, my own personal pigeons, I will give you these six easy hints to happiness, free of charge, before returning to Member Wolfe and how much dough he gets for his "Ambition."

1. *Take a running jump through a high window, and spread your arms wide, at the same time making a face like a camouflaged Fokker.*

2. *Climb the stairs or take an elevator back to where you started and repeat the trick, following the instructions offered in item one.*

3. *Assume a bent-over posture in the middle of any highway and wait for a speeding Greyhound Bus.*

4. *Stick a long needle in the trousers of Louie the Lush.*

5. *Join the Aeronca Aces and shout, "Hur-ray for Ginsburg!"*

6. *Take the elevator a second time and jump out that window for the third time.*

Ah, well, it's fine to be young and foolish, and that reminds me of Member Wolfe. I liked his poem, dammit, and feel inclined towards paying him five bucks, and I would do it in a minute if it were not for another broken-strut whose name is Newell (Slugger) Embly, just imagine it, members, and he lives at 1215 10th Street, Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Newell, or the Slugger, whichever you prefer, is also a poet, and such a poet he tears this bleeding heart to fragments. He has run Member Wolfe a dead-heat, and I do not mean by this that both of them are dead. I mean they are tied for first place and I would like to give them both five bucks, but how can you change six bucks for two fives? If one of these slugs wins, the other gets a dollar. So, do you remember Solomon? What did Solomon do? He did just like Ginsburg. He cut the six bucks down the middle, and so both of these long-haired sentimentalists get three bucks. Sit back, dear friends, and listen to Newell. Take it Slugger :

Dear Nosedive: (this is really good)

Please take with a grain of salt any bouquets which I may unwittingly toss at you. This is my first contribution to the Hot Air Club, but I think my poetry is as good as the stuff, which, by some mental quirk, no doubt, you call poetry. For instance, the odiferous "Ode to An Odor." But enough of this flattery. Here's my poem, and I do mean poem :

PRAYER FOR AN AVIATOR

Dear Lord, Thou makest tempests whirl,
Beneath Thy gaze the planets swirl;
No swallow skims the sky's blue sea
Unseen, unwatched, unloved by Thee.

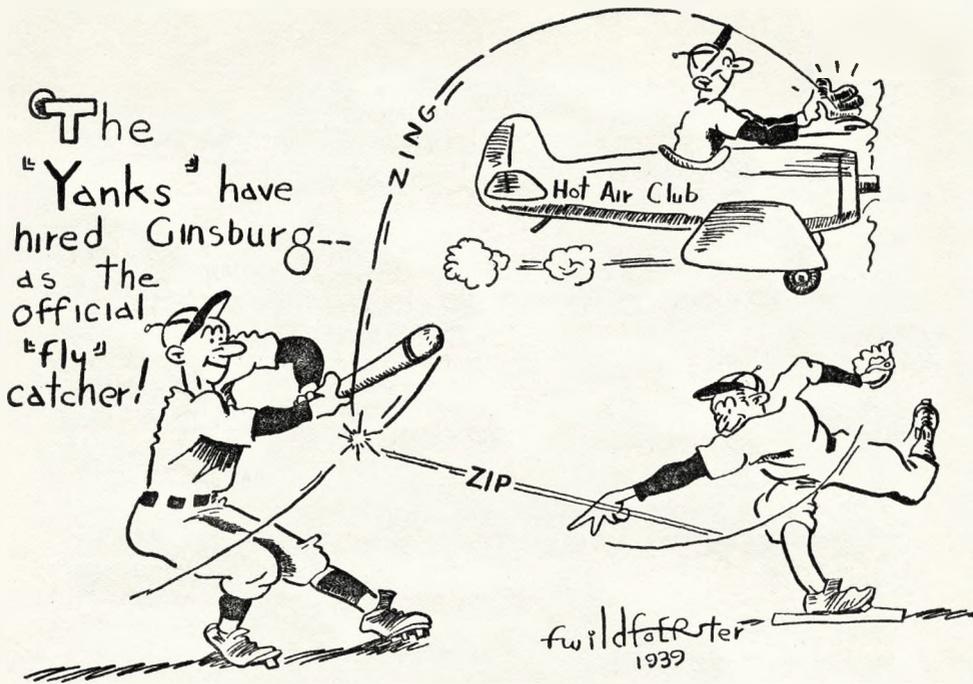
This pilot, young, with eager eyes,
Please Lord, be with him as he flies;
His silver wings keep ever strong,
Make sure his motor's droning song.

All perils of the air, or land
I pray Thee help him to withstand.
Grant him a safe, swift flight, and then
A happy landing, Lord. Amen.

This may sound very mushy to you, Nosedive, but I tried to give the impression of Him watching over the many intrepid birdmen who have flown and died in order to advance aviation.

I beg your pardon, pal, and the pardon of any who suspect I would ridicule a genuine sentiment, stenciled in the indelibly crimson ink of the heart, and expressing to me, as it must to all of similar mind, the prayer we would like to say ourselves, if we only had the skill to frame the words. Thus I must pause briefly in my abuse of the bloody buzzards, award Member Embley the three dollars he so richly deserves, and thereafter beat the ears from you other mugs whose sentiments are not so noble.

And since this has become a moment in which justice triumphs, I am obliged to let you hear the latest dispatch from the Mad Mudhen of New Orleans, the Bad-boy of the Bayou, and King of the Aeronca Aces, Charlie Piedra. Charlie's letter is



The
 "Yanks" have
 hired Ginsburg--
 as the
 official
 "fly"
 catcher!

not offered in competition this month, or for worldly gain. It is more than that. It is Charlie rejoicing in one of his great loves, the Aeronca, and it all works out like this. Perhaps, if you read the wise words of the editors up in the front of the magazine this month, you will note how pleased those guys were with the fairly recent flight of Johnny M. Jones from Hollywood to New York, non-stop. Of course, there are a lot of people making coast-to-coast hops these days, but not in Aeroncas, or "light ships," and that is why Charlie is crowing, believing, for some reason, that I have a grudge against Aeroncas, and not knowing poor man, that I have only harpooned Charlie and his pals, known as the Aeronca Aces, and never the game little ship that Charlie was flying a while back. Anyhow, here is Charlie's letter, without the photograph he was so good to attach. Most likely you screws have seen the photo, anyhow. The guy writes:

Hello, Nosedive:

Well, well, and well! Just look at the pretty picture and read what it says. What has happened to my Aeronca Aces, eh? And

who was it made all those dirty and disparaging remarks about the air worthiness of Aeroncas? Ha, ha, ha, ha! (definitely and very dirtily the last laugh, Nosedive) Yep, that's why the Aeroncas have been so quiet recently—we've been working for this epochal flight. Johnny Jones, incidentally, is an Aeronca Ace of whom we're very proud. I personally chose him to pilot the ship on the flight; in my usually modest, shy and retiring manner, refusing to do it myself. I'm adverse to publicity—it's a phobia! Read it and weep, you enemies of Aeroncas!! Coast-to-Coast, non stop!!!!

