

FALL  
ISSUE  
20c

# SKY

A THRILLING  
PUBLICATION

AND

# FIGHTERS

FEATURED  
NOVELETS:

*The*  
**FINAL  
TEST**

*By* ARCH  
WHITEHOUSE

**DRAGON  
IN THE SKY**

*By* WALT SHELDON

**THE ICE  
CURTAIN**

*By* O. B. MYERS







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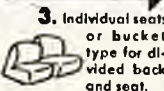
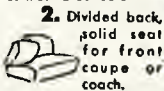
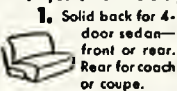
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# SKY FIGHTERS

Vol. XXXVII, No. 3

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Fall Issue

## FEATURED COMPLETE NOVELET

### THE FINAL TEST

By ARCH WHITEHOUSE



*No one had ever piloted the experimental rocket plane, XS-6, off the ground and back again—nor would Glenn Whitney, the country's leading test pilot, chance it!* . . . . . 9

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**T**HE year is 1980.

"Well there I was at twenty thousand feet over Berlin—with number one and number two engines out!"

"But, Grandpa, how can an atom engine be shot out? And why were you down to 20,000 feet?"

"Back in those days we didn't have atom engines, Junior. We had gasoline engines—reciprocating engines they were called. Five miles up was about as high as we could fly."

"Then your gravity neutralizers must not have worked good."

"Great heavens, Junior—no one had even heard of gravity neutralizers in 1945!"

"Didn't you even have space-zone selectors?"

"Nobody had space-zone selectors until 1962. You had better study some of your history microfilm movies. Then your ancient old granddad will try to tell you about flying in World War II."

### Crystal Gazing Again

Does that conversation sound rather far-fetched to you? To tell the truth—your Skipper's crystal ball wasn't tuned up to full volume, so I had to do some lip-reading as I gazed into the future.

Yes, I have lots of fun with this crystal ball of mine. If you guys and gals will unsnap your safety belts and gather close—we'll all try to see what swirls around inside. We can see the past in clear focus. Names, dates and events are all brightly lit.

We get a scene from World War I. A fighter pilot—clad in riding boots, leather helmet, and goggles—is tearing along at top speed in the newest Allied plane. His airspeed is 140 miles per hour.

Surely this man is a strong believer in the flying machine. No doubt he thinks great things will happen to planes during his lifetime—if that checkered Fokker doesn't get him before he gets the Fokker.

Yet what would happen if someone told him that thirty years later a pilot would fly 1700 miles per hour? That a plane would have a wingspan equal to the length of a city block and be capable of carrying several hundred passengers? That fighter aircraft without propellers would be able to reach 12,000 feet altitude in less than one minute after take-off?

Chances are that our Spad pilot would lean back, squint his eyes a little, and say: "Chum, will you let me have a drag off of that before you throw it away?"

So if we judge the marvels to come within the next thirty years on the same period of time behind us, almost anything can seem possible.

### Where Do You Fit?

Letters from many of our faithful readers tell me how interested most of you are in actually winding up in the flying business one of these days. A large number of you have already made some progress in this line. Your experience varies from model building and aircraft study to several hundred hours of flying and commercial licenses.

Some of you feel about airplanes the way our grandfathers felt about their fine team of horses—you hate to see changes being made so rapidly. Just as grandpa hated to see his fine animals replaced by a noisy contraption called the "automobile"—you hate to see the P-38s, Mustangs, B-17s, and even B-29s being replaced by the propless, fire-exhaling jets and rockets and Flying Wings.

Then there are some of you who go to the other extreme. Each new and improved jet design thrills you—and you think of making rocket trips to Mars or the moon. You picture yourself as being one of the first humans to soar free of the earth's gravity and then safely return to the earth's surface.

No one can say for sure just what the

aviation picture will be even five years from now, but we can draw some fairly obvious conclusions. Maybe you'll need to revise your ideas a little bit on your future plans.

### That's the Limit

It is extremely doubtful that airplanes larger than those now flying will be planned for use with the conventional reciprocating engines. All the experts seem to agree that gasoline engines and propellers have reached their maximum useful efficiency. Larger aircraft of the future must have some other means of power. Such power is now available in jet engines, but the problem of range and fuel use is yet to be fully solved.

Just around a corner that seems to be closer every day is the actual application of atomic energy to propel rockets and planes. The handicaps to be overcome before such power is practical are too numerous for an old-fashioned fly-boy like your Skipper to discuss.

Naturally higher speed and greater efficiency of the future aircraft will make it illogical to use our present types of commercial and military planes. It will not surprise me a bit if the Air Force cadets ten years from now never fly a plane with a prop on it.

Unless you plan to get your aviation training by military service—or expect to have enough money to operate your own plane—what kind of a flying job can you hope for ten years from now?

My idea is that the future pilot is going to be a combination engineer-scientist. He will need to be a mathematical expert, a whiz at physics, meteorology, and aerodynamics. The machines operated for commercial purposes will be too complicated and too precious to trust them to anyone but an expert.

Another prediction: fewer pilots will be needed than at the present time in military and commercial flying, but the work for technical specialists will greatly increase. A perfect example of this trend is the amount of engineering man hours required to develop the four-jet B-45, over one million hours.

### Not All at Once

Don't get the idea I'm trying to say all of our present planes will hit the junk pile  
(Continued on Page 121)



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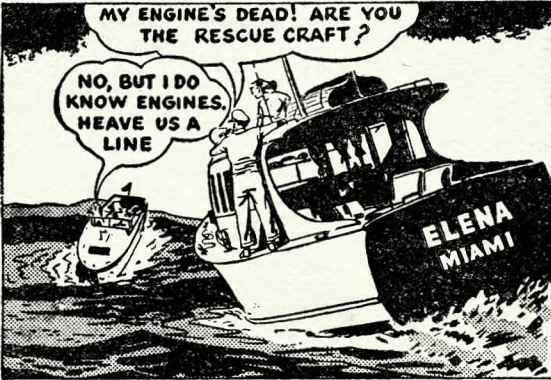
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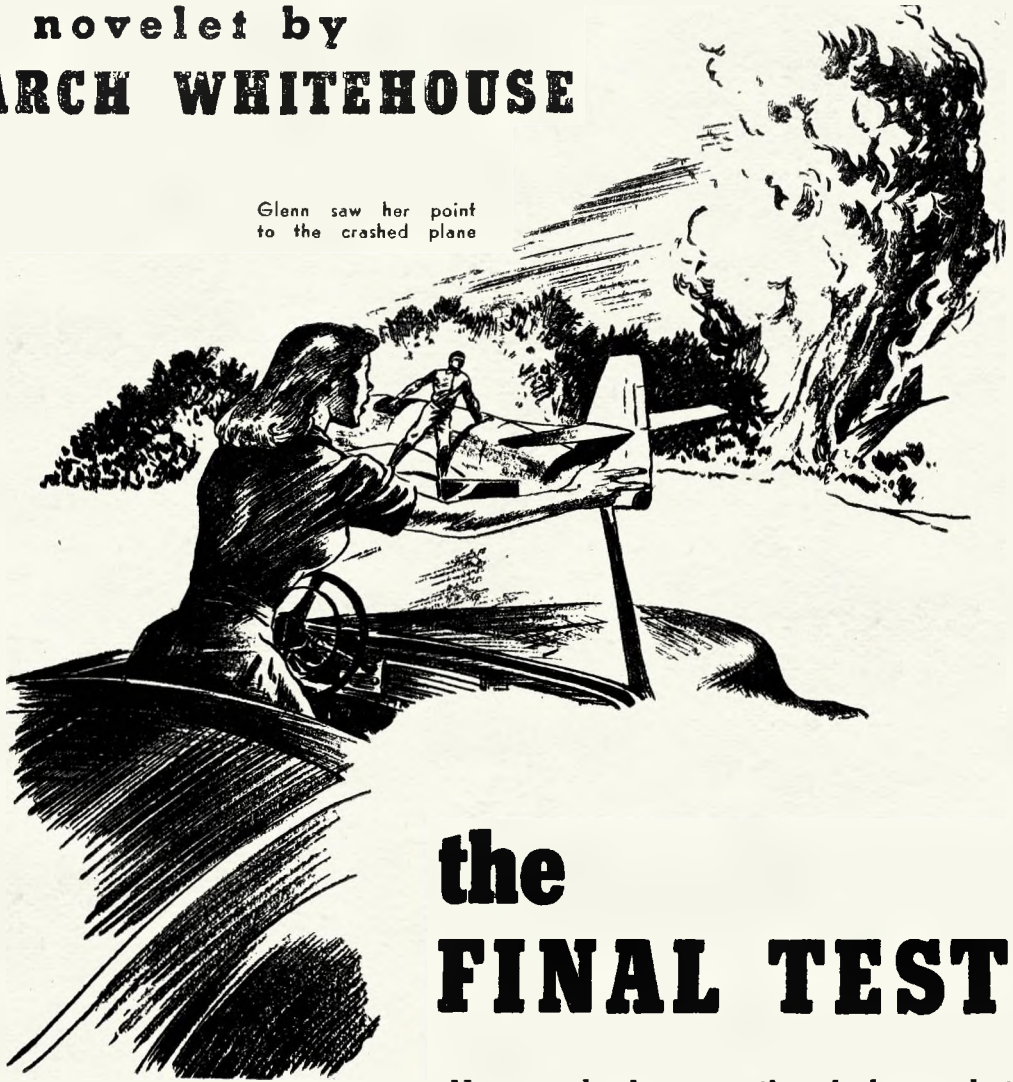
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a novelet by  
**ARCH WHITEHOUSE**

Glenn saw her point  
to the crashed plane



# the **FINAL TEST**

*No one had ever piloted the rocket  
XS-6 off the ground and back again,  
nor would Glenn Whitney chance it!*

## CHAPTER I

### *Supersonic Suicide*

**A**CTIVITY at the Brandon Aircraft Corporation had simmered down to a mere purr. It wasn't a contented purr either. It wasn't just one of those mid-summer slack-offs that gives men and machines a worthy respite. As though someone had pulled a master switch cutting the power and energy

from everything, nothing seemed capable of movement.

Not a wheel turned. Not a lathe hummed.

The week before, the industrial clatter had been joyous, the metallic din a chorus of triumph. Motors had hummed and carbon steel had hacked through

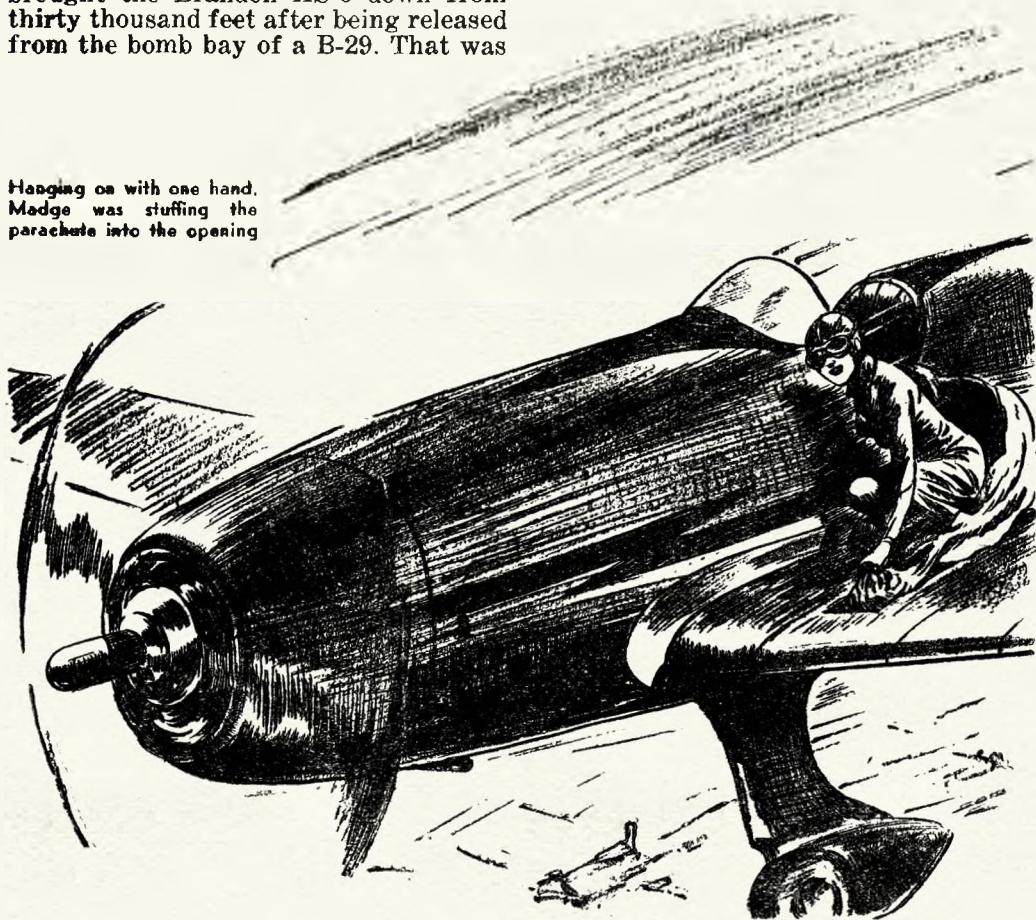
dogged metal. Grinders had screamed across the face of tungsten steel and drop-presses had fashioned metal into glistening forms.

But that was just after Glenn Whitney, the country's leading test pilot, had brought the Brandon XS-6 down from thirty thousand feet after being released from the bomb bay of a B-29. That was

as guided missiles, carrying only a pilot on their test runs and not actually intended for mass production or designed regularly to carry a pilot.

That was why the Brandon crowd knew they were in. Uncle Sam was al-

Hanging on with one hand. Madge was stuffing the parachute into the opening



just after Whitney had taken the XS-6 through the sonic barrier and lived to land her with tanks exhausted and to scrawl his name on the bottom of the test sheet.

The Brandon crowd had known then they had the job Uncle Sam and the Air Force had been waiting for. They knew the XS-6 would fly to any point on the strategic operations map and come back on her own power. They knew she would hold together at supersonic speed and behave like a thoroughbred—which she was. That was the difference between the Brandon job and the others that had gone before. Previous XS ships were only short-range experiments intended

ready drawing up the contract at the Pentagon Building. All Glenn Whitney had to do to finish the deal was—to fly the rocket ship off the ground!

And there was the rub. No one had done that yet. The ship had always been launched from a B-29 in mid-air.

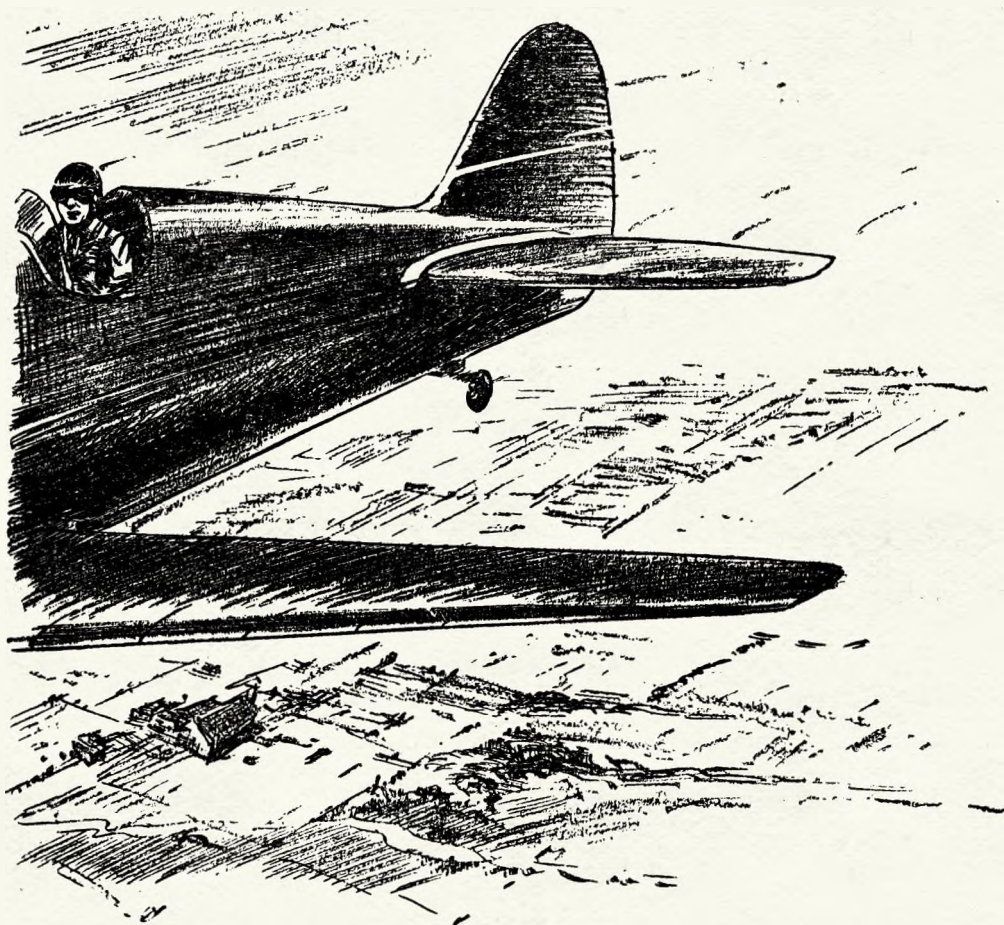
"I won't do it," Glenn told old Cyrus Brandon. "I'm not that brave. Because I know exactly what can happen if I blow a tire."

Everyone else knew what might happen, too. Liquid Oxygen, the XS-6's propellant, had to be pumped into the rocket chambers by gaseous nitrogen under pressure of nine thousand pounds to the square inch—and if that let go. . . .

**CYRUS BRANDON** looked out of the window of his office and watched the effort of a lifetime slipping out of his grasp. It was only a matter of weeks now before the banks would close in and turn the Brandon plant over to someone

"Isn't that skirt—" Brandon began again. "I mean, isn't it a bit revealing for these days?"