Charlie Piedra.

Your commander is very happy that Johnny M. Jones did not break his neck, and, of course, I see no reason why he should have. Mr. Jones is an able and experienced sky-hand, and you must believe that old Nosedive is not ducking an issue when he says that Aeroncas have only his greatest admiration, and have never, in the Ginsburg mind, been considered less than sky-worthy.

Naturally, we do not believe that Charlie knows Johnny Jones, anymore than Ginsburg knows the Angel Gabriel, who was also a flying man. But we can

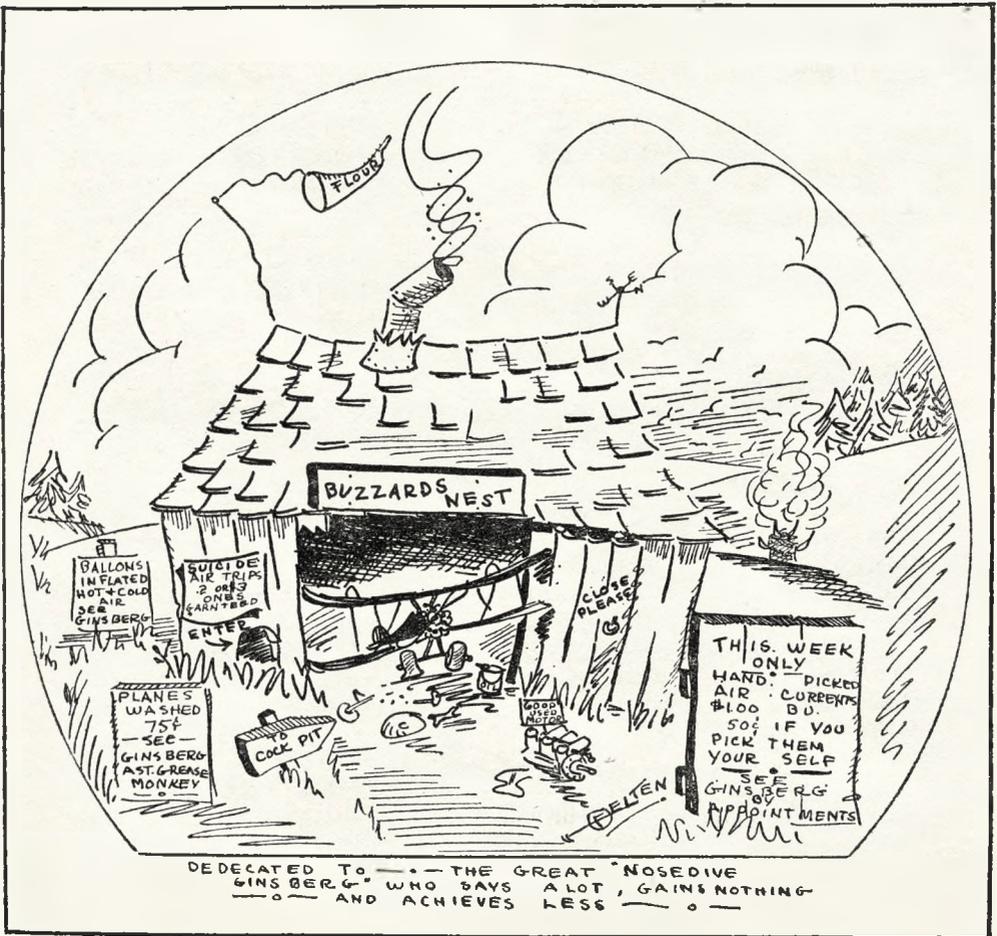
be wrong. The only thing we ever had against the Aeronca was the fact that Charlie used to sit in them, and we are very much in doubt as to whether or not Charlie could have flown either an Aeronca or the Yankee Clipper from Hollywood to New York. By an "Aeronca Ace" we do not mean any person who flies an Aeronca. In this screw-hatch, of the mad and demented, we use the term to apply to Charlie and his pals. But don't misunderstand Ginsburg. Your commander likes Charie. We could not get along without him. He is a valuable friend or foe, and a character to be revered for many ages to come. So much for Charlie.

We journey on, as is our happy practise, to the art gallery, and we will start

from the left, beginning with that fantastic ball game dreamed up by Member Fred Wildfoerster of Mongaup Valley, New York.

Member Fred is a truly remarkable pigeon to have struck a situation very close to Ginsburg's heart. Being a Bronx Boy, I have for many years been an admirer of the Yankee ball club, and find it hard to describe the joy that comes to me as I don my uniform in the service of Joe McCarthy, Lou Gehrig, Joe DiMaggio, etc., thus making my debut in the big leagues.

Ginsie, the ball hawk! Ah, many a sunny August afternoon, when the stands were packed thick with howling, peanut-spitting thousands, did I roam the out-





field! You would be surprised how much better you can chase a fly ball with an airplane than you can with your feet. There was always something wrong with my feet, anyhow, and maybe that's why I became a flying man in the first place.

Only trouble is, Fred, that with me on the Yanks, Louie the Lush will have to be sent along, too. The reason is obvious enough, since every one knows that Louie's the man who handles the ball bat for Ginsburg. No hits, no runs. You get what I mean?

This brings about another problem and a serious one it is. How do we know that Louie, set loose in the Yankee Stadium and wearing spikes, will not mistake the guys in the bleachers for the members of the Hot Air Club and commit the most horrible mass murder of the century? How do we know? Incidentally, Fred wins a dollar.

Moving our eyes around, we find the fiendish work of Mr. Dell Felton of 916 87th Street, West Allis, Wisconsin. Even through the eyes that I may have blackened, you squirts can see the Buzzards' Nest that Artist Felton has tried to represent as our sacred hangar and home!

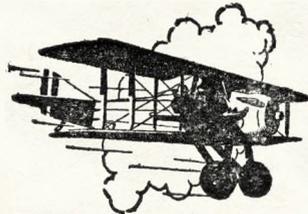
That's very foolish, because the Hangar is much crummier than Member Felton's picture, and if we really had a joint like that, it wouldn't smell so bad.

What do you think this squirt means by that Asst. Grease Monkey stuff? You take him out and bat in his ears, Louie, while your Grand Commander prepares to close the meeting and call the meat wagon.

After we give Felton a buck, we have two left, and they must be awarded to Poet Alfred O. Perry of Box 411, Emmett, Idaho, for a really fine contribution, entitled "PALS." The poetry is so good this month that it is difficult to abuse you bums, and such conduct must come to an end! Give us some of that second-rate rubbish we used to print, and everyone will be happy.

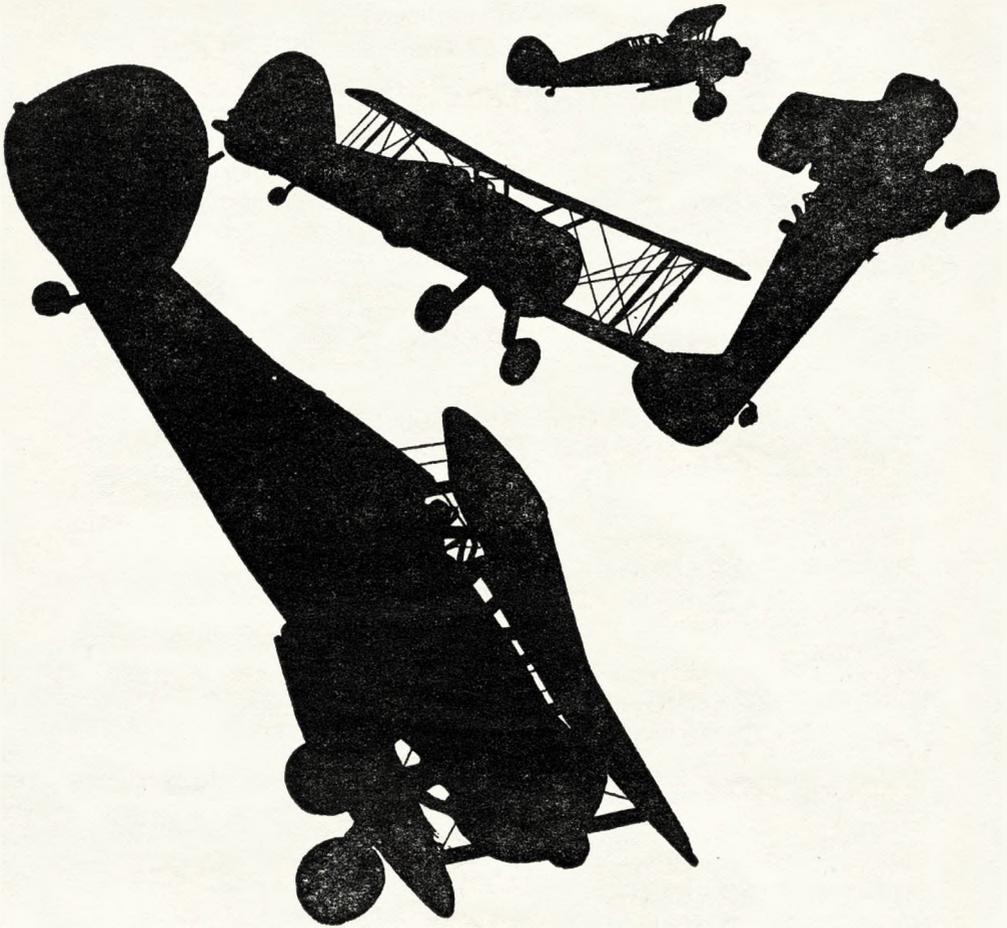
The last of the dollars is acquired by Member Norman Jones of 615 Alder Street, Scranton, Pa. Norman draws pictures that he thinks are funny, but which only succeed in raising my blood pressure to an altitude as yet unattained by modern aviation.

Well, so long, screws, and gentle blessings from Louie the Lush and Nosedive. . . .



| | |
|--|-------------|
| THE HOT AIR CLUB | June |
| Popular Publications, 205 East 42nd Street, New York. | |
| Sign me up quick! I like these stories best: | |
| 1. | |
| 2. | |
| 3. | |
| Name..... | |
| Street..... | |
| City..... | |

Story Behind The Cover



ALTHOUGH there are faster ships, the Gloster "Gladiator" would be able to hold its own in a fight with anything that flies. It is a Single-seat multi-gun fighter. The "Gladiator" is a development of the "Gauntlet", which you have found on these covers from time to time, and will probably be the last biplane fighter. It has a speed of 250 m.p.h. at 15,500 ft. and a service ceiling of 32,800 ft.

On the cover we see them mopping up an enemy station from which troops are being entrained, after it has been bombed by bigger ships.

The German plane is a Henschel dive-bomber, but don't let the name fool you, for it can fight as well as bomb.

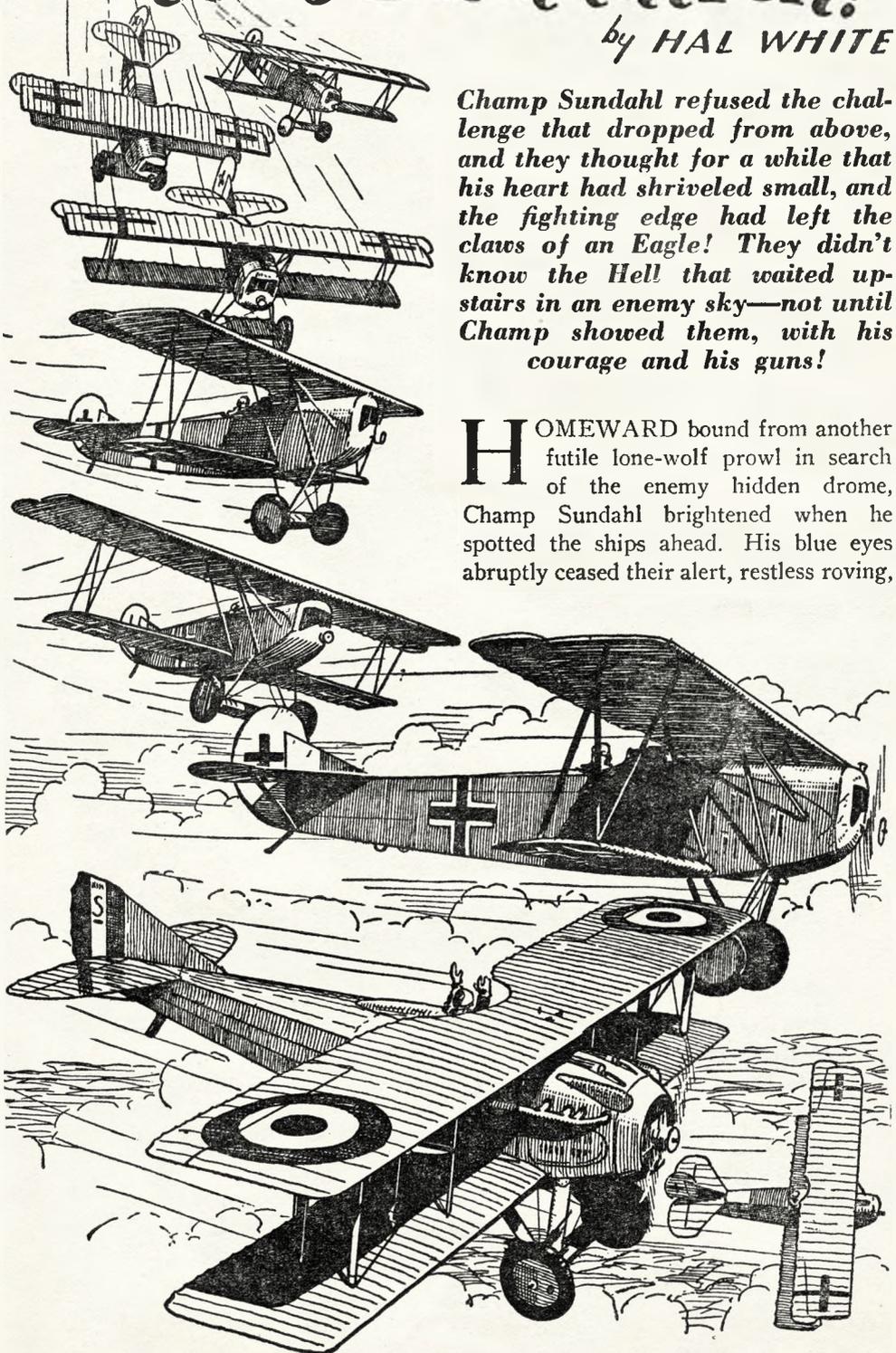
Fred Blakeslee.