"With gams like mine," the girl said with a sneer, "I should clutter them up?" She swished again, and Brandon had



who wanted to make deep-freeze units—or maybe a new line of knockdown greenhouses for the suburban trade.

Then he turned to the girl in the deep-cushioned club chair.

"It's bad," he muttered, swinging his big black cigar over to the other side of his mouth. "I'm low, but I never thought I'd sink this low. Let me look at you again."

The girl rose from the chair and strode back and forth with a compact swing. Cyrus Brandon winced and mopped his brow. The girl was a knockout—in a brazen sort of way. Tall and sleek, she carried herself with an air of smug confidence.

to agree she had what she was talking about. To get it straight, Madge Saunders knew what to wear, and how to wear it to bring out the best in those items men consider when they look at a girl. She had beautiful blonde hair that looked as if it came naturally. Her eyes were the blue that goes with a creamy complexion. Her lips were carefully carmined, and the eye-shadow touch was hardly five-and-dime. What she had put on, she had applied with a skill few secretaries ever learn.

In contrast with the heavy bulk of Cyrus Brandon, and against the background of his executive office, Miss Saunders gave off the air of a smooth

cookie who could take her job or leave it. A hasty impression might indicate that she was there for decorative purposes, to put it mildly.

It just went to show how low old Cyrus had sunk, as he had pointed out.

"Well," he brooded, and picked up one of several telephones on his desk. "I'll give it a whirl, but I haven't much hope."

There was a response to his lifting of the phone and he said, "Will you send Glenn Whitney to my office at once, please?"

Miss Saunders checked everything and then removed the brooch that was fastened to the front of her white silk blouse. She lowered it an inch or two and considered the effect.

"Don't overdo it," Cyrus said caustically. "This man is a test pilot. He does go for night club dames like Connie Payne, but he can still be scared off. I want you to win his confidence."

"Do you want me to say here?" she asked archly.

"You sit in and listen. You can even take shorthand notes, to make it look good. You do take shorthand I presume?"

"I do—and how!" the siren answered.

"Now act intelligent," Cyrus muttered, and groped for another cigar. "But do your stuff—but good."

Glenn Whitney knew what Cyrus Brandon wanted, and he had all his answers pat long before he reached the Big Boy's den. Whatever front he had stacked, however, was scuttled the minute he stepped inside Brandon's door.

"This is Miss Saunders," he heard Cyrus say after he had taken in every revealing detail of the girl in the big club chair. "Miss Madge Saunders, that is—" Brandon went on. "She's my new secretary, you know."

All Glenn could manage was a weak, "What happened to Miss Kitteredige?"

Madge Saunders, in turn, took in the five-eleven test pilot and his crinkly burnt-bronze hair. She liked the spattering of freckles on his nose. There was something worthy in the line of his jaw. But it was his deep brown eyes that drew her to him—the brown eyes and the expressive hands that reached out instinctively to her—and then went back to his hip pockets.

"You wanted me?" Glenn said, as though he had just realized Brandon was in the same room.

"I want to talk to you about this test matter again," Brandon said. "We've got a new idea, and I want you to hear it and let me know what you think."

Glenn didn't answer. He just looked at the vision again and waited for her to leave.

"Miss Saunders is staying," Brandon said. "I'm having her listen in on a lot of this because I want her to get a fast line on what we're trying to do. It's important to me . . . All clear?"

GLENN had no answer for that, so Brandon presumed he could take it up from there. He turned to Miss Saunders.

"We're having a little trouble getting our XS-6 ready for its final test, Miss Saunders. Mr. Whitney here, our chief test pilot, is trying to make up his mind about how he will tackle the problem of flying the XS-6 fully loaded off a runway—"

"I'm doing nothing of the sort," Glenn interrupted.

"So far," Boss Brandon continued unperturbed, "the rocket ship has passed all Government requirements in flight, but we have always launched it from the extended bomb-rack of a B-29 in mid-air."

"Now they want me to take the same job and fly it off a regular runway—fully loaded!" Glenn exclaimed to the girl, who made a new undercarriage adjustment that stopped the explanation at that point.

"Glenn believes that since our fuel system consists of liquid oxygen and nitrogen—"

"Nitrogen trapped in steel tanks at nine thousands pounds pressure to the square inch, remember," Glenn said to Miss Saunders, who finally turned her attention to her notebook. "I mean to say—we could blow Buffalo off the map!"

"Now, there's an idea!" Miss Saunders grinned.

"What Mr. Whitney is trying to explain," Boss Brandon broke in again, "is that there is some degree of risk involved."

"Some degree of risk?" raged Whitney. And, appealing to Miss Saunders again, "Can you imagine gaseous nitrogen under that pressure?"

"No, I can't," Miss Saunders said vaguely. "However, I presume you know what you're doing."

"Darn right, I do!" Glenn exploded. "I know I'm not taking that baby off a concrete strip with that stuff aboard. I took her through the sonic barrier. Let some other dope fly her off a strip of concrete."

"Let's start from the beginning," pleaded Cyrus Brandon.

Whitney sat back, folded his arms and gave his full attention to Miss Saunders.

"We've decided to change its design a bit, Glenn," Cyrus began with a hopeful grimace. "You'll like this. I've been all over it with Thorndyke, and he says we can do away with the tricycle gear and replace it with regular two-wheel equipment and have a castoring tail wheel."

"Look, Mr. Brandon," Glenn began coldly. "You can fix a complete set of baby-buggy wheels filled with eider down and wrap the whole thing up in sponge rubber—and I still won't fly it off the ground."

"What are we going to do?" appealed Brandon. "We need that run for the full requirement test before the Air Force will even look at it."

"There are a dozen men with lots of High-G time who will be willing to do it."

"You would think so," Brandon said with a weary sigh, "but try and get one. They all ask just one question."

"What is that?" Miss Saunders broke in.

"You shut up!" Cyrus barked. "I'll tell you. They all want to know why Glenn Whitney won't do it. If I knew, I'd tell them, and maybe one of them would buy the idea."

"Why won't you complete the test, Mr. Whitney?" Miss Saunders asked sweetly.

"As I've said before—because I'm not that brave. Because I know exactly what can happen if I blow a tire—"

"We'll give you solid tires!"

"Because I know what can happen if a brake locks and ground-loops me."

"We'll burn the brakes off!"

"Because I know exactly what will happen if she doesn't get off and I roll her into the ditch at the end of the runway. Don't you see, Miss Saunders? We've never flown her off the ground. We have no idea how long she'll take to get off under her own power. They want me to risk whatever might happen—

just for a crummy government contract!"

"Crummy government contract!" Mr. Brandon erupted. "It means only a twenty-five million dollar order, Miss Saunders."

"She's never been flown off the ground under her own power. If she gets off clean, okay. If she doesn't—whammo!" Glenn was leaning toward Miss Saunders now. "I don't know where you live, Miss Saunders, but if that stuff goes up here, your house won't be there when you go home."

"You've got flaps, ejection seat and four rocket chambers you can open if she acts bad," old Brandon pleaded again.

"You, yourself, won't be here to go home," Glenn Whitney went on to Miss Saunders.

"I still think you ought to try it," she said sweetly. "I mean to say—what I wouldn't do for twenty-five million."

"Sure." Glenn eyed her with a new point of view. "But you're not talking about test-piloting airplanes now."

"Look!" Cyrus Brandon broke in. "This is supposed to be an interview between an employer and an employee. Give me your attention please, Glenn. Will you or will you not take her off if we change the undercarriage? That's all I want to know."

"That's all that's between him and ruination," Madge Saunders interjected. "No ground take-off, no contract," Brandon added.

"No ground take-off, no one hundred thousand dollar bonus for you, Mr. Whitney," the secretary added, and curled up into a more attractive position.

"The answer is still 'No!'"

"That's all then. Get out of here!" Cyrus Brandon raged.

He had an expression like that of a frustrated bull.

## CHAPTER II

*\$100,000—For Nothing*

MADGE SAUNDERS pouted thoughtfully. "I like him," she said when Glenn had gone. "But I don't think I can do much with a man like that, unless—"

"But you've got to!" old Cyrus cut

in, torching another Corona-Corona. "We got about ten days to bring him around. Now you get out of here and work on him. I've tried all I know."

"Okay." Miss Saunders rose, stroked her sleek thighs, put several wardrobe matters to rights and flicked a wink at her boss. "I just didn't know how far you wanted me to go. But I think I can make him need that hundred grand if I try."

"Don't overdo it," Cyrus pleaded. "Please don't overdo it. I'm responsible for more than the financial future of the Brandon Aircraft Corporation, you know."

"Don't make me say 'Uncle', Mister Brandon," she said with a sly grimace and, kicking a saucy heel, she went out.

Glenn Whitney was using Madge Saunders' telephone when she closed Brandon's door.

"Sure, Connie. Sure!" Glenn was saying. "I've told him flat I'm not going through with it. Don't be so concerned. Right . . . I'll see you for dinner at the Club tonight."

He hung up and started away.

"Oh, Mr. Whitney," the girl said with a come-hither smile. "You were saying you didn't know where I lived—"

Glenn pointed a menacing finger. "Nothing doing!"

"I haven't my car today," she went on, ignoring his suspicions. "If you could drop me anywhere along Delaware Avenue."

"I *have* a date."

"That was Connie Payne at the Roger Club?" she asked sweetly.

"You've really been briefed on me, haven't you?"

She was all innocence. "All I know is what I heard in there."

"Well, I'll be leaving at five o'clock. I'll pick you up out front—if you happen to be there. But that's all."

With that said, Glenn Whitney wandered back to his office high over the main hangar. He sensed the inactivity below was largely his fault. If he would risk that XS-6 take-off, the place would soon be buzzing like flies. There would be a crew checking every inch of the runway. Another mob would be on the tricycle undercarriage of the Brandon fighter.

He hadn't considered the risk in those first tests. . . .

There had been a series of power-off

drops, for example, launched from the B-29, when there had been no way of knowing what would happen to the stub-winged meteor once it was airborne and on its own.

But the XS-6 had acted like a docile thoroughbred. From twenty-five thousand feet Glenn had brought her down in a series of smooth sweeps, tight turns and glides that gave him a thrill he had never experienced before. He slid back into the field proclaiming she was the most responsive hunk of aircraft he had ever handled.

But then came the first power-on effort, when no one knew what she would do once the liquid oxygen was rammed by pressure of nitrogen into the No. 1 chamber of the rocket motor. They knew what happened when they did all that on a test block, but upstairs at thirty thousand feet . . .

"I'll never forget it," he confided to Steve Gill, the barkeep at the Roger Club, Buffalo's rendezvous for the aviation crowd.

Steve had once been a hot Mustang pilot with the Ninth Air Force, but for some mysterious reason he had chucked in his ticket and preferred to mix drinks and talk flying behind the bar of the Roger Club. There were times when Steve talked too much, but he could also be a good listener. No one ever knew what he was thinking.

"Never forget it, Steve," Glenn had said that night. "I flicked the switch once I was clear of the bomber, and let in the first notch. There was a dull tearing roar and, for a second, I figured I'd gone clear through the wings. But it was nothing like that. I eased back from the crash pad, looked the panel over, and she was smacking a neat—and this isn't to go over the bar—she was hitting six hundred and forty on the clock!"

"You mean with just one pipe burning?" Steve whispered.

"Just one rocket chamber open."

"Now you're going to take her through with the others open?" Steve asked with solemn awe.

"That's the deal," Glenn said, and sipped his shell of imported beer.

"Well," Steve said and began swabbing off the bar top. "It was nice knowin' you, Glenn."

"Someone has to take her through," Glenn had argued with a cautious glance over his shoulder.

"Six-forty on one pipe," warned Steve. "You snap in a second, and two times six-forty gives me over twelve hundred miles per hour, and you still got two pipes to go! Where you think you can wind up, doing things like that?"

"A guy can be in Canton, China, in no time!" complained Glenn.

"Next thing you know you're augering in, and you can get to China the short way. Don't be a dope, Glenn."

Even the Machmeter couldn't register what she was doing when Glenn let her have the last rocket chamber, so he

The XS-6 missed the Shrike by inches



**W**ELL, that's how it started, with Steve Gill figuring out how a pilot can get to China just "augering in." Glenn had sneaked past those first doubts, however, and had flown the XS-6 through the sonic barrier with no trouble at all. No trouble that is, except that he was pretty punchy when he came out after running her clean off the clock.

eased her back and bopped between Buffalo and Detroit on one chamber until he had run her clean out of fuel, so he could put her down with nothing in the tanks.

It was while he was running the liquid oxygen supply out that he started thinking about all the things that could happen.

"Like you say, Steve," he said that night at his end of the bar. "A guy can run it out, but fast. I figure, well I've given Brandon a run through Mach-O, and here I am still able to wriggle, so why take any more chances? So I ran her dry before I put her back on the runway."

"You mean you might not be all there, and alert enough to put her down?"

"No. I just start worrying about that stuff in those cylinders behind me. I figure if I make a blooper landing, that propellant may decide that nine thousand pounds of pressure per square inch is rubbing it in, and next thing I'll be

upstairs very high, being measured for a harp."

"Rough stuff, eh, Glenn?" Steve inquired and rubbed his stub nose.

"If ever you find yourself going through that window for no apparent reason," Glenn muttered, and shoved his shell forward, "just put your patties together in an attitude of prayer and figure a nitrogen cylinder went up back at the Brandon plant. That'll be it!"

"You ought to get out of that racket, bub."

"Sure, but what does a guy like me get into when he wants to stop flying?"

"You don't have to stop flying. You just quit being a dope."

"Elucidate, pal," said Glenn Whitney.

"I hear a lot of stuff over this hunk of mahogany," Steve muttered, and put one away he had stashed under the counter for the past half hour. "Why don't you go over to Stuyvesant? They can use a test pilot who can sign his name."

"Just sign his name?"

"Just sign his name on the dotted line at the bottom of a test sheet."

Glenn shook his head. "Maybe you shouldn't tell me any more," he said. "Stuyvesant is in the rocket-racket too, remember."

"They got a smart idea over there, Glenn," Steve began again, and took an order for a couple of gin fizzes. When he came back, he finished, "They just want a guy to fly a Stuyvesant and bring back a report."

"Maybe I'm dull today. I don't get it."

"They're taking a 1945 Stuyvesant Shrike—their old fighter—and converting her into a rocket job. If she goes, they're all set for a fast contract deal. They have tools and jigs all ready. They just take out the Rolls *Merlin* and put in a rocket job. They can give the Air Force a deal that will make your guy look silly."

"The Shrike fighter airframe wouldn't take a rocket job. She was stressed for only about five hundred m.p.h.," Glenn argued.

"The Air Force wants rocket planes," Steve pointed out. "If the Shrike is the best they can get, they'll take 'em."

"Where'd you get this, Steve?"

"Murdoch." Steve ran a small comb through his hair.

"Martin Murdoch, Stuyvesant's Chief Engineer?"

"That's the guy."

"Why would he spill a line like that to you?"

"Maybe he figured I knew a Joe named Glenn Whitney."

"Thanks! Another beer, Steve?"

GLENN WHITNEY put it all together, drew a straight line under it, and added it up. All he had to do for Brandon now was to take the XS-6 off the runway, fly her around and put her back on again. For just that, he'd get one hundred thousand bucks. He could get a nice piece of real estate, too, in the Garden of Eternal Rest—if his mother had the dough for a plot, and if they could scrape up enough of him to bury.

But suppose a pilot can get a sack of shillings just for taking another job up, flicking down a rocket-motor throttle and bringing her back okay? He'd just have to sign that he had flown the Stuyvesant rocket-powered Shrike and that she had performed as shown above. A flier like Glenn Whitney could do a thing like that and the Big Boys at Wright Field might not ask too many questions. They wouldn't if they suddenly decided they wanted a lot of fighters in a hurry.

Maybe it wouldn't be necessary even to take her up. Just sign the test sheet and call it expediency.

The more Glenn Whitney thought about it, the nearer nausea he came. When he realized that there were aircraft manufacturers in the country who would stoop to such measures, he wished he were peddling commercial fertilizer. But when he tried to bring himself to finishing the Brandon test, he suffered untold agonies of acidulous fear.

He could smell the stuff they pumped into those three-inch thick cylinders. It always left a thin coppery tang on his tongue. It seemed to stay in his nostrils for hours. He could hear the first metal-wrenching roar as one went up while he was tooling the XS-6 down the main runway. He could feel the initial blast punching the seat against his back and the bone-crushing crash as he went into the panel. That would be the end, but somehow he could still smell it.

Still, a man could use a wad of dough these days, things being what they were. Glenn figured for the fiftieth time that it was about time he settled down, picked out a home and furnished it with the standard accessories, including a bride.



## CHAPTER III

*Queer Steer*

Well, he had his rating and an Engineering degree from M.I.T. and most of his enthusiasm intact. What more could he ask? There was Connie Payne who thrashed with Lolly Brittan's band at the Roger Club. She was not exactly the domestic type, perhaps, but Connie was nice to be seen with. Connie could put on the act that made a man feel good—anywhere. Connie was in there with her auburn hair, her sultry voice, and a trick manner of wearing things with sequins on them and by now she should have a little lettuce stacked where it would attract more, and who knows what would happen then?

All these things stalked through Glenn Whitney's mind as he played with the cursor of his slide-rule. He watched the phantom of himself on the concrete apron below as he hung around while they finished fuelling the XS-6. There he was, beefed up in a G-suit, a crash helmet liberated from a Tank captain, and the mask of his oxygen equipment flapping under his chin.

"You're a dope, Whitney," he said to his figure down there on the apron. "Maybe you'll get away with it, but the chances are that you won't. But let's suppose you do—then what?"

"If I do, we put steam back on the factory whistle and a lot of kids start eating regularly again. If I'm lucky, I get one hundred grand and my picture in the paper. A man can go and buy himself a nice little island in the Caribbean where he'd never take on anything more lethal than a balloon-tired bicycle.

"Sure! Sure! Sure!" Glenn replied in rebuttal. "But suppose you don't. Suppose it leaves a nice big hole in the middle of the runway. Suppose a tire blows, or maybe a landing gear leg buckles. *Every little movement has a meaning all its own, brother!* Suppose the hydraulic gear goes out, or the igniter coil? What you gonna do with all that stuff in those pretty stainless steel cylinders? You could get yourself a job driving a dynamite truck, you know."

Next thing Glenn Whitney knew, his telephone bell rang and there was that voice again.

"It's five o'clock, Mr. Whitney," Madge Saunders was cooing. "Let's not be late for our first date."

"Listen, you! This is no date. I'm giving you a lift home that's all."

He hung up, wondering.

HE PICKED up his convertible in the Executives' parking area and toolled it around to the front steps. Miss Saunders was there, decorating the set like something on hire from the Powers Agency.

"This kid could be nice if she'd scrape off some of the lacquer," Glenn decided as he drew up and flicked open his door.

Then he looked at her again, and noticed that the day seemed to have lightened the cosmetic load. The eye-shadow was hardly noticeable, and the line of her eyebrows not quite so brazen. Now her lips were just lightly touched at the crest of the bows.

"Well," he said, with no particular enthusiasm. "We've toned down a trifle, eh? What Mother and a nice hunk of yellow soap could do to you."

She gave him a knowing wink, drew her slim legs under her and said, "I'll show you I can compete with that lady lark who sings at the Roger Club. Let's go, Mr. Whitney."

Glenn put the car in gear and moved away before he found a response to that. "You are going to the Roger Club?" he asked with quiet dread.

"Well, wasn't that the idea?" she said, and twisted his rear-view mirror to flush up her curls again. "Just one cocktail, a good dinner, and then a drive out toward Connaught Lake."

"You know," he said slowly, "it just happens that I am going to the Roger Club, but where you fit in, I have no idea."

"There'll be a seat opposite, won't there?"

"I have a date. I've had it since this morning. You heard me make it on your phone."

"Oh, I cancelled your date," Madge Saunders said, as though it had come up as an afterthought. "I explained to Miss Payne that certain business commitments—"

"What business commitments?"

"Me! I work at Brandon Aircraft too, remember?"

Glenn pulled over to the curb and eased to a stop. "Look!" he began from

scratch. "I'm just beginning to see the light. You work for Brandon Aircraft—right! I work for Brandon Aircraft too—that is, I will for a few more weeks. After that, maybe I'll go with United Airlines—who knows? But if you think that by working hard enough for Brandon you can kid me into taking that winged grenade off Brandon's runway, you might as well cover up that come-on costume right now—"

"Now you're being sweet. The Roger Club?"

All the way through town Glenn pondered on this screwy situation. What was this act she was putting on? Why had Cyrus Brandon made a point of her being on hand when he had put in his final bid to have him take the XS-6 off? What had happened to Miss Kitteredge, Brandon's previous secretary?

Miss Saunders broke into a trilling laugh just as they swept through Niagara Square.

"Now what?" he demanded, fearing the worst.

"I was trying to picture you flying an airliner day after day. What a trip you'd give the customers!"

He ignored that and inquired, "By the way, what happened to Miss Kitteredge?"

"She's having a baby!"

"Miss Kitteredge? When did she get married?"

"She's getting married next week. She might be having a baby any time after that, mightn't she?"

"Oh, any time," agreed Glenn with a side-glance at his passenger, certain now he was being beautifully ribbed. A few hours of this and he'd be fresh out of fingernails.

**T**HEY pulled into the Roger Club parking lot, went through the side door and headed for the bar.

"A stinger," Miss Saunders said to Steve.

"Hi, Glenn," Steve said, ignoring the girl.

"Make mine a Martini—very dry," Glenn muttered and took the next stool.

"Thank you, my sweet," Miss Saunders said, when she had finally settled herself so that the best features were suitably displayed.

"Steve, this is Miss Saunders," Glenn explained. "She's Brandon's new secretary."

"You better figure on finishing that test routine, it's safer," Steve said quietly, and gave Madge a look that could have curdled battery acid.

"I'm just showing Miss Saunders around," Glenn offered.

"She's been around," Steve said, and went down the bar to refresh a couple of Old Fashioneds.

"Seems to know you," Glenn muttered, looking at the girl in the bar mirror.

"Where's your warbling songbird?" Madge ignored the inference.

"It's early. She doesn't get here until the supper crowd arrives."

"Well, we can have our dinner in comparative peace, eh?" she laughed. Then she switched on her stool suddenly and said, "Oh here's a friend of mine. Do you know Martin Murdoch?"

"See what I mean?" Steve said, as he went north to do a refill job on a Manhattan.

Glenn watched the byplay between the two. Murdoch walked in, staring past the tables and focusing his sight on the bar. Miss Saunders flicked a finger. Murdoch caught her signal as though it was something he had been expecting.

"Well, well, Madge. What are you doing here at this ungodly hour of the day?" Murdoch greeted. Then he swung his blue-chinned face to Glenn. "This is Glenn Whitney, isn't it?" He stuck out a sleek, manicured hand. "May I join you for a quick one?"

So this was the Martin Murdoch whom Steve Gill had mentioned. He was the well-groomed type. He wore good clothes, clothes so good you did not notice them. His long, oblong face was thatched with jet black hair that had two waves that were too good to be true. Coleman could have used his mustache.

"Yes," beamed Madge, "this is the great Glenn Whitney, test pilot at Brandon's. Have you met Mr. Murdoch, Glenn?"

"No. Just heard of him," Glenn said, and studied the Stuyvesant engineer while he moved up a stool.

"How goes it?" Murdoch asked. He flicked a drink signal to Steve. "Finished up your test job on the XS-6 yet?"

"I've finished all I'm going to do. From here on, it's all theirs."

"You don't like that take-off routine, I take it," Murdoch smiled, patting Madge's knee.

"Something like that."

"I don't blame you. It can be rough. How long you got with Brandon on this deal?"

"Probably wrap it up in a week or so."

"Anything in mind?"

"He's figuring on taking an airline job," Miss Saunders broke in, and sipped her drink.

"Oh, don't be ridiculous!" Murdoch stormed. "A top test man working for that sort of money?"

"They say it's not too bad. If you get the right runs, you can meet some nice people."

"You would never have met me if you hadn't been working at Brandon's," Madge said, and patted the back of his hand.

"Don't worry baby. I'm dropping you, but fast. You've played your first and last line with me." He grinned at Murdoch. "A plant if ever there was one, Murdoch," he said.

Murdoch looked very puzzled.

"Look, my pets," the girl broke in. "Will you excuse me a minute? I think my nose is shiny. You can really put me on the simmer."

"While you're in there," Glenn growled, "call Brandon, and tell him his scheme has fizzled."

Madge Saunders kissed the tip of her finger and tapped it gently on Glenn's cheek. "Don't run out on me," she cooed, and clacked away for the powder room.

MURDOCH looked at the drink Steve brought him. "We can use a man like you at Stuyvesant," he said. "We have a project under way that may bring in some real money."

"So I heard," Glenn said.

"From Miss Saunders?"

"Saunders? How would she know?" Glenn snapped as he retrieved his olive. "I got it from Steve."

"Of course. I like Steve. Good man. We talk things over now and then. Steve should be back in the racket."

"You didn't say how Miss Saunders might have known."

"Might have overheard something," Murdoch explained lamely. "I've known her for a year or so, you know."

"She didn't work for you, did she?"

"Work? Madge Saunders?" Murdoch said aghast. "What are you talking about?"

"Every once in a while people have

weak moments and go to work," Glenn said. "She's working at Brandon."

"Madge Saunders working?" Murdoch asked again. "I mean to say—"

"She's Brandon's private secretary."

"Look, Whitney," Murdoch said hurriedly, with a glance across the room. "How about lunch here tomorrow? Say about one o'clock. I think I have something that may interest you—and don't let Brandon rook you into that take-off job in the meanwhile. We can give you something much more suited to you talents."

"Who knows? I might be interested," Glenn said, as Murdoch gulped his drink down and hurried away.

"Now you're getting smart," Steve put in. He was doing twirly things with the bar rag. "There's a gent who can nourish your piggy bank."

"You don't think I'm like that, do you, Steve?" Glenn asked quietly.

Steve gave Glenn a searching look, swabbed the top of the bar again and moved off without another word. Madge appeared shortly.

"Well, what happened to Mr. Murdoch?" she said, and snapped Glenn out of his trance. He noted she had added to her makeup and it wasn't as kind to her as it could have been.

"He left in a hurry when I told him you were working for Brandon. Is that bad?"

"Let's eat. I'm famished," she said.

"You didn't finish your drink."

"I never do. I just order them and peep over the top of the rim. They say I'm irresistible that way."

Glenn had no answer for that one so he followed her to a table that looked out on a lawn scalloped with rock gardens.

He watched her closely while she studied the menu. Here was a neat slab of what might be classified as intrigue. Here was a doll holding a job as secretary to Cyrus Brandon, one of the few good eggs in the business. First, she mapped out a lively campaign that appeared designed to kid him into completing the XS-6 tests. But next thing he knew, she had led him into a queer introduction to a man who not only represented the opposition, but who wanted to lead him into a deal that would pay off even though it was well on the wrong side of the white line. Verily, it was a queer situation from any angle.

"How do you know Murdoch?" Glenn demanded suddenly.

"Oh, just buzzing around here and there. I probably met him here at the Roger Club, as a matter of fact."

"You sure come up with the fast answers, don't you?"

"One of the prerequisites of the complete secretary," Madge countered, and added another saucy wink.

"Why did you steer Murdoch my way tonight?"

"I thought he might be a man you should know—in case you ever left Brandon. You see, I'm thinking of your future."

"And you've known me eight hours."

"When I like 'em—I like 'em." She smiled.

"I might fool you. I might take that job he's dangling before my sea-green eyes."

"They're olive-brown!" Madge said suddenly, as if to cover her real feelings.

"May I have a small steak?"

"Let yourself go, baby. From cream soup to biscuit tortoni. I got a test in mind."

"A test?" Madge inquired.

"You'll see what it's like to test planes, my sweet," he replied.

"That might be an idea," she agreed.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Fire in the Air*

STEVE GILL was the ideal bartender in that he was willing to talk to anyone on any subject. But Steve often carried it further than that. He'd talk to anyone on subjects that could be poison.

When Connie Payne came in just before the first show, Steve gave her the high sign.

"What's about this new jill Glenn Whitney's buzzing around with?" he asked, slipping Connie a coke.

"Was he here tonight?" Connie asked with arched interest.

"Yes, with this cute trick whose name is Madge Saunders. She's Brandon's private secretary. Of course it could be just business."

"Saunders? Madge Saunders?" Connie considered the name before she placed it. "What's she doing working in

a factory? Isn't she what passes for cafe society in this burg?"

"Wasn't her mother a Brandon?" demanded Steve. "Seems to me that's the tie-up. Old Brandon hires his niece to be his secretary, and she immediately trots around with Brandon's test pilot—the boy who won't finish a test on a rocket job."

Connie took refuge in the mirror of her compact while she riffled all the details. "Come to think of it, she was the one who called me up and said Glenn had to kill a date because of a previous business commitment."

"Nice arrangement," said Steve, and took a gulp from one he had under the bar.

"Has Murdoch been in here tonight?" Connie asked savagely.

"He was here too, but blew early. The Saunders gal introduced him to Glenn. He cooked up a lunch with Glenn for tomorrow."

"If he comes back tonight, I want to see him."

"Glenn?"

"No, Murdoch! And don't make any mistake about that."

Steve wished he'd kept his trap shut, but that was the way he was.

But apparently not relying too much on Steve's ability to remember certain matters, Connie slipped into a booth near the bandstand and dialed a number.

"Martin," she said when her number responded. "This is Connie. Connie Payne. I'm at the Club."

At the other end Martin Murdoch closed his eyes in resignation and dropped into a deep chair. He knew exactly what was coming.

"Is Whitney still there?" he asked.

"No. Steve said they just left. I missed him."

"Well, don't worry. We have a date for lunch tomorrow. I think I can interest him in my proposition."

"You know who this Saunders chit is, don't you?" Connie asked.

"Sure. I'm just interested in why Brandon hires his niece as his private secretary, and has her tailing around with Whitney."

"That sure takes some figuring," Connie said with disgust. "She's test bait, brother! Brandon's set her on Glenn to kid him into finishing that test. That witch can do it too."

"That's what I'm afraid of. You

should have seen the act she was pulling there tonight."

"Listen, Murdoch," Connie said with unmistakable emphasis, "I haven't been mugging up to that Whitney guy for fun—or to Bart Cunningham because I like his apartment. If she kids Whitney into completing that test, I'll raise the devil!"

"You'll raise the devil?" Murdoch blazed back. "Don't you think I'm interested? If Whitney makes that test, we'll all be selling pencils."

"You'll be selling pencils!" Connie raged back. "You get Whitney out of Brandon's before that wench has him flying like crazy."

"I'm telling you—I have a luncheon date with him tomorrow at the club. If you want to sit in on it, okay by me. I can't do any more."

"You get him out of that Brandon setup, or I'll spill the Steve Gill story all over Buffalo!"

Martin Murdoch went white on the other end of the line and poured himself a stiff dram of Napoleon brandy.

"Steve's the answer," he said, after swallowing half of the drink. "Steve would do anything to fly again."

IT WAS impossible to define, but Glenn Whitney suddenly realized he was pleasantly relaxed. Perhaps it was because he was going to feel the controls of a high-speed airplane again, rather than fight the highway traffic. On the other hand, it could have been the company. As much as he hated to admit it, he was enjoying a new sense of companionship. It was like a good pipe, properly packed and carefully lighted. There was the same warmth and comfort.

It was that way until they reached the still-open doors of A-Hangar, where Glenn ran the car up to the shelter of the folding doors and rewarded his companion with a sleek smile.

"You still interested in test flying, Miss Saunders?"

"That's what Mr. Brandon ordered. Show an interest."

"I've a little job I've been putting off for some time," Glenn said, with a twitch of his right eyebrow. "Not exactly a rocket job, but it can be interesting."

"There's room for two?"

"You should know that the Brandon firm is also experimenting with a new acrobatic trainer—a two-place job designed for high-speed acrobatic training. Our young fighter pilots need plenty of that sort of thing, and for that reason—"

Madge Saunders was making with the finger. Loops, spins, rolls and power-spins. "Like that?" she said with a knowing grimace.

"A good deal like that," Glenn agreed. "We still have enough light for a short routine program."

"On top of a gooey supper?" she asked.

"Boss Brandon said you were to show interest," Glenn reminded her. He stood off a pace or two and considered her dress. "It's nice you thought to wear a skirt that's not too long."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"We wear parachutes on these trips. You can't ever tell."

Madge let out a whistle that was far from a bird call.

"Come along, sweetheart," said Glenn.

[Turn page]

## HURT TO SHAVE YOUR CHIN?

Make the  
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# STAR



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He called across the hangar and two mechanics appeared from the shadows, started up a light tractor. Glenn led the girl over to the locker corner and selected a clean nylon helmet to protect her hair. Then he selected a parachute harness, draped it over her shoulders, fitted the snaps and belt and then showed her how to tuck her skirt up and bring the leg straps through.

"That can wait until you're aboard," he grinned. "This is the safety ring—in case you have to step out."

Madge said nothing. She followed his instructions explicitly. Glenn had to admit her legs were even longer and straighter than he had at first realized.

"You don't *have* to do this you know," he said while he adjusted his own pack straps. "It was just an idea."

"As nice a compliment as I've had in months," Madge said, and stared out to where the mechanics were tooling out a sleek low-wing experimental job.

"Why don't you quit this act and be yourself?" he taunted.

"What act?" she asked, trying the feel of the straps again.

"You've been sicked on me by old Brandon. I'm supposed to get involved in your charms, and pay for the deal by completing the XS-6 test."

"Is that bad?"

"It was so crudely planned," Glenn said, and tossed her a pair of flying goggles. "You'll need these, too."

"Maybe I can explain better, later," Madge said, and gave him a winning smile.

"Let's go!" Glenn snarled, determined to give this glory hit a real thrill and see how she took it. It would be fun to hear her cry: "Uncle!"

His conscience was snarling back: "*You're a filthy drip, Whitney!*"

The Brandon AT-40 was a smart-looking job powered with an un-super-charged Packard Rolls, and designed to give a tyro experience in high-speed acrobatics at a low cost of operation. It carried simple instruments, no armament, and was burdened with no more equipment than was absolutely necessary for precision flying. In the right hands, it could fly rings around the average military fighter.

"You take the front seat," he said coldly. "If we crash, the passenger in the front seat usually gets it good."

"We must spare our valuable test

pilots," the girl agreed, and pierced him with another smile.

"Give with the leg-straps, sister," he ordered from the wing root. "We also provide little girls with brown paper bags."

"Not this little girl," she said back sharply. "Nothing makes me ill."

"We'll see," he said, and fastened her safety belt. "If you have to go out, you pull the canopy back, like this. I'll hold her as long as I can—in case."

His conscience taunted, "*You're gonna lose again, Whitney.*"

He closed her canopy, slipped into the rear seat and made himself comfortable. Outside, the two mechanics stood trying on anxious grimaces for size. They knew this was no show for a girl.

They stood by while Glenn kicked in the starter and checked everything. He had no intention of anything going wrong. He just wanted to give this doll a taste of her own restorative.

"*Sucker!*" laughed his conscience.

"We'll be back in fifteen-twenty minutes," he called down to the Crew Chief. "Better have a mop and pail handy."

Madge heard it, flipped back her canopy. "Never mind the mop, Mister," she called. "You have a nice portion of broiled crow ready for Mr. Whitney." She turned and stuck her tongue out at the test pilot.

"I'll make you swallow that too, baby," he muttered.

Glenn got an okay from the Brandon tower and selected the short runway, for there was no other traffic in the area. He wheeled her sharp off the perimeter track.

"Hang on, Sister, he said then. "This is a test show."