Here's to Damnation!

by HAL WHITE

Champ Sundahl refused the challenge that dropped from above, and they thought for a while that his heart had shriveled small, and the fighting edge had left the claws of an Eagle! They didn't know the Hell that waited upstairs in an enemy sky—not until Champ showed them, with his courage and his guns!

HOMEWARD bound from another futile lone-wolf prowl in search of the enemy hidden drome, Champ Sundahl brightened when he spotted the ships ahead. His blue eyes abruptly ceased their alert, restless roving,



Hands raised above his head, the flight of Fokkers herded him away.

and clicked to a focus on the two black dots like spatters of ink against the azure backdrop of the afternoon sky.

Relaxed in his pit, he sat unmoving except for the slight turning of his helmeted head as he followed their course. The sun threw flat, emotionless glints from the glass of his goggles, but behind those goggles his eyes gleamed with satisfaction, and his wide mouth twisted in a half grin, revealing a flash of white teeth.

The Spad drilled straight to the west, while the big American ace held a keen, unwavering gaze on those black dots ahead and above. There were two of them, almost certainly a couple of von Stull's veterans. Dangerous men, and they would be ravenous to taste the blood of Captain Champ Sundahl, whom the von Stull outfit hated worse than any other man on the Western Front.

That was all right with Sundahl. Two to one was fair odds. More than two he might have avoided, unless trapped and compelled to fight his way out, because the Yankee ace was first of all a man of common sense.

Closer, and the two dots slashing down across the blue, sprouted dark green wings and identified themselves as Fokkers. Sundahl's mouth set grimly. Those green ships belonged to the *staffel* of the Baron von Stull, and here was a chance to relieve some of his disappointment over that hidden drome.

The Fokkers were roaring down in a steep power dive, and Sundahl saw the sputter of bluish-yellow flame mushroom against the wind of their motion as they warmed their guns. His own guns chattered a brief burst, and he set himself.

And then, with the two rushing at him, fore and aft, he went into action with the speed of a jungle tiger. Even as the Spandau slugs came reaching for him, he slapped the throttle, and the Spad leaped like a spurred bronc, the gray wings blurring as he kicked the ship into a roll. The

crate corkscrewed out of the line of fire, leveled, zoomed, hung on its prop for a dizzy moment. Then it switched ends and went slashing after the enemy.

The two Huns might never have tried that diving trick if they had known who they were up against. Now they were below, and at a disadvantage. Their startled faces were white in the ovals of their helmets as they looked up and back at the Spad, and tried frantically to come out of their dive in time.

"Sad, mates. Very sad," Sundahl muttered, and a grin twisted his lips, wrinkled the craggy nose that had been broken once and badly reset. "Mebbe I'll never find your damn hidden drome, but *you'll* never see it again, either!" The Spad roared down, and Sundahl's thumbs jammed the trips.

The slugs took the nearer Fokker amidships, drove down through the head and shoulders of the pilot to spike him to his seat cushions. The German stiffened erect, and the Fokker swooped up in the beginning of a zoom. Then it fell off on a wing, and went into a tight spin, the man's limp body slapping from side to side of the cockpit.

Sundahl slammed the Spad after the other. That gent, startled out of a year's growth, fumbled for a moment, then skidded on his turn. But he was an old hand, and he came out of his daze swiftly, and began to go to work like the tough baby he really was.

The two ships went round and round, over and over, like a couple of fighting Kilkenny cats. It was a backyard scrap, hard and relentless. Over the roar of the motors rode the woodpecker chant of the guns, and through the smoky yellow crisscross of tracer slugs the two crates rolled and dived and spun.

Sundahl saw fabric snip and flutter from his wings, and slugs rattled on his fuselage like corn in a popper. They rang on the motor cowling, leaving bright little

streaks and dents in the metal. One of them raked his helmet, parted his straw-colored hair for him, and burned his skin. That made him mad. He was sore, anyway, over this dirty von Stull outfit. Now he was hotter than hell, and an Immelmann, a swoop, the grim staccato of the Vickers, and a score of whizzing slugs took up their residence in the enemy's motor, and in the head and body of the pilot.

THE ship caught fire instantly, flame rolling back. Sundahl, for all his savage skill, was a soft-hearted cuss, and ordinarily he hated to send a man down wrapped in the awful torture of flame. But he knew that this one felt nothing. He watched for a moment as the falling ship sped earthward, trailing its funeral plume of black smoke. Then he grinned, drew a gloved hand across his powder-blackened lips, and resumed his interrupted journey to the drome of the 64th Pursuit Squadron.

As he went, he thought of von Stull. A clever devil, the baron, but tricky and dirty, and his pilots were like him. A tough outfit. Not only did they have a lot of Yank ships and lives to their credit, but they seemed always to be hanging around with a double flight of green Fokkers to break up any attempt of the DHs to get photographs of the German back areas.

Wing wanted the baron's hide, and was everlastingly on Major Brady's neck to "*get von Stull.*" But the guy was smooth as an eel and he continued to roam the skies at will, while Wing and the 64th cussed and swore and made plans against him that never seemed to jell.

Try as they might, the Americans had never been able to find the baron's drome. But he had found theirs. He liked to come and crack down on the 64th with bombs and machine guns. And the Yanks couldn't retaliate.

At the drome, Sundahl taxied to the deadline, cut his motor, shoved up his goggles, and legged out of the pit. Piper, his little bow-legged mech, came scurrying up, and stopped, open-mouthed, at the bulletholes in the Spad.

"My gosh, Captain," he gasped. "You musta met somethin' with hair on its chest."

Sundahl grinned, digging for a cigarette. "Yeah, it sang bass, all right. Get out your court plaster, fella, and renovate this hack."

Piper, to whom the big ace was almost a god, said breathlessly, "Yes, sir. Right away, sir," and ran.