The AT-40 tensed under the initial impact of the first lash of power and in a short run hoiked her tail up and lanced down the runway. Glenn watched his air speed and waited until he was certain. Then he brought a wing-tip down, lashed her over and tipped her into the sky. The advanced trainer went up like a winged rocket, and even Glenn clamped his jaw hard and breathed to restrain blacking out.

Miss Saunders snapped against her shoulder straps once and then peered out at the tilted landscape below.

"Some nice contour plowing back there," was all she said over the Gosport set.

GLENN gulped down something the size of a regulation golf ball. He levelled off and tried a tight turn which only appeared to give Miss Saunders a better view of the contour plowing below. Now she was leaning her arms on the canopy rail and really enjoying the view.

Glenn climbed some more, set up a few tight loops and Miss Saunders flicked a recalcitrant curl under her helmet.

"I'm going to do a series of power-on spins, just for the record," he said, and the girl nodded.

The trainer hoiked over, cartwheeling on one wing-tip and nosed down. Glenn checked the dials fast and let her go down with the prop roaring. She spun the required number of revolutions in the required number of seconds. It was like going down a high-speed turbine tube, and Glenn Whitney knew it. He put the figures down on a chart card and looked at Miss Saunders.

Miss Saunders was refreshing her lipstick.

Glenn drew in his breath and took the AT-40 back upstairs and really began horsing around. He was mad, and his flying was not as smooth, and that he knew too. He was beginning to wonder who would need the paper bag now.

He flung the ship through a series of tight chandelles and switched from that into some precision-eights for time and consistency in maintaining height.

"How you doing?" he called over the head-set.

"It's very interesting, but you are not flying as well as you did when we started."

"Oh, it's beginning to get you, eh?" Glenn laughed.

"Not exactly. I'm beginning to wonder whether you're as good as they say."

"Oh, brother!" chortled his conscience. "*On top of everything else, she also has done some flying. You sure pick 'em.*"

"You'd maybe like to pick the next maneuver?" he asked.

"Would this stand an outside loop?"

"You have to rig special for outside loops," he raged.

"I thought a Brandon job would take anybody."

"It won't take an outside loop."

"We've got parachutes haven't we?" the girl said, and turned her wide eyes on him.

"Sure we have, but I'm not taking those chances, any more than I'm taking one on the XS-6, and you can tell that to Brandon when you see him in the morning."

"I won't see him in the morning," Madge Saunders said. "I called from the Roger Club—just as you figured. I resigned, as of tonight."

Glenn eased the AT-40 out of a falling-leaf and tried to figure this new twist.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I mean, I'm sorry if I'm the cause of you giving up what is probably a good job. But you had two strikes on you from the start."

She smiled back. "I know that now." "Then it was the way I figured?" he probed.

"Something like that."

"Okay. Now why the Murdoch interlude?"

"That was *my* idea. From here you're on your own."

"I'm not buying Murdoch either, you know."

"I'm glad, but I knew you wouldn't."

Glenn sat and tried to figure that out. He was still puzzling when the girl said, "Don't look now, but I think we're in trouble."

Glenn caught it then—a frightening odor of hot metal, smoke and acid.

"We're on fire!" he said calmly. "Now take it easy. I'll stall her and give you plenty of time—"

"We've lost a panel over the tank cap," she said, yanking back her canopy. "There's no cap on the tank either, and we've been flooding the wing."

"Listen, Sister," Glenn said. "That can be bad. The wing's full of sloshing high-test fuel. She can go up like that."

"Take it easy," the girl said back to him. "I can fix it."

"I'll fix you—you—" Words failed him. "Get out on that wing-root and when I say 'Go!'—you go!" he added desperately.

"That's no way of doing it," Madge cried. Releasing her straps, she rose to her feet.

"Just a spark—just a flick from the exhaust and we'll be done for!" he yelled. "What in St. Christopher's name are you doing?"

"We're not abandoning her," the girl shouted back. "You have nothing to argue about, if that's what you think we'll do. We're riding her down."

"Get out on that wing-root!"

MADGE got out, but she was dragging something behind her. Glenn had throttled back and was easing down slowly. He didn't dare risk a steep tilt. Then he saw that the girl had started pulling the parachute material from her pack.

"You're nuts!" he shouted, but watched in admiration as he realized what she was about to attempt. "We can both go up—now."

The girl could hear nothing. Out on the wing-root, she had taken some parachute material from her pack and now, hanging on with one hand, she was stuffing the silk into the open aperture with the other hand and one high heel.

"If the slip stream gets into that chute," Glenn was yelling, "it'll yank you off so fast—"

But he was only shouting at the wind. Madge stayed with the twisted wad of nylon as it came out of the pack and continued to ram it into the wide aperture left by the lost panel. It seemed she was out there for hours, but, eventually, she had the last fluttering wad in, leaving only enough of the shrouds free to allow her to climb back in.

"Listen!" yelled Glenn when she was back in. "Maybe that works. Maybe not. That stuff is still sloshing around in there. It can vaporize fast, and anything will kick it off. Suppose when we let the wheels down we create some static electricity, or we have a short in the system. *Whammo!* You don't even have a parachute now, you sweet dope. Now we've got to stay and take it. Nice going!"

"If we get down, we'll have something to show to that goofy mechanic who forgets to screw fuel caps back on and fails to fasten wing panels properly. I believe in doing things right."

"*What did I tell you?*" Glenn's conscience laughed.

But there was nothing they could do now except ride it down. Madge had sacrificed her parachute to plug the opening and prevent any outside spark or flick of flame from igniting the loose fuel. Men in the war had won Congressional Medals of Honor for less.

For minutes that seemed weeks, Glenn sat and eased her down. He waited for the blast that would tear the wing away, or envelop them both in an all-consuming flame. He wondered what he would do if they lost the wing. After all, he

had a parachute, and he could have taken to the silk. But now—

Madge Saunders turned around and folded her arms across the top of Glenn's instrument panel. She turned on her No. 4-Special smile.

"You know," she said. "That was a sweet take-off."

"Wait until you see this landing—if we make it," Glenn said, still gulping golf balls.

"We'll make it," she said.

They had to make it. And they did.

What seemed hours later, long after he had given the Crew Chief a beautiful dressing down, and long after he had started to tell her what a swell guy she was for even thinking of that gag, they were tooling along Delaware Avenue.

"Well, what about dinner again tomorrow?" he asked.

"Drop me at the next corner, and be on your way, Mr. Whitney. Thanks for the meal, the ride and—the test flight."

He stopped under a light and let her out. "All right. We've both played rough. I'm sorry for my rotten show. Can't I give you a ring sometime?"

"No. We've both had our fun. It's better this way."

"What are you doing?" he asked. "Taking a bus from here?"

"Something like that."

"You're a swell guy, Madge," he said, and purred away.

Three minutes later Madge Saunders hailed a taxi.

## CHAPTER V

### *Missing!*

CYRUS BRANDON sent for Glenn early the next morning. His greeting was really zero-zero.

"Where's Miss Saunders?" Glenn asked bluntly.

"Miss Saunders won't be here any longer," old Cyrus said.

"Then she actually resigned?"

Cyrus ignored that and said, "I want to talk to you about Cliff Nostrand."

"Can you give me Miss Saunders' address?" Glenn asked, and then jerked back with, "Cliff Nostrand?"

"Nostrand has agreed to complete the



XS-6 test for us," Cyrus said coldly. "He'll be along later, and I want you to turn in all your flight data on the ship and then give him some dry-run cockpit time. He'll need at least a couple of hours, I'd say."

"Cyrus, you must be batty!" Glenn said. "I wouldn't trust Nostrand with a kindergarten hobby horse."

"Let's switch the situation," Cyrus Brandon answered. "What would you do, Whitney, if you had everything sunk in a new rocket model and a twenty-five million dollar Government order swinging in the balance—to say nothing of other benefits that may be involved? I happen to be more than an aircraft manufacturer, Whitney. I, and this may sound strange to you, have an interest in world progress, and in the peace and welfare that may come to the peoples of the world by improved and ever more rapid communication and trade among them. Let's say I'm willing to gamble that twenty-five million to produce an air advance important in the building of aircraft of the future."

"Then for heaven's sake give your dough a run for its money," raged Glenn. "Why are you allowing a dope like Cliff Nostrand to see all your test-flight data and the technical dope on your ship? He's a Stuyvesant man, isn't he? Do you honestly believe he'll really fly the ship after he has picked up that information? Once Nostrand gets the thrust and stress figures on the XS-6, he'll go straight back to Stuyvesant and they'll apply them to the job they're cooking up. You have spent several million dollars getting that information. Now do you want to hand it over to Stuyvesant for free?"

"Well, what are *you* waiting for?" snarled Brandon. "We can have the XS-6 fueled and on the line in twenty-four hours with any type of undercarriage you want. Just one take-off and landing. That's all you have to do, Glenn."

"Do you want a man who is honestly frightened to try it?" Glenn asked, biting his lips.

"Glenn, we're all frightened. I know the possible risks involved, but someone has to do it. If you feel you can't, then I have no choice. Nostrand is willing to do it."

"Then you'll give him the flight data from *your* copy. He won't get it from me," Whitney said. "Let him get the

cockpit drill from the Chief Engineer. I'm through."

"You're not through. You are still under contract to Brandon Aircraft whether you complete the XS-6 test or not. I admire you for the courage to admit you are frightened. I respect you more than I care to say because of your frankness. But someone has to complete that test, Glenn, or we're sunk. I can tell you that with the same soul-searing honesty."

"And with the same soul-searing honesty, Cyrus," Glenn said, "I'll have to repeat for the last time I will not fly that rocket job again, under any circumstances."

Cyrus sat staring into space.

"What it all adds up to," Glenn went on, "is that test pilots are not brave men at all. They are very smart. They'll take certain risks, but they always want one out. They fly with slip-stick and have it all worked out on charts before they ever buckle on a G-suit. But there are no figures on what can happen in a rough take-off or landing when you have gaseous nitrogen penned up at nine thousand pounds per square inch."

"We could take one out and fire a rifle at it," old Cyrus suggested.

"Sure you could. I thought of that, but it wouldn't be the same. We wouldn't know whether the impact of the bullet created a spark and ignited the nitrogen, or whether it exploded with its sudden release. Besides, you would have still to conform with the government test regulations and make an actual take-off and landing with a fully-fueled aircraft. Perhaps a crack physicist could tell us, but I still wouldn't want to know. I'd still have no out."

THEY sat in silence for several minutes.

"I'm sorry about Miss Saunders," Glenn said finally.

"It's not important. I think I can get Kitteredge when she comes back from her honeymoon."

"I'd like to see Miss Saunders again. Do you have her address?"

"Uh uh!" Brandon waved a cautioning finger. "She's not your type, Glenn. You stay with the talent you've been moving with."

"I don't like that crack."

"Miss Saunders is not for you."

"Yesterday, you seemed intent on

herding us together."

"Yesterday, I was desperate. Today, I have Cliff Nostrand lined up. Miss Saunders put on a good act, but it wasn't good enough."

"I liked it—at the finish. I'd like to see more of her."

The telephone bell rang and Cyrus scowled at the instrument. Finally, he picked it up and grunted.

"Who?" he demanded. Then, "Oh—put her on."

"Hi-Sweetheart!" he said after a pause. "Thanks for the try . . . Never mind, I have Cliff Nostrand lined up. If he makes it, all right. If not, we're sunk anyhow. No, Whitney still refuses to touch it."

Brandon scowled again and stared into the mouthpiece. "What do you mean you're glad?" There was another long pause and finally a puzzled-looking Brandon said, "I understand—I think," and hung up.

"One more question, Cyrus," Glenn said roughly, "just who is Miss Saunders?"

Again Brandon waved that cautioning finger and pursed his lips. "You're still out of bounds."

"Okay! I'll find her," Glenn said. "I'll be having lunch at the Roger Club with Martin Murdoch. I believe Murdoch has some idea who she is."

"I'm quite sure he has," Cyrus Brandon said with a twisted grin.

"I don't get it," Glenn said.

"You will, Brother. But it will be too late then."

There were several Saunders in the telephone book, but none of them gave any hint as to Madge's address, and Glenn gave up after several futile tries. He even tried a couple of secretarial schools to see if they had recently placed a Miss Madge Saunders—but no soap.

Then he began to ponder on Cyrus Brandon's statement, "*Never mind, I have Cliff Nostrand lined up. If he makes it, all right. If not, we're sunk, anyhow.*"

What had he meant by that? Who was sunk besides Cyrus Brandon?

He got up and wandered down the long flight of steps to the hangar floor where the slip-stick boys were still fumbling over the XS-6. Beyond that there was little activity on the floor. They all turned and glared at him as he strode down the hangar to the open door and

then down the apron to the parking lot.

"Nice guy!" one said.

"Because of him, all of us are likely to wind up on the bread lines," another muttered.

"That's the aviation racket for you. I should have taken up blocking straw hats for horses!"

Glenn Whitney heard none of these statements, but he knew exactly what the trend of conversation was back there.

He found his car, swung into the main highway traffic and headed for town. So he wasn't good enough for Madge Saunders. His kind was—the talent he'd been running around with. That was a crack at Connie Payne. Well, what was wrong with Connie? She worked hard, and everyone couldn't be private secretaries to aviation tycoons—even for one day.

That annoyed him, that one day business. Why was Madge Saunders selected to lure him into making that last test? Sure, she was good looking and had a line—and legs.

Glenn snapped to attention at that. That was it! That wasn't the real Madge Saunders. That stuff was an act that had washed off when she had used her parachute to prevent a mid-air fire. No slick chick would have risked a situation like that, but Madge—the real Madge—never thought a thing about it. It was as simple as that.

Would Connie Payne have done it? What a chance!

The more Glenn thought about it the more he knew he was sunk. He stopped at a drug store and tried two more numbers listed under a Saunders name, but with no luck. Neither party had ever heard of a Madge Saunders.

By the time he had pondered and thought himself into utter confusion, he crunched up the driveway of the Roger Club and hoped he would find Madge Saunders there instead of Martin Murdoch. But he still had—no luck!

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## CHAPTER VI

### *Looser Take—Death!*

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**M**MURDOCH and Connie Payne were hunched together at one end of the bar with whisky sours. Steve was just

coming on duty, and stood buttoning his white jacket and sharing the confidences.

"I hear you lost a test pilot," Glenn said to Murdoch, taking a bar stool beside him. "Bottle of beer, Steve."

"You're not interested in our proposition?" Murdoch began, and then looked puzzled. "I don't get it," he added.

"Cliff Nostrand is going to finish the XS-6 test for Brandon," Glenn said.

"Is it arranged?" Murdoch asked, playing it safe.

"Brandon told me to give him all my flight data and a cockpit dry-run.

"Just so long as *you* don't have to do it, Sweetheart," cooed Connie, stroking Glenn's arm. "That's the second best thing I've heard today."

"Oh, what was the other?"

"That you were interested in the Stuyvesant set-up." Glenn looked coolly at Connie's eyes. "What's the difference what I test? You can get clobbered lots of ways."

"Not on our scheme," Murdoch broke in.

"Then why does Nostrand want to risk the Brandon job?"

"Who knows? Murdoch shrugged. "Maybe there's something extra in it for him."

"There's dough in your job, isn't there?"

"For you—not for Nostrand," Murdoch said, and then obviously wished he hadn't. "I mean—Glenn Whitney's name on the bottom of a test sheet means a lot to us."

"I get it," Glenn said. He studied the collar on his beer. "How much?"

"You name it."

"I can get one hundred thousand for just taking the XS-6 up and bringing it back," Glenn said softly.

"You name it," Murdoch said again.

"What do I have to do?"

"Just sign a test sheet and help us out—in a general way."

"If Nostrand takes the Brandon job, he'll be able to give you all the information you want, won't he?" Glenn asked with a leer.

Murdoch's tone was low and ominous. "Don't be a sucker, Whitney," he said. "Why did Brandon sic his niece on you? You're supposed to pull them out of a fine financial mess. The Air Force is leery about the XS-6's fuel pressure business. You yourself know it's hot!"

"Brandon's niece?" queried Glenn.

"Madge Saunders is Brandon's niece," Murdoch stated. "She's the daughter of Brandon's sister. If you want the rest of it, Madge Saunders is Brandon Aircraft Corporation. She owns sixty per cent of the stock. It was her money that financed the XS-6, you fool!"

Glenn drew in his breath, exhaled and then turned to his beer for time.

"For one hundred grand, Glenn," Connie Payne added, "you lay a twenty-five million dollar contract in that rich-witch's lap. That's all you'd get too."

"She did try to get you to agree to finish the test, didn't she?" Murdoch prodded.

"It started out that way," Glenn said, and studied the girl beside Murdoch with new interest. "How come you're interested in all this, Connie?"

"You think I want to warble in a night club all my life?"

"You may as well get it straight," Murdoch added. "If Stuyvesant comes up with a rocket job that can be produced cheap and fast, Connie stands to make a wad of dough. I've got it fixed for her."

"Look! Let's have this in basic English," Glenn said.

THEY went to their luncheon table, sat down and left it to Steve to order for them.

"We got a great idea at Stuyvesant," Murdoch began again. "The Air Force wants rocket jobs, but fast. We began thinking along a new line. We had tools, jigs and dies for the Stuyvesant Shrike still on hand. If we could convert the same job into a rocket model, we'd be doing the Government a great turn, eh?"

"Keep talking," ordered Glenn, watching Connie's eyes.

"We take a regulation Shrike air-frame and switch weights and loadings so that she takes the rocket power plant. We eliminate months of mock-up time and fiddling with a prototype. All we have to do is to prove that the Shrike can take the extra stress and fly at rocket speed. She always was a chunky job, you know."

"But not that chunky," Glenn said.

"Who knows? Maybe she is."

"You want me to find out?"

"We want you to *say* she is."

"Nice! And what about the poor mugs

who believe me, and take her up?"

Murdoch laughed. "You're way ahead of the picture, Glenn," he said. "We have only one test job. We produce some structural changes to satisfy the engineers. Then we get a sweet contract—and here comes the hot part."

"I can't wait!" muttered Glenn.

"We don't build any rocket-powered Shrikes. We sell the contract for seventy-five per cent of its face value—and let some other mug take the grief!"

"Who sells who?"

"Connie has it all fixed. She has sold Bart Cunningham."

"Oh, Brother! A cutthroat operator if I ever heard of one!"

"Cunningham always wanted to get into military aviation. We give him his chance. Look, just we three sitting here can split the best part of a million bucks! You know what these Government contracts are!"

"A million would buy a lot of sleeping pills," said Glenn.

"Don't be a sucker!" Connie snapped. "Maybe no one will ever fly one. It's happened before."

Glenn tried to fathom the real story in Connie's eyes. "You want me to do this, Connie?" he asked. "It would mean the last test I'd ever make—even if I don't take it off the ground."

"Name me a better all-around deal," the singer said.

"What did it take to sell Cunningham?" he asked with cutting simplicity.

"Look, Golden Boy. We had a business deal. It took plenty, and I had what he wanted. That was my part of the deal. Are you going to get pious all of a sudden? All you have to do is to sign your name to a test sheet. You don't even have to fly the thing. You can get a share of a million just for some snappy penmanship. Is that crude?"

"It's a business. I suppose," Glenn muttered, and began thinking about telephone numbers again.

"As a matter of fact," Murdoch broke in, "you don't even have to go out to the Stuyvesant field." He reached inside his coat and drew out a folded triplicate form. "You can sign it right here."

The waiter brought the soup, and while Connie and Murdoch shook grated cheese into theirs, Glenn looked over the details typed on the document.

He whistled low and handed it back. "Quite a kite you have there,

Mr. Murdoch," he said.

"Nice flying, Mr. Whitney," Murdoch answered.

"When do I draw my blood money?" the test pilot asked.

"I have another paper here already signed by Cunningham. It will be just a matter of depositing one check before three this afternoon and scribbling a check for you on the strength of it. Simple, eh?"

"You mind if I call Cunningham to verify it?"

"Not at all. Here's his number. I mean, where he is right now."

Murdoch scribbled a set of letters and figures on a corner torn from the menu. Glenn took it, and went across the room to the telephone booth.

There he dialed the Brandon Aircraft Corporation and left a message for Cyrus Brandon.

"That's right," he said to the startled operator. "Tell him I'll complete the test on the XS-6 tomorrow morning—just as she stands. Tell him to toss Cliff Nstrand out on his rusty-dusty!"

"Oh, Mr. Whitney," the girl said, breathless.

WHEN Glenn went back to the table, two pairs of eyes searched him like penetrating instruments designed to probe for foreign objects.

"Well?" Murdoch asked coldly.

"I didn't bother calling Cunningham," Glenn said and sat down. "I had a better idea."

"There isn't any better idea," the engineer said pointedly. "I think you'd better sign now, Whitney."

"Little worried, eh?" taunted the test pilot.

"After all," Connie broke in, "we've given you our confidence." She turned and gave Murdoch a sooty look. "It's up to you from this point on."

"I'd like the straight on this Saunders gal," said Glenn, ignoring Connie. "Do you have her telephone number?"

"Tell me who you called just then," Murdoch said menacingly.

"Sure. I just left word for Brandon that I'd complete the XS-6 test tomorrow. That's what I think of your scheme of splitting a soft million."

The silence held. Finally Connie dropped a spoon.

"So that pretty puss did put it over," she forced through clenched teeth.

"No, she didn't. You did. All I had to get were the facts on this slimy deal—to make me keep clean. I wouldn't be in on your deal for a *full* million. I like to sleep nights."

"Fair enough," Murdoch said coldly. "Only don't try to glom our deal."

"Knowing you and your contacts, the only way I can glom it, is to finish the Brandon job," Glenn said.

"When do you plan to do that?"

"By noon tomorrow, you'll know what chance you have for your million."

"A sawbuck will get you a grand that you don't make it," Murdoch said.

"I'll take that bet." Glenn peeled off a ten-spot and tossed it on the table.

"Now, will you excuse me? I usually lunch at a dog wagon. You meet more interesting people."

They watched him thread his way through the tables to the door, their world tottering about them. Connie finished tearing her handkerchief into shreds.

"I told you not to wise him about Madge Saunders," she said. "He just tossed away three hundred grand to latch on to about twelve million."

Murdoch picked up Glenn's ten dollar bill and tossed it at Connie. "I'll bet you ten he never steps out of that whoosh-box."

"He hadn't better," the girl said.

liquid oxygen from the tanks to the rocket burners. This system was necessary because no known mechanical pump could operate and handle the extreme low temperature of the propellant. It was this particular tank that caused Glenn the most concern.

They were bolting the final panels back into place when a gleaming Packard station wagon tooled around the corner of the hangar and crunched up to the portable benches banking the rocket job. Glenn turned, and his heart did a wing-over when he saw Madge Saunders at the wheel. Without a word Glenn darted to the front of the car and took down the numbers on the license plate.

"Hello Glenn." She smiled. "Am I out-of-bounds out here on the apron?"

"No. I'm just making sure I can trace you next time. I tried to get you all morning."

"Mother doesn't list our number. One of her pet peeves—the telephone."

"I see." He smiled. "And what can I do for you, Boss?"

"Who told you?" she asked, looking startled.

"Murdoch. We had a date for lunch, remember."

"So, to save my money, you decided to complete the test?" There was fire in her eyes.

"Don't be stupid. I'm blocking their scheme to stick the Government with that redesigned Shrike."

She eased over to one side and he slipped in beside her.

"I don't want you to take up the XS-6, Glenn. Let Nostrand get himself a bonus."

"I might need the money too," he said thoughtfully.

"I'll see you get your check—complete."

He looked at her and saw the simple, wholesome type that represented the finest America produced. There wasn't any question as to what was making his temperature fluctuate. He might have been puzzled over these new emotions the night before, but now he was certain. He was in love with his Boss.

"Look," he broke in. "We've got to block them off. Murdoch and that mob, I mean."

"Glenn, I don't want you to fly it. I told you so last night, and I mean it more than ever now. I was afraid you'd find out my connection with Brandon

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## CHAPTER VII

### *Ready to Fly*

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**B**ACK at the Brandon plant, Glenn slipped on a pair of coveralls and prepared to check the XS-6 from needle-nose to tail-pipe. With a box of high-speed wrenches and gauges he went to work, keeping everyone else clear.

Panel after panel came off, and part after part was checked and measured. He removed tires, replaced the tubes and then inspected the pucks in the brake discs. He left nothing to chance.

Later, with a chemical engineer, he went over the fuel system, first testing the tanks that carried the liquid oxygen. Then he gave an hour's attention to the gaseous nitrogen container which was used in place of a fuel pump to force the

and decide to go through with it. I'd forgotten about Murdoch knowing who I was."

A tractor was dragging the XS-6 back into the hangar and they sat and watched the beautiful winged ship as it moved slowly up the apron.

"You can't do this to *her*," Glenn said.

"*She's* not going to interfere with my life, either," Madge said with a frown.

"But I'm not going to let Stuyvesant and Murdoch—and Connie Payne and all the rest of them put over this fraud."

"Connie Payne? Where does she come in?"

Glenn tried to explain Connie's part in the deal that had brought in Bart Cunningham—a questionable operator with a murky syndicate behind him.

"No girl would sell herself in a deal like that," Madge argued.

"You'd be surprised what they'll do for a third of a million dollars."

**M**ADGE sat and pondered, and then suddenly she turned.

"Glenn, I'm asking you not to complete that test. I—I really don't want you to. If Nostrand wants to, that all right with me."

"He could cross up the Brandon outfit," Glenn warned.

"Maybe, but he won't cross me," Madge said with a strange glint in her eyes.

"I'm not trying to save your stake in this outfit," Glenn began again. "That you must understand. If you had told me last night that the test meant so much to you, financially, I'd have refused, just as I did before you ever came into the picture."

The girl swept the back of her hand across her forehead.

"Where do we go for dinner tonight?" he asked with his best smile.

She shook her head. "I'm smart enough to know we'll never repeat that. Events like that just have to happen."

"You liked it, eh?" he taunted.

"Get out of here," she snapped. "I've got to talk to Uncle Cyrus."

He slipped out of the car while she depressed the starter. "If you dish me out of this deal," he said, "I'll haunt you for the rest of your life."

But she had swung the station wagon around and was purring back to the Administration Building.

Meanwhile, back at the club, Murdoch

was looking across the bar at Steve, who was staring into space.

"It's the only way, Connie," Murdoch was saying. "Steve would give his right arm to fly just once more."

"But why would he risk a show like that?"

"He's in it with you, isn't he?"

Connie turned her eyes on Murdoch. "You know," she said faintly. "There are times when I have to check myself on that."

"Steve doesn't. If he thought Glenn would double-cross you, after what he's put up with—"

"How much real risk is there?" she asked.

"It's all a matter of timing. Steve was one of the best."

"Until he tangled with you," she said tartly.

"All right! He puts the zinger in on the Brandon job. He gets even with Whitney, and we can be in a better position to sell the Shrike. If the Brandon ship fizzles, Wright Field will snatch at anything. What have *you* got to lose?"

"Just a husband no one knows I have, I guess," Connie Payne answered. "I'll bring Steve to your place tonight, eh?"

"Good girl!" beamed Murdoch. "I'll go check the car radio."

**G**LENN WHITNEY went ahead with his plans for the final test of the XS-6, as though he had never met Madge Saunders. He sat in on the refueling from the compressor tower early the next morning, and then drove his car up and down the mile-long runway checking every crack and irregularity in its surface.

With a can of red paint he marked the danger features, and completed his inspection by painting a touch-down spot about forty yards inside the incoming end of the strip.

The take-off and landing test would take only a few minutes, since requirements were that the rocket job was to be taken off and landed with full fuel tanks, which is just the way its counterparts would be flown once they were put into production.

Cyrus Brandon came out with Thorn-dyke, the Chief Engineer. Glenn looked around to see if Cliff Nostrand was still in the picture.

"Morning, Boss," Glenn greeted.

"It's a devil of a morning," Brandon

grumbled. "But it's nothing to the night I put in after Madge went to work on me."

"Is she here?"

"She's taken over your office," Brandon said, and jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

Glenn didn't look up, but he hoped Madge Saunders was up there looking down on the proceedings.

"You didn't give Nostrand anything?" Glenn asked under his breath.

"No. I got your message just in time. How's everything?"

Glenn held out two upraised thumbs and winked. "We'll make it."

"Fine! Anything you want before you gear up?"

"Just keep that niece of yours up there until I get back. After that, you can turn her over to me."

"I'll be responsible for nothing. She's worked herself up to a fine lather. I won't tell you what she told me when I came down."

"I know. She doesn't want me to make the test."

"Well, that's one way of putting it. She threatens to pull out of the concern if you do."

"Legally, that would take time, wouldn't it?" Glenn asked.

"You're making more than a test, Glenn," the old man muttered. "The real trick comes when you get back and tackle that vixen."

"Leave it to me," Glenn said, and went over to the hangar to dress.

on since the early hours of the morning.

"That's all you have to do, Steve," Murdoch was saying, "and you're one pilot who can do it."

"I can fly," Steve muttered. "Just gimme a break."

"All you have to do is to make him swerve it off the runway," Murdoch repeated again. "You don't want a guy like Whitney to kill himself on a crummy show like that, do you? He's one of your best friends!"

"One o' the best," agreed the sodden Steve. "You just tell me what to do. I can fly."

"Not only that, but if we can head off that Brandon contract, Connie has a piece of the Stuyvesant deal. You'll be able to do all the flying you want, after that."

"That Connie's a good kid. I can fly," muttered Steve drunkenly.

The spotter outside the Brandon plant gave Connie the word, and she called out to Murdoch, "Get him in the air!"

With a few last-minute instructions, Murdoch saw Steve settled and strapped in.

"All you have to do is buzz around until we give you the word from my car," he told him. "Then it's up to you to show Glenn Whitney you can fly."

"I can fly," slobbered Steve.

Back at the Brandon field, a cleat-track was drawing the XS-6 well clear of the hangar. Glenn walked after it, checking the weather with Thorndyke from a sheet brought out from the main office.

"We've asked everyone to keep clear of the field while you are in the air," Thorndyke said.

"Don't worry. No one will be anywhere near me once I get her off," Glenn grinned.

"We've tried to plan for that."

Two Air Force officers sat in a jeep nearby and watched the proceedings, but showed no inclination to get any too close. All this was a throbbing mystery to them, and both apparently noped it would soon be over so they could sign to what they had seen and get away.

Glenn turned once and looked up at his office window. He turned back again sharply when he saw Madge mournfully peering out, her face cupped in the palms of her hands.

"Don't worry, baby," he breathed. "Don't worry!"

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## CHAPTER VIII

### *Supersonic Disaster*

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**W**HILE the Brandon crowd was putting the finishing touches on their XS-6, another group of mechanics across the city was gassing up a Stuyvesant Shrike fighter in a little-used hangar at the far end of the apron. Inside the hangar office, Connie Payne sat at a telephone, fretting and fuming.

At a secluded point of the shelter, Martin Murdoch was talking quietly but with sincerity to Steve Gill, who stood swaying in a khaki coverall, listening loose-lipped and dull-eyed.

The same lulling chant had been going

But Glenn worried. And once he climbed up and checked the fuel gauges again, and tested the controls, the old knotting fear set in. He drew over the safety straps and took time making himself comfortable while the gray-cheeked Thorndyke watched.

"Okay," Glenn said. "You've done yours. You don't have to stay here. Beat it!"

"Best of luck," Thorndyke said, and closed the cockpit panel.

Glenn spoke to the tower and received a final okay to proceed. Now came the test for man and mechanical equipment, he knew. He turned on the valve that allowed the liquid oxygen to flow back to the rocket motor. He winced when he opened the nitrogen line, praying that all connections were tight and secure.

"Here we go," he said, and strapped the No. 1 selector switch.

Immediately, the first rocket chamber caught and let out a screech of flame that sounded like high-speed steel racing through a metal bar. Glenn closed his eyes and waited. So far, so good . . .

Easing the brakes off, he let her waddle from the apron to the perimeter track. This was where trouble could break out all over the countryside.

"Brother, hang together," he breathed, and out of the corner of his eye he saw a long tan sedan standing on the road beyond the wire fence. The sedan had a familiar look, but this was no time to check license plates.

Every yard seemed like a mile, every depression in the track a yawning canyon, each infinitesimal bump an obstruction worthy of a bulldozer. By the time Glenn was making the curve to get to the assigned runway, he was drenched with his own sweat and trembling like an aspen.

As he swung the ship's needle-nose around and aimed down the long take-off strip, the tower called him.

"There's a Stuyvesant Shrike pooping around at about four thousand feet, Glenn," the operator warned. "Keep your eyes peeled. We're trying to contact him and get him out of the area."

"Roger," said Glenn, and somehow the acknowledgment brought up grim possibilities. "A Shrike?" he muttered to himself. "Why at this particular moment would Stuyvesant have a Shrike in this area?"

"Get him out of here," he said, calling the tower back, "or I'll blast him out." Little did he know . . .

THE Brandon XS-6 stood poised, her No. 1 chamber pouring flame and power. Glenn decided to try it on one and see how much it took to get off with that power. He closed his eyes, gave her a little flap.

"Here we go, baby!" he said.

The rocket ship stiffened as he eased the brakes off again and rammed down harder on her nose wheel, punching more oxygen into the chamber. She began an erratic movement, fighting the energizing blast, until Glenn took over with his pedals and forced her to maintain course. Then she accepted his command and smoothed into a take-off run that was as swift and as true as a bolt from a cross-bow.

"Oh beautiful!" Glenn beamed and relaxed.

He was certain she would behave now. She had to with a take-off like this. He turned and checked his distance from the edge of the runway. Then he saw the Shrike.

"Holy hat!" he gasped. "What's the fool doing?"

The Shrike came down the chute from a tight angle, screeching for the point in the runway just ahead of the XS-6. There was no way to avoid him. Glenn didn't dare attempt to shag his ship off the runway now, on either side. She'd ground loop and dig in a wing-tip.

"You blasted fool!" he screeched.

The Shrike had timed it perfectly, taking its cue from a short-wave radio set in Murdoch's car which was parked on the roadway outside. In the split second left, Glenn remembered the tan sedan and realized what was taking place.

"Murdoch, you—" he snarled, and took the only way out.

He flicked the No. 2 switch and hoped. The Shrike was still boring in. Glenn held her down as long as he dared, and then dragged his wheel-control back hard. There wasn't time to tuck the wheels away.

What happened next was hard to explain. Steve timed it exactly as Murdoch had figured. But the XS-6 hoiked up off the runway and vaulted the Shrike at the bottom of its dive, missing it by inches.



There was a loud tearing hiss and a spatter of blue flame. From a distance, it appeared that the two ships had collided, but the rocket ship came out of the bewildering tangle and shot skyward like a stub-winged projectile.

The Air Force observers just blinked. The Brandon mob gasped.

The tower operator heard Steve Gill in the Merlin-powered Shrike curse Murdoch with exactly the same words Glenn had used. That was all Steve could do—because the Brandon ship had wiped him off with a double hosing of intense flame that had almost torched the Shrike in two.

Glenn never saw what happened after that. He was kiting skyward at almost supersonic speed, reveling in the performance, forgetting his close shave completely.

But Steve Gill knew what had happened. In a sharp, flame-annealed second he sobered and realized his plight and the tragic part he had unwittingly played in Murdoch's insane scheme.

The tower operator heard Steve scream Murdoch's name again, and he watched the ill-fated Shrike nose down, steer what seemed an erratic course, and suddenly poise over the roadway beyond the barrier of the field. Then, with a pathetic nodding of a vanquished warrior, it took aim—and plunged with a roar of released power and the blast of fiery explosion smack into the top of a long tan sedan parked on the roadway!

No one walked away from that pile-up.

Meanwhile, Glenn had taken the XS-6 to a reasonable operating altitude and called the tower again.

"Whitney—XS-6—coming in for test landing," he reported.

There was nothing to it after that. The rocket job performed like a dolphin. The radio buzzed and Glenn responded. At the same time he noticed the blazing pyre out on the roadway beyond the field.