But a man was coming, strolling across the tarmac, to whom Sundahl was no god, but just another damn good fighting man. That one was Lieutenant Rod Ellison, member of Sundahl's "A" Flight, pal of civilian days, pal of wartime skies, and about as comfortable to have around as six pounds of cockleburs in a man's bed.

Ellison, whose real name was Paul, had his nickname of "Rod" from the lean slimness of him, the hard, muscled straightness of his body. That, and the further fact that he could *almost* drink the iron man, Sundahl, under the table. Almost, but not quite.

Sundahl's parents had named him Henry, but his hard fists and strength of body had won him the heavyweight championship at school, and he had lived up to it in the air.

Ellison came strolling, but Major Brady got there first. The stocky little C. O. glanced at the Spad, then at the rip in Sundahl's helmet.

"Bad?" he asked, worried.

Sundahl grinned, and blew smoke. "Just a skin burn."

"You didn't locate von Stull's drome, by any chance?"

"Nope. No luck." The big ace told him what had happened, while Ellison stood nearby, with folded arms, listening. Elli-

son had a cigarette between his lips, and a sardonic dent of amusement quirked those lips and danced in his gray eyes.

When the major had gone, Ellison advanced and thrust a finger into one of the bullet holes. "Nasty men," he drawled, "picking on a little fellow, sticking pins in him, rumpling his hair and everything. If he could only find out where the big boys lived he could go and tell their papa."

Sundahl's lips tightened. "Some of these days, bird-brain, I'm going to take you apart and distribute the pieces far and wide."

"Begin, funny face. But look out for yourself." And then, "Nicked you, huh, ya big ape? I don't know why I let you go out alone. Come on to the hutment, and I'll slap some iodine on you."

Sundahl growled, "I don't need a nurse."

"What you need is a keeper," Ellison drawled. "I s'pose, fat head, you never heard of infection."

"If it's something that's poison in a man's system, you're it," Sundahl countered. But at Ellison's tug on his sleeve he grinned, and the two walked away together.

THE squadron was at supper when von Stull and his Fokkers arrived. They came so fast that they were in sight to the eastward before the last of the pilots had boiled out of the messhall.

There was no time to roll out ships to meet them. No time for anything but just to flop on the ground, chins in the dirt, and take it. The five green ships slammed down, and the roar of their motors was drowned in the thunderous crash of their bombs.

One of the ground guns, hastily manned, blasted a frenzy of defiance, but an instant hail of Spandau slugs killed one of the squad and put the gun out of action. The Fokkers, roaring down in single file, turning to come back, made three trips each

with the bombs, and on the fourth trip cut loose their Spandaus, raking the ground.

The last ship down was the baron's own, recognizable by its black wing tips. The baron did not use his guns this time. Instead, he dropped a message container which disappeared in the smoke and dust on the tarmac. Sundahl, lying flat, glimpsed it out of the corner of his eye. Then the Germans were gone, blipping their motors in studied insult to the helpless Yanks.

Sundahl got to his feet, spitting dirt and oaths.

Ellison rose, too, brushed dust from his clothes. "Well, that's that," he drawled. "We take it, and like it. Just a bunch of panty-waists, playing with the big, bad boys." And he set up a wail, "Ma-ma!"

"Stow it, idiot," Sundahl growled. "Listen, von Stull dropped something."

"Y' don't say? Y' know, I *thought* I heard a noise!"

"Amusing insect," Sundahl gritted. "Why don't I kill it, and get myself some peace? He dropped a message container!"

Others, nearer, had picked up the container before they got to it. Captain Melrose, skipper of "B" Flight, said, "For you, Champ," and held out the paper.

Sundahl unfolded it, skimmed it swiftly, his eyes hardening. Then he handed it to the major, who read it aloud to the crowding, curious group.

Captain Champ Sundahl:

This afternoon, in combat over Lessy Antoine, you shot down my brother. I demand that you give me an opportunity for proper revenge, and challenge you to meet me over Adencourt at ten tomorrow morning.

von Stull.

An excited murmur rose, and Melrose said, "He's tough, Champ, but you can take him. I'd bet my last dime on that."

"It's the chance we've been waiting for," Dunbar, skipper of "C" Flight, broke in. "The chance to get von Stull."

Major Brady looked steadily at Sundahl, saying nothing. Ellison watched, saying nothing. But the jeering expression was gone from his eyes now, and a fighting light shone there.

Sundahl reached for the note, read it again, slowly. Then he crumpled it, flung it from him. "The hell with it," he rasped. "I'm not going."

"Not—?" Melrose gasped, and an amazed murmur spread. "What do you mean, you're not—"

"I happen to know that von Stull has no brother."

"What's that got to do with it?" Melrose's tones were cold.

"It's a trap," Sundahl growled. "Can't you see that? Von Stull will be there with enough ships to wipe out this whole squadron. He'll probably figure that we'll try to protect ourselves by having a flight go along. He'll trump that, and make a killing. Am I right, Major?"

Brady hesitated. "Perhaps you are," he said at last, slowly. But his gaze, like that of the others, was cold. Sundahl's angry eyes swept the circle, met only hard stares. With a savage exclamation he turned on his heel and strode to the hutment which he shared with Ellison, his lips a thin line.

He sat down on his bunk, lighted a cigarette, his face rock-hard in the flame of the match. The red glow of a burning hangar flickered on the window pane, and outside he heard the voices of the M. O. and his aides, attending the wounded. After a moment he got up, went out to help.

He was in the hutment again, later, preparing for bed, when Ellison entered. Sundahl opened his mouth to speak, and then, noting Ellison's grimness, clamped his iron jaw on the words. Anything he could say now would sound like an attempt to justify himself. They went to bed in silence, and Sundahl cursed himself to sleep.

SUNDAHL had the dawn flight. It was uneventful. He brought his flight back, set down, and went to the mess-bar, where he drank alone, the liquor having no effect on him.

He was moodily playing solitaire at a corner table when motors blasted into life on the tarmac. Startled, he glanced at his watch—9:30—and stepped to the door. A flight of six ships was warming, and the one nearest bore Ellison's number—47. Pilots were stringing across the tarmac, shrugging into flying clothes, Melrose with them, and Ellison.

Sundahl had a glass in his hand, and, with a savage exclamation, he flung it into a corner and strode out to overtake Ellison. He grabbed his arm, spun him around.

"So that's how it is, huh? You're going to take on von Stull yourself."

He felt Ellison's smooth arm muscles harden under his fingers, then jerk away. "Take your hands off me. Yes, that's how it is, mister. You'd shame the squadron. Somebody has to do what needs to be done around here."

"You complete damn fool! You'll be gunned down like a chicken hawk, and 'B' Flight along with you!"

"That's a chance we're taking—with the skipper's okay."

"With the skipper's okay, huh? I thought that gent had a brain in his skull, but I must've been wrong. All right, go on, and be damned to you!"

"And be damned to you, fella!" Ellison turned away.