"Tower to Whitney! Tower to Whitney! Check your undercarriage, Glenn. Check it—right. Think you sheared off your nose wheel on that Shrike."

"Roger!" answered Glenn.

HE loosened his straps, leaned over and peered under the deep instrument panel. There was a glare of light coming up from below. The tower was right.

"Front leg out," Glenn called back and said. "Will try to get down on two wheels."

"Tower to Whitney, XS-6," the tower came back with. "Mr. Brandon's orders. You are to stay upstairs until you have exhausted nitrogen load. Forbids you to attempt landing with test load . . . Over!"

"Tell Brandon and his niece I'm bringing her down for those Air Force guys. They want a full load landing test. I'll give 'em a beaut! If she stays together like this, they'll have no arguments about the Brandon rocket fuel system . . . That's all!"

They tried to call him again, but Glenn was too busy to answer. On the way down he tried to figure out how he could get a tricycle job down when his nose wheel was out. He had no answer, so he punched a button, retracted the main wheels—and prepared for the worst.

If she would take a belly landing, she would take anything and this was the way to find out. [Turn page]

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When Glenn started his final glide toward the runway, there was only one human being in sight on the field. Everyone else had taken cover. That was Madge Saunders, who had taken his convertible from in front of the hangars, raced out across the turf and swung into a position parallel with the runway.

"Get out of there, you crazy kid," Glenn screamed, but it was too late then. As he let the XS-6 down gently, heading for the runway, Madge began to race with him.

"If this baby goes up, you go with it, sweetheart," Glenn muttered, and then turned his attention to the emergency landing.

The XS-6 touched once and metal screamed. Glenn steadied her as she tried to porpoise, and made her drag her tail as long as possible. Holding his breath, and bracing himself with one hand against the panel, he waited for Eternity.

It came in an eight-cylindrical convertible. The rocket job slobbered to a belly-scraping crunch. Glenn closed his eyes.

Madge eased the car up to the grounded rocket job and stood up as she

watched the man behind the plexiglas screen. He marshaled what few ounces of strength he had left and crawled out. She pointed to the blazing pyre of the crashed plane.

"We made it, Glenn," she shouted then.

"Thanks," he gasped, and when he climbed in beside her, he asked, "What happened?"

"Everything! That was Steve Gill in that Shrike. He tried to head off the test."

"Then what?"

"You seemed to hit him with your nose wheel, and somehow he caught fire. The Air Force men think you set him on fire with the rocket blast. It will be hard proving."

"Well, we didn't blow up," Glenn grinned. "If she'll take that, she'll take anything. I guess we're in, sweetheart."

"Sweetheart?"

Glenn kissed her before the pack of mechanics that poured off the fire engine.

"I'm compromising you," he said.

"Silly," she laughed aloud. "You never had a chance. Two strikes on you right from the start, darling!"

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## THUNDER OVER THE ROCKIES

**TWO HARUM-SCARUM PILOTS BARGE INTO A PRIVATE WAR!**

by PAT PATTERSON

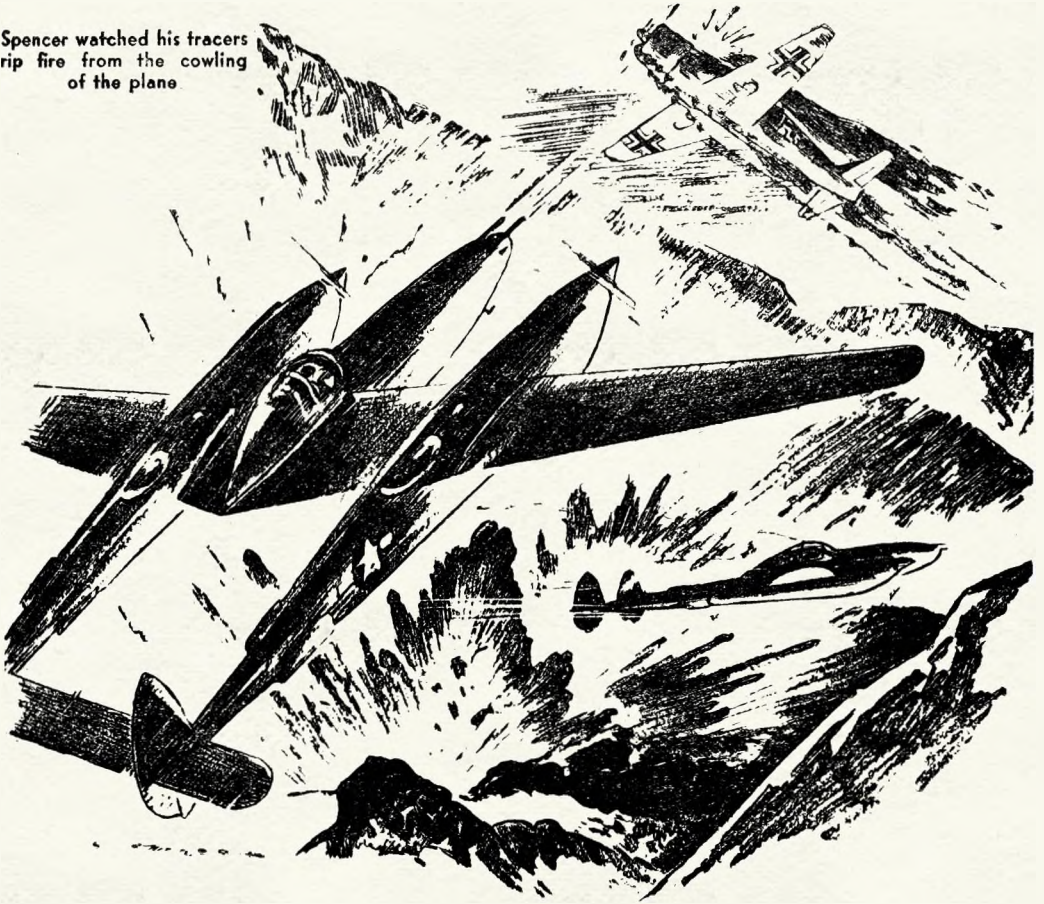
## UNDERGROUND SKYWAY

**WAR HERO BABE MAXON SPIKES A SMUGGLING CONSPIRACY!**

by F. E. RECHNITZER



Spencer watched his tracers  
rip fire from the cowling  
of the plane



# FINAL MISSION

*by Johanas L. Bouma*

**I**T is a damnable thing, Dane Spencer thought, to come to the end of your combat career and have it fizzle out like a spent cartridge. He turned in the bucket and looked with hungry eyes at the Lightnings flying his wash. Off his left wing, Major Dunn led the formation with the careful precision of a man who has learned the officer's manual well. Twenty-three, this man who had

won his rank as an instructor at Kelly Field. And Spencer was aware of intense dislike that bordered on hatred for Major Dunn.

Below, the blue-green heave of the Adriatic was a darker reflection of the sky. The Mountains of the River Po curved in abrupt entrance to the Gulf of Venice. Beyond, past the province of Venitia, lay the Brenner Pass—a deep

*Captain Spencer Believed in Getting Things Done—Fast!*

narrow V carving through the milk-white Italian Alps. And below the Pass, between the towns of Trent and Bassano, the ammunition train was fair game for the sixteen Lightnings. Or would it end up another fluke?

Anger pressed outward against Spencer's chest wall. This was the third time in a week they were going out to bomb an ammunition train between Trent and Bassano. On the previous two attacks they had found the box cars on a siding between the towns.

They had come out of the sun, smashing the column with their 500 pounders, hosing the column with machine gun and cannon fire. But there had been no answering concussions, no earth-shattering explosions to tell them the box cars had been loaded.

They had not been loaded. They had been planted there, empty, at the side of the River Brenta that followed the tracks, and nothing on either side but the lower foothills of the Alps.

Major Dunn led the formation across the coast between Chioggia and Venice, taking them to 20,000 and using evasive action as flak batteries darkened the sky on either side. The corridor was narrow, but it was enough, and Dunn angled down with throttles wide open.

The railroad tracks were thin and glinting copper as they swept past Cittadella. Bassano was twenty miles in the distance, and the Alps towered high and wide beyond. Spencer sighted the columned box cars on the instant that Dunn dipped his wings. They went down for the run, and to Spencer it was a moment when three years of combat were forgotten, for it is never the memories but always the present acts that witness the manner of our living.

THEY came down in a single stretching line and poured their hot steel to the waiting box cars. Spencer's bombs found the locomotive and blew it in a swelter of angry steel. He pulled back the stick and knew a hollow aching as his stomach sucked against the curve of his spine.

Thirty years old, he thought bleakly. Graying at the temples. Africa and Sicily behind him. P-40's in Africa. Dive bombers in Sicily. And all the hell and terror of a thousand hours fighting the enemy. But a deep, underlying fulfillment had come with the years. Duty

performed, and it was not something he wanted to give up for a state-side desk job. He wondered now if the major had considered and put through his application for another tour.

The Allison howled as he heeled at the top of his climb and looked down. The box cars were splintered firewood, scattered and blazing. They had been empty again. Spencer cursed softly and combed the surrounding terrain. The river glistened beside the tracks. Brush and shrub led to a narrow belt of green forest that met the foothills. Five miles away, Spencer estimated.

He flew toward it as the formation wormed the sky. No roads down there. He banked for the turn and then a glint of silver in the green, a sudden alien reflection that came and went like the snap of an eyelid. Spencer thumbed his mike.

"There's something in that patch of forest, Major. We'd better investigate."

"Rejoin the formation." The major clipped his words and Spencer found anger in them.

He bridled a hot retort and took his deputy lead position. Dunn was new to his job, but Dunn was also in command. And the man had the power to waver his application for another tour. The thought was with him when he saw the fighters.

"Bandits at nine o'clock high."

Six Focke-Wulfes, Spencer saw, angling away from the formation and well out of gun range. He waited for Dunn to give orders for the chase, but the major led the formation toward the coast.

Spencer jabbed his mike button. "Let's give 'em a run."

"We're not chasing enemy fighters over half of Europe, Captain," Dunn snapped. "We came here to fly a mission, and we've accomplished it."

They flew home. After landing and interrogation Spencer stalked across the area toward Squadron Headquarters. The major was in his office, a smooth-faced youngster with eyes that could cut. He listened Spencer out, then looked up, unsmiling.

"We followed orders, Captain," he said. "It was no fault of ours the box cars were empty."

"We're being played for suckers," Spencer said evenly, "and it burns me up. They know we're after their ammu-

nition, so they set up a decoy and wait for us to bomb it."

"A decoy, Captain? Those box cars were real enough. At least we deprived the enemy of their further use."

"I'm trying to tell you they would not send ammunition through unescorted. You don't bag a prize in this war without paying for it. Had the ammunition been down there, we would have met plenty of opposition."

"Intelligence said it was coming through," Dunn snapped. "Reconnaissance spotted the train leaving the Pass for Trent. Maybe they unloaded there and trucked the stuff to their front lines."

"I don't think so. Our P-40's stationed at the lines are pretty good at shooting up truck convoys. The enemy wouldn't take the chance on moving it that way. It's my idea they have a central dump beyond the limits our P-40's fly. They probably draw enough from this dump to supply only their immediate needs."

"It's not our problem to find such a dump—if there is one." Major Dunn impatiently rattled papers on his desk.

"I have a hunch where it's located." Spencer quickly told what he had seen in the forest. "I've been thinking about it all the way back, sir. Whatever I saw didn't belong in those trees. A reflection from metal of some sort. A helmet, perhaps, a rifle barrel."

**D**UNN leaned forward. "Did you see any roads leading to this forest?"

Spencer said he hadn't.

"And are you trying to make me believe they would have thirty or forty car loads of ammunition down there? It's ridiculous, Captain."

Spencer tightened arms at his sides. "They could cover their tracks so they couldn't be spotted from the air. The forest is thick, and they could easily camouflage the ammunition boxes so that it would be impossible to see them. Our ground forces keep untold amounts of ammunition hidden in the same way, sir. I suggest we take the chance and bomb that strip."

The major flushed and his mouth hardened. "Headquarters has mapped every inch of that terrain. If there's anything unusual down there they would know about it. And I'm not wasting bombs on a wild goose chase. Forget you mentioned it, Captain."

Spencer bridled his impatient fury. A man had to take chances in this war, but the major wasn't a gambler. He would schedule his missions, his duty accomplished. But the taste for daring wasn't in him.

"Those Focke-Wulfes we saw, sir. I think they were there for only one purpose—to lure us away from that vicinity. They—"

Dunn banged the desk with his open palm. "You need a rest, Captain. You've flown one tour and have a final mission to finish your second. That brings us down to this request of yours for yet another tour. I'm refusing it."

"Yes, sir." Spencer saluted and turned to the door.

"One moment." Dunn stood, his hands on the desk. "I'm leaving for Naples tonight to be gone two days. I'll want you in charge until I return. You'll receive orders for tomorrow's mission through the usual channels. Lieutenant Bricker will lead the formation. You'll remain here in charge of the office. Is that understood?"

Spencer merely nodded and walked out.

The orders came late that afternoon, and Spencer posted the flight schedule on the Operation's bulletin board. In the morning he presided at the briefing.

"Escort mission to the 55th Wing, Heavy Bombardment. They're bombing the Munich marshalling yards, and you'll rendezvous at—"

He finished and watched them file out in the early dawn. Mae Wests and parachutes slung carelessly across shoulders. Helmets and goggles cocked high as the pilots laughed and shouted and clambered onto the trucks that would take them to the line. Spencer watched and stifled his feelings.

He was on the line an hour before their return. Later he counted them as they flew the pattern before landing. One was missing. He sought out Lieutenant Bricker at the interrogation tent.

"Bandits," Bricker said. "They caught us past the Alps. Two to one. They got Jones." He grinned. "Four of 'em won't be back for chow."

"Good boy."

Spencer checked the rest of the pilots and returned to the office. Orders had arrived for the next day's mission. He read them and leaned back in his chair.

The main target was an enemy fighter

base, twenty miles south from where they'd ruined the box cars the day before. There was a secondary target—a radio station at Belluno. No alternate targets. Spencer stepped to the wall map, studied it carefully.

He went back to the orders that said twenty Lightnings would participate, ten carrying bombs, the remaining ten to act as cover over the main target. There was a distance of forty miles between the main and secondary targets. And in between, filling out to a triangle, was the forest. Spencer's hesitation was only momentary before he picked up the phone and called the armorer sergeant.

"Twenty ships, Sergeant. Maximum gas and ammunition load. And two 500 pounders to each ship."

**T**HE next morning Dane Spencer was up before the dawn, and his own name headed the flight schedule. His last mission, and they could break him if they wished.

Nineteen pilots faced him in the briefing room. Spencer advanced to the wall map and pointed with his ruler.

"Our main objective, gentlemen. Lieutenant Bricker will lead his flight across the target. The rest of us will fly cover." He turned to the room. "One run, you understand, Bricker? Then keep going." He pointed with the ruler. "To here, the radio station. Shoot it up good! You have five minutes to do the job. Meanwhile, we'll be strafing the hangars and barracks at the air base. Then we rendezvous at . . ."

The dawn lifted its curtain and exposed the day. To experience it once again and for the last time, Spencer thought. He led them along the narrow sweep of the Adriatic and watched Bricker's element of ten settle off his right wing. Timing was essential, and he hoped Bricker understood. Bricker had to understand!

The morning sun lighted the white crags of the Alps with beacon fires as they crossed the coast. Flak bursts fingered across the sky, sought them out. Spencer increased his throttles and wheeled the Lightning in a dance. The flak mounted in intensity, then died like the last splatter of rain. Spencer dumped the stick and ran down to 5000. The air base, he knew, was across the next rise. He thumbed his mike button.

"Deck level, Bricker, and I want that landing strip ruined so a fly can't set down."

The rest of the escort strung out behind Spencer in a thin line, circling the base as Bricker led his ten downstairs. Spencer looked down. Two hangars. A half dozen barracks buildings. A row of tents. A shop area and the runway itself with its sand-bagged revetments for the fighters. He counted only a dozen aircraft, 190's, by the looks of them, spaced around the shop area. That meant their main strength was on a mission.

Or were they high overhead to protect the ammunition dump? Or was there an ammunition dump?

Spencer shivered in the enclosure of his cockpit. A flash of silver in the green stretch of a forest. Not much to go on. And yet— He remembered a lesson on camouflage, learned long ago in the States.

" . . . and blend your camouflage with the natural terrain. Keep covered any slick surface that might throw a reflection . . ."

Spencer took a quick look across the sky and looked down as Bricker unloaded his bombs on the head of the runway. Fire, smoke and earth leaped up as the rest followed and smeared the landing strip. The men knew their jobs, and there was your war. Knowing your job and doing it. Spencer took a ragged breath and pointed his props for the hangars as Bricker and his ten raced across the horizon.

Tracers were golden daggers as they found the hangar's roof, leaving behind a lace work of smoke that spread and swirled and revealed the tiny flames beneath. Spencer allowed the run to take him across the shop area. A flexible machine gun down there stung the Lightning's wings before Spencer banked out of range.

He turned carefully dropping the nose, finding the sand-bagged hollow in his sights. He squeezed a burst, watching his fire gather dust puffs that moved in a startling clear line toward his objective. Instinct told him when the target was his, and he fed three .20 mm shells down there that killed the machine gunners and left a shambles.

The parked 190's were next, the barracks, and the panic driven soldiers who ran with the pride of the Luftwaffe for-

gotten. A last run on the tower, and then the job was finished. Spencer eased back on the wheel and called his pilots to formation.

Ten minutes were gone. Allow that for Bricker to reach the radio station, five more to destroy it. Spencer led a wide course around Bassano. Give Bricker another five minutes to reach the rendezvous. Spencer eased back on the throttles and Bassano huddled off his right wing.

There was a tight, unwanted pressure in the pit of his stomach. Major Dunn would not hesitate to throw the book at him when he found out about this day's work. Somehow that didn't seem to matter, and he traced back his feelings and found in them an anticipation that bordered on the unknown.