"Wait, Rod." Sundahl caught the other's arm again. "I didn't mean that, old son. Best of luck, kid."

For a moment the two men looked into each other's eyes. But there was no softening in Ellison's gaze. Cheeks white, jaw set grimly, he looked Sundahl up and down. Then he pivoted on his heel and walked off.

And Champ Sundahl stood there with

sudden agony in his hard blue eyes, staring after him.

He was still there when the six ships took off. Then he turned, took three steps toward the mess bar, wheeled suddenly and ran to the hangars.

"Gas my crate, get her ready," he snapped to Piper. "And make it fast or I'll wring your damn neck!"

Piper made it fast. Brief minutes, and Champ Sundahl went gunning after the flight.

But Adencourt was only some ten miles to the north, and a mile behind the German lines, and Sundahl was late for the event. Not that he could have helped much if he had been earlier.

Crossing the lines at 5000, slashing to reach the scene, he spotted two ships that came together in a brief burst of combat over the ruined village of Adencourt. He looked for "B" Flight, but could not see them, and figured they must be lurking somewhere in the big blobs of white cloud that floated higher up. Only the two ships were to be seen at the moment.

A brief interchange between the baron's green ship and Ellison's gray Spad, and then one of those white clouds spilled a bunch of Fokkers that dived savagely to the baron's aid. Another cloud disgorged "B" Flight instantly, the five ships roaring to Ellison's assistance.

"I knew it," Sundahl groaned, and slapped at the already wide open throttle. But his eyes, as the Spad rushed toward the fight, were on those high clouds, and he had not reached the battle when the skies rained more Fokkers. More, and yet more! Five, ten, a dozen of them, with flame wreathing their blunt noses as they dived onto the Yank ships.

Impossible odds, and Melrose knew it, of course. But he fought, and his men fought. They were trapped, and they had no choice. And Sundahl, yelling into the slipstream, gloved fist pounding the throttle, drove his crate full tilt into the whirl

of ships, and fought, too, with everything he had.

He got a Fokker in the first minute, saw it tumble in flames out of the furious tangle of battle, and for once had no sympathy for the man with the agony of fire in his face. In the same instant a Spad went down, and another followed—one afire, the other spinning like a top gone crazy.

Sundahl had a glimpse of Ellison, saw him pounding at the breeches of his Vickers guns and trying to get out of a crossfire. Tracers zipped through his wings, hummed like red-hot hornets around his helmeted head.

Then two more Fokkers hemmed the luckless pilot, herding him to the edge of the fight. Ellison had no choice. His guns were jammed, and the four forced him eastward and away, while his outnumbered mates traded desperate lead with an enemy that still outnumbered them three to one.

Another Fokker dropped, but a Spad went pinwheeling down with it, trailing smoke, leaving only Melrose and Sundahl. Sundahl knew which side his bread was buttered on. So did Melrose—now. They got the hell out, with the slugs of the pursuing Germans shredding their wings and reaching gloatingly for their ears.

BACK at the drome, they brought their wobbling crates to bouncing landings and taxied to the deadline side by side. Melrose lifted his goggles, got slowly out of his pit. Greaseballs, pilots, Major Brady himself, came running.

Melrose's face was chalky underneath the smoke of oil and powder, and he held to the coaming for support. "You—you were right, Champ," he muttered thickly.

Sundahl stood, fists balled, nostrils wide, eyes aflame. "Damn you, Melrose! Damn all of you for a pack of fools!" He turned fiercely on the white-faced major. "And that includes you, Brady!"

For a moment the appalled group thought he was going to drive his rock-hard fist into the major's pale face, but he restrained himself with an effort. With a furious gesture of scorn for all of them, he turned on his heel and walked away. It was about noon when a lone green Fokker dipped low over the tarmac, dropped a message container, and sped away again. The message was again for Sundahl. It said:

I am sorry it was not you, Sundahl, but we welcome your friend—to hell. Perhaps he will give us some information about the American plans and dispositions. We shall seek to persuade him.

von Stull.

P.S. It was a mistake to bring other ships. You noticed that *I* didn't!

Sundahl crumpled the note in steelly fingers, his wrist twisting as though he held the neck of the baron. "They've got Rod at that hidden drome," he said to those around him. "I guess you know what that means."

Melrose came up to him as he stood at the bar, alone, a few minutes later. "We're game, all of us, for anything that you propose, Champ," he said quickly, anxiously.

Sundahl, eyes burning with torture, turned to him. "Hell, Captain, forget the things I said. I know you acted in good faith—the skipper and all of you. You thought I was letting down the squadron, but I wasn't. It was just that I knew von Stull better than you did, that's all. Forget it."

"Thanks, Champ. I feel like hell about this, you know. And if there's anything at all you can suggest—"

"Suggest?" Sundahl spread his big hands helplessly. "What is there to suggest? They've got Rod, and we couldn't get to him if we had fifty ships. Where would we go?"

"I understand that," Melrose said sadly, and turned away. Sundahl turned

back to his drinking—and his tortured thinking.

Suddenly an idea came to him. An idea so wild, so crazy, that at first he laughed at himself for it. Then, over another drink, his face hardened. "A long chance, but worth trying," he muttered. He went quickly to his hutment, found pencil and paper, wrote busily.

To the Baron von Stull:

This will be forwarded to you, you rat, in time for you to meet me at four this afternoon, at the same place. Adencourt, at 5,000 feet. I'll be alone, and you'd better be!
Sundahl.

A few minutes later he was in the air, heading for a German drome whose location he knew, farther to the south. A ground Maxim blazed at him as he swept low over the tarmac, but he ignored it, dropped his note and went back home.

Preparing to take off again, shortly before four o'clock that afternoon, he had an audience of curious pilots and grease-balls who looked at the grim set of that hard jaw and lumpy nose, and held their tongues. Major Brady came out, asked a quiet question.

"What are you going to do, captain?"

Sundahl drew the major aside, spoke earnestly to him for a minute. When he had finished, the major said, "That's a mighty long chance, Champ, but if anyone can put it over, you can. All the luck in the world, old man." He held out his hand and Sundahl took it. A minute later the big ace was in the air and away.

A MILE from the rendezvous he saw a lone green ship cruising in slow circles at 5000 feet. Closer, he picked up the black wing tips, and, warming his guns, went after von Stull.

The baron was clever, perhaps the best on the German Front. But that didn't matter. Sundahl's game had more in it than met the eye. He knew what to ex-

pect of the wily German, and it came shortly. It came in the shape of a diving flight of Fokkers, seven of them, hemming Sundahl fore and aft.

The American put up a show of resistance, then held up his hands. The baron cut in close, and, with a gloating grin, motioned to the east. Sundahl nodded, and the eight German ships moved off with their captive. Von Stull didn't know that behind the goggles the Yank's eyes were smiling grimly.