He'd had the same feeling, he remembered, the first time out on mission. The temptation to search what lay beyond. He had never considered himself a dealer in death. It had been a wanted duty, a task to accomplish, a chance to strike the enemy at his strongest spot.

SO it was now. The enemy used considerable ammunition to defend their Gothic Line. And the Brenner Pass was the logical route. Intelligence knew it and confirmed it. And yet they had wasted precious bomb loads and gained nothing.

Now was the showdown. If the enemy was found out, there would be a reckoning. Ten Lightnings with bombs snug beneath their wings, ready for the battle. And Bricker and his men to fly cover, to help in the strafing—if strafing was necessary.

The River Brenta curved like a living snake in the distance, and Spencer consulted his wrist watch. They should hit it right on the nose. And with the proper amount of luck, they would make it.

"Unidentified aircraft at twelve o'clock high, coming out of the sun."

Spencer's breath caught in the tight chamber of his throat. What better confirmation than to know they were being watched? As they had been watched on the previous attack.

"Watch them, but don't pull from formation unless they attack."

It was hard to count them in the yellow haze up there. The sun made glinting darts through the convex curve

of the canopy, and Spencer was aware of its warmth. He was sure he had counted twenty of the bandits, circling high, above 20,000, most likely, waiting to pounce at the opportune moment.

The river flowed below them now. The tracks glistened beneath the sun. Off to the left lay the blackened hulks of the box cars they had bombed two days ago. And the forest rose in the distance.

"Those bandits are circling lower," a pilot said. "I think they're getting ready to attack."

Where was Bricker? In trouble? Had they walked into a trap?

Cut in two like they were, Bricker might well be under attack, with no hope of fighting back for the rendezvous. But there was no time to think about it now. There was a job to do, and Spencer mouthed orders in his throat mike and led the Lightnings downstairs.

The strip of forest tilted in crazy angle as he made the turn and lined up its center. It was purely guess work. It was hit and run and see what happens. He sent a preliminary burst through the heavy foliage and watched the tracer suck down and disappear. His hand lay heavy on the bomb toggle release. He was ready to trip it when the incredible happened.

A wide swath opened in the forest's center and revealed a line of light flak and machine guns. It was as if invisible wires had drawn the branches back and the puppets below were ready to go into their act.

In the split passage of time Spencer was aware of soldiers pulling branches from guns, a line of camouflaged humps that might be trucks, ribbon-like trenches that contained the unmistakable shapes of boxes. His hand slapped the bomb release.

A tower of earth and broken branches flew up as if thrown from a huge shovel. Spencer felt the twin booms shudder beneath the impact, even as he thumbed his mike:

"Make every bomb count," he shouted. "If you're not sure, try another run."

Try another run! And a curtain of steel pouring from below, and the 190's attacking from above. Spencer dipped his wing straight down in turning. Stay above the strip of forest. It was their only chance. Make the attacking planes brave their own ground fire. But get

that ammunition. Hose the blazing tracers and cannon shells and ruin the enemy's dump. Not easy. The ammunition was scattered.

He tipped the nose of the Lightning, disregarding the ground fire and the tracers that burned from above. The Allison's shrieked and clamored and Spencer's eyes were tight slits as his tracers and cannon shells streaked in yellow and red lines to rip into the ammunition trenches. He saw the explosions that followed, the length of the trench a molten river of flames and hazy smoke.

**T**HEY were flying it wing tip to wing tip, and some of them had blown the trucks. He turned on another run for a flak battery, and watched his steel wipe the gun crew as if a sudden, hot blast of air had caught them and flung them in writhing agony in a furnace of scalding fire.

The Lightning bucked through the inferno and he saw that they had lost two so far. And the forest down there was no longer a green haven. It was a roaring stretch of death, the trees bare and pointing grotesque fingers that shivered beneath the blistering fire.

All but one of the gun emplacements had been knocked out, and Spencer twisted the wheel and ruddered right, aware that half the Lightnings had gone up to offer combat to the 190's. The enemy planes hovered like vultures, he saw. He watched them and cursed and made his final run on the remaining machine gun nest. He swept it clean with the hammering fifties and gutted the wheel for his climb.

Two Focke-Wulfes were chasing a P-38, trying to run it into the ground, and Spencer flipped from the climb and angled a deflection shot toward the 190's. He watched his tracers rip fire from the cowling of the near one, the flames eating back under the prop wash and spread across the canopy.

"Here's your tracks, skipper! Below your right wing where my bombs landed off center."

Spencer looked down. At the tip of the forest, where it was closest to the main line, he saw twin bomb craters in the heavy brush. And the twisted railroad tracks pointing upward.

"Hang on a little longer, boys. Here we come!"

Spencer swung around and saw the twin-boomed Lightnings swing out of the sky and pounce like terriers on the hovering enemy. Bricker and his gang! A tight happy smile drew Spencer's lips across his teeth. He pitched into the battle with renewed fury, using all the wisdom, the little tricks learned in a hundred sky battles.

Another 190 blew and disintegrated under the viciousness of his fire. And then his guns jammed for the last time and were silent. He looked around. The fight had carried them away from the forest. The terrain was dotted with burning aircraft, most of them Focke-Wulfes. The job was done, and now was the time to get out of there. He gave the orders.

"Make a break before we all run out of ammo. Let's go, gang!"

There were fifteen where twenty had started, but the retreat went unhampered. The enemy seemed eager enough to postpone the battle to a later date. Their home base was destroyed and they had another nest to find.

Spencer felt the weariness in his bones as he led the formation across the coast. At high noon he saw a plane streak toward them with the speed of a bullet and disappear toward the Alps. An F-5, a photo ship, he noted mechanically. Probably going over for pictures of the enemy base and the radio station. He smiled grimly.

"Target destroyed, Major Dunn."

Bricker explained his delayed absence at interrogation. "Bandits jumped us after we had destroyed the radio station and were turning for the rendezvous. We had to fight our way back—it took a little time."

"You saw the tracks?" a pilot asked Spencer.

Spencer nodded and stepped to the wall map. "Here," he told the interrogation officer, "the forest is some three or four miles from the main tracks. They had a single track, camouflaged by heavy brush and shrub, running that distance. Our reconnaissance plane made sure the train left Trent before heading for home with the information. After that the enemy ran the train into the forest, unloaded, and came back to rest on the siding, empty. Not a new trick, but one that has probably worked for a long time."



**I**n his tent, Spencer stripped off his flight clothes and sat wearily on the edge of the cot. So now it was finished. The past years were nothing now but memories, and memories served only for the aged. Only good when there was nothing left but a pipe and idle talk. A man couldn't stand that. Not when there was still work to be done.

He looked up at the headquarters' sergeant who had pushed through the tent flap.

"The major just came in, Captain. He wants you pronto."

"Right." Spencer rose and reached for his cap. Now trouble would break loose. Let it. To blazes with the major and his manner of fighting a war. He stepped through the tent flap.

Major Dunn still wore his dress blouse, and the golden leaves on his shoulders twinkled in the lazy sunlight that streamed through the window.

"I haven't as yet read the report on your mission, but I doubt if it is important as disobeying my orders. You remember them, Captain?"

"To remain in charge of the office."

"Correct." Major Dunn strode across the office and back. Tiny muscles jumped across his jawline. "Direct disobedience. You've been long enough in the Army to know—"

The ring of the field telephone cut across his words. "Major Dunn speaking. . . . Eh? . . . Yes, sir, thank you,

sir. . . . Daring? . . ." Dunn half turned and looked at Spencer while speaking. "No credit due me, sir. . . . No, I was absent from the base. Captain Spencer led the formation. It was his idea something might be going on down there. . . . Yes, sir."

Major Dunn carefully replaced the receiver and for a long moment looked down at his desk. When he looked up, a grin pulled at his lips. "The General from Wing. It seems the reconnaissance plane just returned and brought some startling information. Why didn't you tell me about it?"

"Would it have made any difference?"

The major frowned. "Listen, Spencer, they say a man is never too old to learn, and I'm just starting out. I made a mistake. I should have investigated your suspicions." He drummed the desk in thought. "About your request for another tour—my Operation's Officer is leaving for the States in a month. It means flying only one out of every four missions, but—" Dunn left the sentence unfinished.

Spencer grinned. "Say no more, Major. Throw in a short leave to Cairo, and I'm your man."

For a second the major grinned. "Your leave starts day after tomorrow." Then his face sobered. "Right now, Captain—orders just came in for tomorrow's mission. I'd like your advice on—"

COMING SOON

## YESTERDAY'S WINGS

A Trophy Race Story by ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN

This situation calls for



**WILDROOT  
CREAM  
OIL**

NON-ALLERGENIC  
Contains  
**LANOLIN**



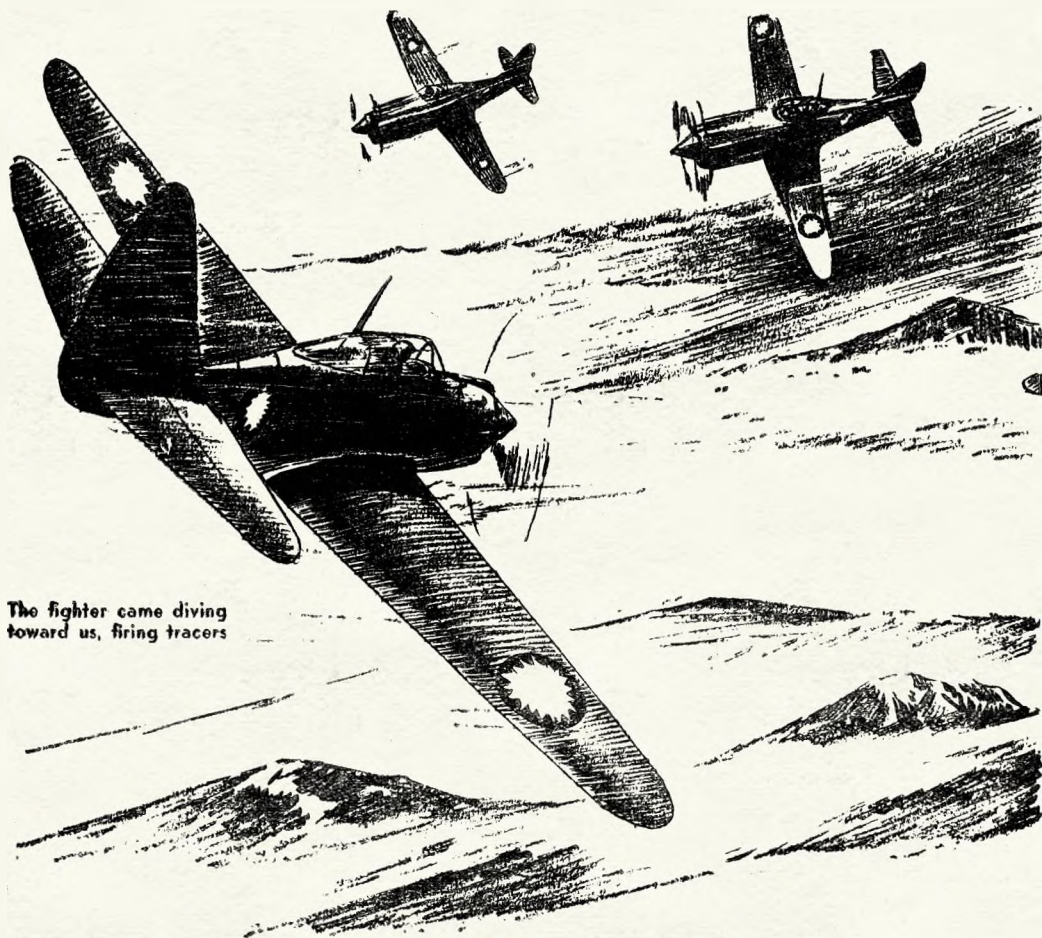

also in  
**TUBES**

**WILDROOT  
Hair Tonic**

**WILDROOT  
CREAM-OIL**

**LANOLIN**

EASY TO USE  
NO WASTE  
OR SPILLING  
HANDY FOR  
TRAVELING



The fighter came diving toward us, firing tracers

# DRAGON

## CHAPTER I

### *Two Wrecked Airplanes*

**I**N the middle coast provinces, the earth keeps spreading away as far as you can see. But no two rice paddies are shaped exactly alike. No two little hills are pointed in quite the same way. Air miles go by quickly. It seemed to me we had scarcely bobbed up off the runway in Shanghai, before we were circling our destination—a tiny, green

patch of terrain seventy miles away.

Cassidy sat ahead of me in the Vultee Sentinel. He banked hard left and pointed to the bigger airplane down there on the field. Its two engines and swept-back wings gave it the look of a preying mantis at rest. "That," said Rex Cassidy, "is Flagship Number One, Cassidy Airlines, Incorporated."

*When Rex Cassidy and Eddie Thorson team up to start a C-47 transport service in China, watch those gremlins and guns team up to beat them!*



# in the SKY

a novelet by **WALT SHELDON**

I grunted. "Don't count chickens, and so forth."

"Eddie," laughed Cassidy, "you may be the best airplane mechanic in China, but you're a born pessimist. If a bottle were half-full, you'd call it half-empty."

Rex Cassidy wanted that war weary C-47 down there more than anything in the world. It was his dream. He'd started planning the thing five years ago, thinking out the details during long hours over the tea fields of Assam, the

wrinkled peaks of Northern Burma and the great plateaus of Western China. Afterward, he'd come back to Shanghai and he'd worked hard—instructing, flying charters, testing, designing airports—and all of it had pointed to the moment when he'd own his own transport.

Cassidy pulled the throttle back and we dropped toward the little field. Below, someone ran from one of the shacks and set a manual wind T so that the crossbar pointed south. The name of the

place was Tien-Tao, and it was mainly a health resort. We hadn't discovered yet how the black marketeer named Papa Hung had come into possession of a Douglas transport, or why he had it here instead of Shanghai, where its sale would be much easier and quicker. The price—ten thousand dollars, gold—was a bargain. Even so, I suspected Rex Cassidy would be living on tea and noodles for a while after he paid it.

**N**OW, as we flew along our downwind leg, lining up the field in the opposite direction from which we'd landed, Cassidy was babbling happily about it all.

"No more hiring planes, Eddie! Think of that. Why, they're soaking me twenty-five dollars an hour for this little puddle jumper! But I guess that's the market. Business all over the place, just waiting to be picked up. Air transport's what China's been needing for centuries. The war proved that. I've got three jobs lined up already. Which reminds me, I'm going to need help. Got to find a co-pilot somewhere—and of course a flight engineer."

"Don't look at me," I said. "I've got a good job with China National. I only came along for the ride today."

"Well, think it over, anyway," said Cassidy.

He banked left and started a steep descent. I looked at his slender features in profile and marveled at how delicate and transparent they seemed when you couldn't see the wrinkles around his eyes. And it was then that the Waco biplane emerged from the sky and began to dive toward us—

I caught the image of it from the corner of my eye, which was a facility I'd developed as top turret gunner. My head swung about. I could see it, still little more than a speck, seeming to float just beyond the trailing edge of the wing. But the speck was growing—fast.

"Cassidy," I said, "some blasted fool is going to make a pass at us."

"Huh? What for?" Cassidy banked the plane sharply so that he could look up, out of the right hand window. He squinted, and said, "Is that guy crazy?"

"Either that," I frowned, "or he's trying to get into the field ahead of you."

The Waco was near enough now to make out yellow wings and a blue fuselage.

"Looks like one from Bright Cloud Field at Shanghai," said Cassidy. "Maybe he followed us."

I sighed. I didn't have to come along and look at Cassidy's bargain-counter airplane. I could have been in any hotel bar along the Bund, fingering a long, tall one. I could have been lazing on a teakwood deck far down the Whangpoo not really caring whether the fish bit, or not. But, no—Cassidy had to tell me I knew more about airplanes than the Wright Brothers, and I had to fall for it.

"Fasten your safety belt," said Cassidy.

I didn't like the way he said it. Too calm, too firm, with obvious extra effort to make it that way. He swung the ship easily into final approach, and about the only comfort I could find was that if you had to be on the spot in an airplane, Cassidy was about as good a man as you could have in the pilot's seat. He was not quite thirty years old, but he had been flying since the age of sixteen, and he could handle everything from an old Jenny to a four-engined C-54. He knew more about navigation than most navigators, more about engines than most mechanics, and more about instrument flying than most Link trainer instructors. During his leisure moments I had seen him actually read manufacturer's flight manuals for the sheer pleasure of it. I think, too, he dreamed of flying when he slept.

I took his advice and clipped the webbing across my middle. I had just finished that when the biplane screamed past us, sliding along the arc of a pursuit curve. Cassidy banked violently to the left to avoid it. The Sentinel's wing tips shuddered, and he jammed the throttle forward to keep us from stalling. "The blasted fool!" I said, watching the Waco.

**I**TS momentum hurled it toward the field, and I think its wheels brushed grass before it leveled and chandelled upward again. At the top of its floating climb, it flopped over neatly—and then it was roaring our way again.

"Relax, if you can," Cassidy said quietly. "I'm not jinking this time. He'll come as near as he can, but he won't dare ram us. I'm going ahead with the landing, as though he wasn't here."

"And I," I said, "am going to close my eyes."

The Waco flashed past again, and I did.

But I couldn't keep them closed. I was more curious than scared—which must have meant that I was plenty curious. I opened them again a few seconds later and saw that Cassidy had realized the ship on final approach, that he was easing the throttle once more and that the green square of the field was floating toward the arc of the propeller.

I stretched shoulders and neck to look back and locate the Waco, but I couldn't see it. Cassidy kept his eyes on the field, and didn't budge. His calm was remarkable. Every muscle he had was relaxed, except those in his fingertips, and the movements of these were unhurried and sure. The Sentinel settled. The engine whirr slid a few tones down the scale, and the edge of the field passed under the wings. Then there were those few hanging moments before the wheels touch, the moments that always seem much longer than they really are—

The Waco, like a ghost, pulled up alongside of us.