The flight drilled northeast, arrived finally over hilly country that was densely forested. Sundahl looked overside, puzzled. He had been over this territory a dozen times, hunting for that hidden drome. If there was a place down there where ships could land, it wasn't visible from the air.

But the Fokkers were slanting down toward that wide green area of tree-clad hills and valleys. They took formation in a long line, four ahead of Sundahl and four behind him, the baron leading. Sundahl saw the baron's crate drop lower, and then disappear completely in a tree-blanketed valley.

"What the hell?" he muttered. "Do they land in the tree tops?"

The next ship went down, and the next. And then the Yank, close to the ground, saw the answer. There was a long cleared space down there, floored with cement, and the cement was painted green, camouflaged to look like treetops.

"Smart," Sundahl told himself, setting down smoothly and rolling to a stop. "Very smart. No wonder we couldn't find it."

The ships swung, taxied to the deadline. The hangars and other buildings were under the arching branches of the forest. A minute, and the American stood face to face with the baron. Von Stull was a thin, wiry fellow with a beak of a nose and light blue eyes as deadly as the muzzles of his own twin Spandaus.

"A pleasure long awaited, Captain," the German said in good English. He grinned, but his eyes hated the Yankee.

"It's all yours, von Stull," Sundahl snapped.

The baron's grin faded. "I had always known," he said harshly, "that you Americans were fools—but not quite such fools as you and your friend Ellison have proved to be."

"We won't go into that," Sundahl said quietly. "What comes next?"

"I shall send for you when I am ready. We will have much to discuss, *nicht wahr?*"

"That remains to be seen, von Stull."

The baron turned, snapped a curt order in German to two burly armed guards. They searched Sundahl swiftly, then herded him away, their Lugers at his back.

HIS prison proved to be a small sheet-iron building somewhat apart from the others. It proved, also, when the door was opened and Sundahl was shoved inside, to contain Rod Ellison.

Ellison, still in flying clothes and leather helmet, was sitting with his back against the wall. He remained seated, too numb with astonishment to get up, and stared as the door closed behind the newcomer.

Sundahl stood with boots braced wide, arms folded, and regarded the seated man with the expression of one who has swallowed raw quinine.

"Well, well, well!" he jeered. "If it isn't the master mind himself, parked on his fat fanny like a Chinese Buddha and scheming what to do next to win the war!"

"Skip it," Ellison drawled wearily. "Welcome to hell, funny face."

The captain's mouth tightened. He drew a deep breath, strode to stand over Ellison, who looked up at him with a sardonic quirk of his right eyebrow.

"Listen, louse," Sundahl growled, "I oughta bust that Grecian beak of yours till it looks worse than mine. I—"

"Start any time." Ellison came swiftly to his feet, fists cocked. "I could use some action."

"Yeah, you sure could. 'Specially north of the tonsils. That part's been dead a long time. I'm holding my nose."

"My, my," Ellison breathed. "He comes all this way to say 'I told you so!' What a pal! Well, do you start, or do you take it out in talkin'?"

Sundahl sighed. "I'm savin' it for when you can be among friends. You gotta go out of this place on your own feet." He stopped suddenly, walked to the one high window and peered out. A burly guard stood there, his back to them, leaning on a bayoneted rifle.

Sundahl asked cautiously, "Does that kraut savvy English?"

"Naw," Ellison said. "But I do, and I'm waiting to hear how the brains of the A.E.F. got himself hooked."

"I was personally escorted here, guy—not hooked."

"Yeah?" Ellison scratched his chin. "Well, hell's warming, feller. Would you like to be fried rare, medium or well done?" He grinned faintly, and Sundahl's mouth curled in an answering grin. He drew Ellison to the farthest corner of the bare room.

"Listen, dim-wit, we're blowing this dump."

"How lovely," Ellison murmured.

For answer, Sundahl unbuttoned his shirt collar, reached a hand back over his shoulder, and drew out something. "Here's our passport to Paris. Nice, huh?"

Ellison stared at the flat, vicious little 25 automatic in Sundahl's palm, and then, eyes suddenly warm with understanding, into the craggy face above it.

"So you planned this, did you? You let von Stull grab you. Champ—"

"Two reasons," Sundahl cut him off. "First, to take you home and beat the silly can off you. Second, to find this damn drome."

"But they searched you—" he started.

"Sure, but they didn't expect a holster in the middle of my back. They didn't know I schemed to get here." He looked fondly at the weapon in his palm. "She's small, but she speaks with authority, m' friend."

"She'd better," Ellison grinned. "She'll have to drown out some loud talkers when the Lugers start."

Sundahl nodded his helmeted head. "Mebbe hell's waitin', keed. But you can bet your last centime we're sending von Stull ahead to play doorman for us when we walk in."

"We might start shooting when they come for us," Ellison suggested, but Sundahl shook his head.

"Nope. We'd have the whole drome on our necks right now, and we need a little time. Better take our chances in the baron's office, where the row won't be heard till we get clear. Besides, we want that rat—first and foremost."

While the afternoon waned, they discussed their plans in low tones, while outside, ships came and went. Darkness fell, and lights flashed on everywhere. A smell of cooking drifted to them, and they sniffed hungrily. But no one came near them, and they cursed the baron and all his works.

From their window they could not see the front of the hangars, but they could hear what went on, and they pricked up their ears when, about eight o'clock, first one motor and then another roared into action. They stopped, started again, several times, but no ships took off.

"Tuning," Sundahl said. "Warming our ship for us."

And then they heard the crunch of booted feet, and saw shadowy forms approaching.

A MINUTE later they were on the way to the Operations office, two guards with Lugers, and their own sentry with



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Here's to Damnation!

his bayoneted rifle directly behind them. Roughly shoved, they entered a large, lighted room and faced the baron. Von Stull sat behind a huge, heavy, flat-topped desk on the far side. He sat like a god, smiling faintly and fingering a spiked mustache.

Sundahl and Ellison stood side by side in front of the desk, and Sundahl felt the reassuring weight of the weapon in the pocket of his flying coat. The guards took station, one leaning on his rifle directly behind them, the other two, hands caressing the Luger butts, on either side and a little to the rear.

The prisoners noted the setup out of the corners of their eyes. It didn't look too good. And it looked worse immediately. For the baron, after a sneering, "Good evening, gentlemen," lifted his right hand, which had been resting in his lap, and the two looked squarely into the muzzle of a Luger.

"You will kindly raise your hands," came the sharp order. Sundahl hesitated, eyes on that frowning Luger muzzle, debating a grab for the gun in his pocket. No good. That would be suicide. Warily he raised his hands, and Ellison followed suit.

The baron barked an order in German, and the guards searched them thoroughly. They found the little automatic, handed it to the baron, who took it and looked it over, smiling.

"I suspected as much," he said. "You

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Dare-Devil Aces

Americans are never to be trusted." He opened a drawer, dropped the weapon into it, closed it with a decisive bang. "And now that that little matter is attended to, we can talk business."

Neither prisoner spoke for a moment. Sundahl felt sick inside. If only he had kept his hands casually in his pockets! And then, his big shoulders drooping, he stepped close to the desk, pleading in his eyes and in his voice when he spoke.

"Von Stull, I don't know what you've got planned for us, but we are legitimate prisoners of war and deserve honorable treatment."

"Weakling, you deserve only what you will get!" the baron sneered, and the Luger lifted menacingly. "You planned to kill me in cold blood. You will be in hell within the hour. But, before that time comes, you will wish it could be sooner. Put your hands behind your backs, both of you."

But Sundahl, near the desk, now, was ready to go. With a sudden movement possible only to one of his giant strength, he gripped the edge of the heavy oak desk, flipped it as though it had been a card table, and sent it crashing onto the baron.

The baron's gun went off in the air, and he spun backward against the wall with the desk on top of him. The guards were too stunned to move for an instant, and in that instant Sundahl and Ellison went into action with fists and feet.

Sundahl's fist crashed stunningly into the face of the guard beside him, and his foot caught another in the groin, spilling him in a writhing heap. Ellison's guard got a similar kick in the groin, and then, as he doubled in agony, the fist of the slim Yankee straightened him, hurled him backward with heels dragging.

Each grabbed a Luger, and Sundahl spun to face the baron. But von Stull had hit his head against the wall, and he lay dazed and helpless in the wreckage of desk and chair.

Here's to Damnation!

Sundahl couldn't kill a man in that condition, and, cursing with bitter disappointment, he turned away. "Come on, Rod!" he shouted, and Ellison followed him to the door.

The guard with the rifle got it up just as Sundahl jerked the door open, and the weapon spouted flame and noise, the bullet knocking splinters from the door jamb into Ellison's face. Ellison, running, fired from the hip and the guard collapsed to the tarmac.

Outside, taking it in his stride, Sundahl leaped for the telephone wire some nine feet from the ground, and it snapped with a sharp ping. Then they were on their way.

ALREADY, warned by the shots, men were coming from the officers' hutments, from the quarters of the enlisted men. They were startled, uncertain of what had happened, and in the dim light the running men were shadowy targets. Even so, Lugers began their savage crashing immediately, and bullets came whistling.

Sundahl and Ellison had planned carefully, and they moved like a team. Sundahl ran to the nearest hangar and Ellison to a ground Maxim which Sundahl had spotted when he came in. The gun was near the edge of the cleared space, angled to shoot at any enemy who might swoop over. Ellison, worked swiftly, got it down to the horizontal, fingered the mechanism in the dark to learn its operation.

Sundahl got the hangar door open, swore as bullets struck the wood close to his face. Men were running toward him, firing as they came.

And then Ellison went into action, with a staccato roar of the Maxim. The running figures went head over heels under the level flail of slugs. He swung the gun to the lighted front of the men's quarters. Window glass splintered, and men, boil-

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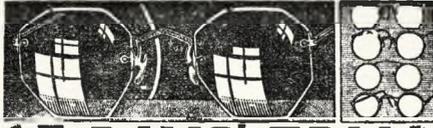
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ing out of the doorway, dropped in their tracks. The officers' quarters got the same dose.

But some were out, and circling in the dark, and they fired at the winking flash of the Maxim. The gun was in a shallow pit, and Ellison crouched lower to escape the slugs.

In the hangar, Sundahl found a motor which was still warm. He hauled on the prop for compression, ran to the cockpit and switched to contact. But the enemy was stalking him, and suddenly, from a window in the rear, a gun blazed at him. He threw an answering shot, then ran to jerk the prop again. The motor caught, roared, and he throttled it quickly, nursing it expertly. Slugs came through the door, men were yelling, and over it all rode the chatter of Ellison's Maxim.

From the rear of the hangar a shadowy figure advanced, moved close along the wall toward the open door, Luger fisted. He appeared suddenly at the door edge, and Sundahl, turning saw him. It was the baron, eyes hot with killer lust. The two guns roared together. The baron's bullet missed, Sundahl's hit the German full in the chest.

One more thing to do. Sundahl had seen a big gasoline drum at one side of the hangar, and he ran over and opened the valve, releasing a flood of gasoline onto the floor. Back to the ship, and into the pit, and from a side pocket he snatched a Very pistol. Then, rocking the ship over the chock blocks, he leveled the pistol and tossed a ball of blue flame at the tank.

There was a jarring "Poom", and a gush of fire reached for the departing Fokker. Reached, too, for the dead body of the baron, and Sundahl, looking back, muttered "Welcome to hell, von Stull."

Ellison, bullets hissing around his ears, left his gun and flung himself onto the wing of the moving ship. "Let's go!" he yelled, and Sundahl, swinging onto the

Here's to Damnation!

cement tarmac, opened her up. The Fokker sped, lifted, and they were away.

LOOKING back, they saw flame rolling red from the stricken drome. The trees were evergreens, highly inflammable, and the fire spread swiftly. By the time they had gone three miles it looked as though the whole valley back there was one great mass of flame.

They met no opposition on the way home. Ellison, flat on his stomach on the wing, hands gripping the leading edge, grinned into the wind and swore happily. Sundahl, in the pit, kept an eye peeled for pursuit and smiled with grim satisfaction.

When they reached the drome, they had a little trouble. The men of the 64th detected the intermittent pulse beat of a Mercedes motor, and they weren't greeting Fokkers tonight with anything but machine guns. Sundahl had to circle several times, blipping his motor pleadingly, before the Yanks finally relaxed their suspicions and lighted the trench flares.

On the taxi line, the ship was surrounded at once by an excited crowd. The whole squadron was there—mechs, pilots, flight leaders, and the major himself.

Sundahl legged out of the pit, dug for a cigarette, lighted it. Flicking out the match, he jerked a scornful thumb at Ellison.

"Here it is, gents. No brains and never had any. No sense and no savvy. But if you can use it, here it is."

Ellison grinned.

Then the questions began, and when the 64th learned that the von Stull menace had been emphatically wiped out, a delirious whoop went up.

"And now a word in your large furry ear, dim-wit," Sundahl growled.

"Huh?" Ellison took his eyes off the snake dance to regard his companion suspiciously. And then, with a snap of his fingers, "Oh, sure. Careless of me to forget. You were going to beat the can

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off me." He stepped back, squared off. Sundahl stepped in, flung a hard right. It missed, and he took a stinging smack on the ear in return.

Ellison laughed. "Now the other one." *Clop!* Sundahl's fist crashed on the side of Ellison's jaw, and the slim pilot did a neat flip onto the back of his neck.

Sundahl dusted his knuckles. "Been promising myself that for many moons." Ellison sat up, head wabbling, and blinked after his departing comrade. Then he got to his feet, yelling "Hey, Champ, wait for me!"

Sundahl turned, came back. He put a big arm around Ellison's shoulders, and the two of them, grinning from ear to ear, headed for the mess-bar.

THE END

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