This time Cassidy did move. He waved his hand violently, waved for the other plane to get away. It had simply dropped into a landing approach of its own—side-slipped probably—and its wing tip was perhaps the thickness of a cigarette pack away from ours.

I got a good look at the pilot. His face was turned broadside toward us. It grinned at us from under the long visor of a gabardine sun cap. It looked as though it had been shaped from hard wood with an adze, and the rough edges left without sandpapering. Every feature was heavily blocked, except the nose, and this seemed to have been mashed on as an afterthought by a heavy palm. The jowls were bluish, and the grin put deep creases into them.

He answered Cassidy's gesture with a wave of his own—a pleasant, pass-the-time-of-the-day wave.

Prods worked on my memory. I'd seen the man—somewhere. Hanging around the airport, probably. I had the impression that he'd come in once or twice on a non-scheduled carrier from the Philippines.

And then it happened. I didn't see the wing tips touch, but I heard the first, soft bump and immediately after that a crashing, grinding noise. The air-

field started to rock, and then spin around us. The sky was mixed up in it somewhere, too.

I heard one more noise, louder than the others. I remember reaching for the switch and finding Cassidy's hand already there ahead of mine.

The next thing I knew, Cassidy was pushing at my shoulder and saying, "Don't sit there staring. Unfasten your belt and get out of this thing."

I was at an angle. A cockeyed angle. So was the airplane. Its nose was in the grass, its tail high. Its right wing was crumpled. Either I'd passed out, or my memory was blocked completely.

I felt myself for injuries as I scrambled from the ship. There was a tender spot in the middle of my forehead, but there didn't seem to be much else. We stepped a little away from the plane and I started to look at it stupidly.

Cassidy tugged my arm. "Come on," he said, "we're going to meet that guy. Socially."

"What guy?"

Cassidy pointed across the field. The Waco sprawled ingloriously there, wings chewed, engine torn from the mount, and landing gear crumpled. A broad shouldered man in a sun cap was climbing from its cockpit.

Cassidy started to trot that way and I stumbled along in his wake. I realized vaguely that several people had come from the shacks bordering the field, and that they were moving toward us, too.

## CHAPTER II

### *The Devil's Partner*

THE two men met halfway between the two crumpled airplanes. They both stopped several yards apart. They both looked each other over carefully before speaking.

The man with the heavy features, incredibly, was still grinning. I saw now, at close range, that he had very black and very intense eyes, set deep under shaggy brows. He put his hands on his hips. His arms were thick with muscle and so tan that they made the silver wrist bracelet and the aluminum watch band glisten by contrast.

"Well, buddy," he said finally, in a

booming voice, "I guess that's a bad break for both of us. My name's Neil Thorson. You must be Cassidy."

"Mister—" Cassidy's voice was coated with about as many layers of rime ice as it would carry—"just where do you get your colossal gall?"

"Hey, now, wait a minute." Thorson put his palm up. "You don't have to get sore. It's just the breaks, that's all. Anyway, you come out ahead. You win."

"I—*what?*" Cassidy thrust his head forward.

"Sure," boomed Thorson. "I came in with just enough cash to buy that kite." He waved heavily in the direction of the parked C-47. "But cracking up this Waco'll break me."

"*What in the galloping gates of hell do you think smashing the Vultee does to me?*" asked Cassidy.

Thorson looked surprised. "That's right," he said. "You did rent the ship, just like me, didn't you? They told me back at Shanghai. That's why I got the Waco—to beat you in here." He shrugged. "Oh, well. Easy come, easy go."

Cassidy turned his slender face slowly, so that he faced me. He was white—dead white. His jaw was hanging in stupefied surprise. He spread his hands. "Did—did you ever hear anything like it?"

I shook my head. I knew that Cassidy had full intentions of sending a swift poke in the direction of the Waco pilot's jaw when he first went toward him, but now I could see that he was too flabbergasted to remember his plans in that respect. All he could do was turn and stare at the man.

And Neil Thorson found a battered pack of cigarettes in his breast pocket and offered them to Cassidy and me before helping himself.

Suddenly we were surrounded by jabbering Chinese—coolie field hands and one or two merchant types in long, blue gowns. Out of their midst came a fat man. He waddled directly toward us, smiling and clapping his chubby palms together. He was dressed in a gold brocaded Chinese mandarin gown that went all the way to his ankles, and over this he wore an incongruous checked sports coat. A little black cap with a red tassel perched squarely atop his head. His smile put at least a dozen folds in the blubber of his chin and cheeks.

"Gentah-men!" he said in a squeaky voice. "How lucky find you togezzah! Now are talking about turkeys, all of us!"

This was Papa Hung, China's cheerfulest black market operator. He was thought to be wealthier than any of the war lords he sometimes supplied with arms, and if there was a pie in China, Papa Hung's fat finger was in it somewhere. The airfield here at Tien-Tao was his, and so was the resort hotel with its entertainment that ran to gambling and sing-song girls. The current story was that he'd begun his career as a laundry boy in San Francisco.

CASSIDY turned toward him. "All right, Papa Hung," he said. "What goes on? How did this guy get in on the act?" He gestured at Thorson.

The Chinese shrugged heavily. "Papa Hung not promise aih-plane anybody. He sell faw best price, okay? Now—who make offah?"

Thorson moved his thumbs into his belt, threw back his blocked head and laughed uproariously.

"Why, you old swindler!" he told Papa Hung. His voice must have carried to every corner of the field. "You out-smarted yourself this time! Now that we've cracked up these hired planes, neither one of us has enough money to buy your fool crate!"

Cassidy frowned with quick mental calculation. "Listen, Papa Hung, I'll have about half enough. If you want to take my note for—"

A fat hand stopped him. "Oh, no. All cash faw Papa Hung," said he. He smoothed the bulging front of his gown with his finger-tips, then looked up suddenly. "Hey—Papa Hung got idea. Maybe all is okay. Maybe make evvah-body happy."

Thorson snorted. "Any ideas you get, chubby, are strictly to make Papa Hung happy."

"Oh-ho!" laughed Papa Hung, quite unoffended. He waved his fat arm toward the parked C-47. "Papa Hung got aihplane. No good to him. You boys one-two both maybe got ten-thousan' dollah. You buy aihplane togezzah—evvah-body happy!"

"*What?*" said Cassidy. "Go partners on something with—" he looked at Thorson, the way you might look at a scorpion in your shoe—"with *him?*"

"Don't worry," Thorson growled back at him. "I wouldn't hitch up with any sour-puss sorehead."

I stared at the big, impossible character and supposed that by now he had honestly convinced himself that what had happened was partly Cassidy's fault. He was almost like a big dog you can't quite hold responsible even when he smashes all the crockery. About the only thing good for him I could possibly say was that he had certainly put that Waco through some skilful, skin-of-the-teeth maneuvers.

Papa Hung studied both men shrewdly for a moment. Then he shrugged. "Okay. Papa Hung jus' try make evvah-body happy."

I scratched my chin, then coughed for attention. Both Cassidy and Thorson looked at me.

"You know," I said, "whoever owned that Douglas would get their returns pretty quick, wouldn't they? I mean, with all these transport contracts to be had—"

"It'd pay for itself in two months," Cassidy said. "But forget it, will you? I don't even want to talk about it."

"Well, look. I just sort of had an idea." I looked at Thorson's puzzled scowl, and back at Cassidy's cold frown again. "Suppose you bought this thing, and in a few months, when you've each made about five thousand—well, one of you could just buy the other out."

Thorson said. "Yeah—but who buys who out?"

"That," I said, "can be decided by a game I invented, played with a simple coin. It's called heads or tails."

"Aaa, I wouldn't take an option on a lot in Heaven with that guy," growled Thorson, nodding at Cassidy.

"Me, neither," Cassidy said.

But I noticed that Papa Hung was already rubbing his fat hands and smiling.

**I** CAN explain with absolute logic why Rex Cassidy and Neil Thorson finally bought an airplane together and formed Dragon Airlines. I can give all kinds of reasons and even say I knew it would happen all the time. But to this day, I'm not sure what made me do what I did. Maybe it was that tender spot on my forehead from the crash. Anyway, before the afternoon had gone, I had signed up with Dragon Airlines, for a

share, as crew chief.

Well, there's nothing like hard work to keep an armed truce in effect. And getting that C-47 off the ground was certainly that. The three of us inspected her carefully before closing the deal, and the consensus was that she was a good buy. I spent the entire day, and part of the next further checking the airplane, found probable trouble in the hydraulic blower control, and repaired it.

Cassidy and Thorson went all over it, too, grinning and feeling it with their hands, like boys with a new pet. They were very polite to each other, only just a little chilly in their politeness.

The only rough spot in their relations came about an hour before take-off, when Cassidy found that there was no check list in the cockpit. While Thorson sniffed and snorted, Cassidy insisted on walking all the way back to Papa Hung's office and typing one out.

"Check lists, for Pete's sake," said Thorson. "Cadet stuff."

I worried a little, and with more sense I would have worried a lot. I would have seen that that pilot's compartment was going to be the next thing to a gunpowder magazine.

So Dragon Airlines Flight One poked her nose into the sky and flew. She flew well. We shook her down on the trip to Shanghai, finding out such things as the fact that she was slightly nose heavy during single-engine operation and needed almost four degrees of rudder trim. The four of us—Cassidy, Thorson, myself, and the airplane—were well acquainted by the time we let down at the airport in Shanghai.

We called her Beulah. Beulah, the gas-eating dragon. That bit of whimsey was Thorson's contribution.

But the big-shouldered, rough-featured young bull of a pilot turned out to be more of an asset than we'd expected. He was a gregarious fellow. He had back-slapping friends from the Gulf of Tonkin to Manchuria, and his fast, smooth tongue made it easy for us to get credit on things like fuel, parts and hangar rent. He was also tireless. He worked all night long on the bug in the hydraulic system, and then insisted on testing it himself all the next day. The only difficulty was that he gave us near heart failure side-slipping in for a landing instead of making a normal approach after the test hop. But in all

fairness, I must say I'd never seen a C-47 side-slipped so skilfully.

Cassidy privately remarked to me that he guessed everything had its use, even a loud mouth and a dangerously playful disposition. He'd done a little asking around about Thorson and had learned that the lad had more clusters to his Air Medal and D.F.C. than Cassidy had wrinkles around his eyes. He'd stayed in the Pacific Theater two years, refusing rotation.

Dragon Airline's first commission came several days later. . . .

### CHAPTER III

#### *Gun Smugglers*

**OUR** first job was hauling a load of machinery to the site of the Yangtze dam at Ichang. Cassidy spent practically the whole morning positioning the cargo in the fuselage and checking it with his weight and balance slide rule, and Thorson paced up and down, growling and muttering.

"Come on. Let's get going," he'd say every once in a while.

Cassidy would be sarcastically patient. "Thorson, you can use up twice as much fuel if it isn't balanced right. Besides, it makes it hard to handle in an emergency."

I think it was Thorson's fault that the automatic pilot went out on that first trip shortly after take-off. I remember frowning because he operated the iron flyer in too turbulent air with the ship out of trim. Anyway, when it did go out, he took over without complaint and kept her going manually through a couple of hours of midday turbulence and a high squall line, to boot. When we landed, he didn't even stretch himself and yawn.

On the return run, that squall line had built itself into a regular cold front—a boiling, black mass of weather that swept in a long north and south curve right across the rice belly of China. It was Thorson who took the yoke and found between two towering thunderheads a hole that was just about the size of our wingspread.

Even Cassidy had to grunt afterwards, and say, "Nice going."

Altogether, with Cassidy's careful planning and Thorson's quick strength in the emergencies, that first trip was a successful and a profitable one.

But there was no time to philosophize about that after we returned. The ship had to be carefully checked and readied in a hurry for our next flight. We had them lined up for two weeks, now. Our load mile rate was considerably below that of the regular carriers, and our overhead in bribes and squeeze to Chinese officials was less, too. Without undue expense it seemed now that Cassidy and Thorson might amortize the cost of the airplane even sooner than they had planned.

We got some pretty strange commissions. We flew a load of books and laboratory equipment from the Associated Western Universities in Chengtu, where they'd moved during the war. On the way out we hauled medical supplies to be distributed to a flock of border missions. The government hired us for an emergency troop transport, and we didn't think we'd get paid for that one, but something must have slipped, because our check came a week later.

Papa Hung even showed up in Shanghai one day and commissioned us to fly sixteen sing-song girls to a war lord in a far western province.

And more and more, I was struck with the way Cassidy and Thorson flew together. They would alternate as pilot and co-pilot in the air, but at other times each kind of naturally fell into the duties he liked best. If it called for careful planning and double checks, it was Cassidy's baby. Thorson could handle the spur of the moment stuff and the more daring schemes.

In spite of their cold politeness toward each other, they were a hot combination. They flew in a way that made the profits mount.

At the end of six weeks we found ourselves with a day off. We spent it puttering about the hangar. I sat at the drawing board designing an engine rack, Cassidy dumped himself at the desk and began pouring over the books and Thorson dropped into a wicker armchair and just relaxed.

Cassidy studied a slip of paper on which he'd been scribbling some figures. He looked up. "Two more good jobs'll do it."

"Do what?" asked Thorson. He



knocked the top from a bottle of beer by smacking it against the side of the hangar.

"Give each of us enough to buy the other out."

"Oh," said Thorson. He shifted his bulk in the chair. "Well, it can't come too soon for me."

Cassidy's eyes took on frost. "You don't think I've enjoyed flying with a hot rock barnstormer, do you?"

"Or me with an old woman," shrugged Thorson.

CASSIDY got up and pushed his chair back all in one motion. I knew it had to happen sooner or later. They'd just been too busy up until now to get around to it—but it was clear that since the first, both men had been itching for a knuckle showdown. Not that it would prove anything. It would just make them feel better. Be an interesting contest, too—Cassidy's lean science against Thorson's brawn.

"Thorson," Cassidy said, "I've taken just about enough of your guff."

I dropped the broom and hopped in between. Me, five foot six in stockings, if they're thick ones.

"Listen, you two boneheads," I said, "when just one of you is flying Beulah, I don't care how you scrap. But while you're co-piloting, and while I have to ride with you, I don't want any part of it. Now sit down and shut up, both of you!"

Thorson looked down at me from his powerful height. "All right, Eddie," he said finally, "don't blow your top."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," frowned Cassidy. He sat down and reached for a bottle of beer, himself.

There was a movement at the open hangar door, and we all turned our heads. Papa Hung was standing there, fat hands on his gold brocaded middle, grin all over his blown-up face.

"*Hao p'hao!*" chortled Papa Hung.

"Hubba hubba, yourself," boomed Thorson, getting up. "Come on in. Have a bottle o' beer."

Papa Hung came forward and waved the beer away. "Gentlemen," he announced, "Papa Hung has job. You kids make some money, okay?"

"Always a pleasure," said Thorson, making a mock bow. His heavy brows went up in expectation. "More sing-song girls?"

"Oh, no." Papa Hung waved his fingers in a casual gesture. A little too casual for my money. Especially since I could see his eyes glittering way in the folds of his cheeks. He patted his tummy again and burped. "You fly some boxes to General Lo in Yunning, okay?"

"General Lo?" Cassidy straightened in his chair, and leaned forward.

And I knew why. The General was something of a controversial character. He was absolute monarch of a large region in far western China and during the war he had absolutely defied the government by refusing to send any of his own troops to the battlefronts. He claimed he needed them in Yunning to combat banditry. Some said that was true, some said otherwise. At any rate, it wasn't hard to guess what kind of boxes might be flown to General Lo. Cassidy asked the question just the same.

"What kind of boxes, Papa Hung?"

"Oh-ho, you don't worry," Papa Hung said. He picked at his front teeth with his long, little fingernail. "We pay one-two-three times price charge, okay?"

"Arms and ammunition, eh, Papa Hung?" Cassidy persisted quietly.

Papa Hung shrugged.

"Don't you know that if we flew one twenty-two cartridge out to Yunning, we'd have the secret police on our tails?" said Cassidy.

"You don't make bad bet with Papa Hung," said the fat broker. "Also, he go 'long with you. Make sure get paid by General Lo."

"Nothing doing," Cassidy said. "Dragon Airlines is keeping its nose clean."

THORSON swiveled his big shoulders around and turned toward Cassidy. "Now, wait a minute," he said. "If Papa Hung's going along with us, he must figure it's pretty safe. Besides, we don't actually know that he's smuggling arms out to Yunning. We don't have to snoop into all those boxes when they load 'em. They could be bouquets of violets for all we know."

"Look—" Cassidy tapped the desk top with his forefinger. "It's too much of a chance to take. Especially with everything going so well."

"Maybe," said Thorson. "But did you figure the mileage between here and Yunning? At triple rates?"

Cassidy brought his head up. He looked blank for a small part of a second, and then he frowned heavily. "That's a lot of money."

"Yeah," Thorson nodded. "Just about enough to finish paying for the plane. Enough to settle this business once and for all."

Cassidy shook his head stubbornly.

Thorson came forward. He leaned, putting his palms on the desk. "Don't be a dodo, Cassidy. What do you care if Lo gets a few slingshots? From what I hear, he really needs 'em out there. The government won't send any arms into Yunning, so he *has* to smuggle 'em in. If we can help him keep down those bandits, we'll actually be saving lives by taking this trip."

"Well, that's kind of stretching it," said Cassidy. But his face was all frown, and temptation was riding side-saddle on that frown.

"Think, man, think!" Thorson pounded the desk with his big fist. "One little flight across China—dump the stuff—get paid in gold by the General, and then we flip that coin. *On the return trip one of us will be a paid passenger.*"

"Hm, well—" said Cassidy.

Papa Hung lifted his arm clumsily and jerked it so that the sports coat and the sleeve of the brocaded gown slid back from his wrist. He looked at the diamond-studded wristwatch this revealed.

"Please making up mind, okay? Papa Hung busy man." He looked directly at Cassidy. "What is answer?"

Cassidy stared back for just a second. Finally he grunted, "Okay. Let's go." He got up from the chair.

Plans were immediately made for the trip.

There wasn't any ceremony or anything, but all of us felt the drama of the moment when Beulah, the gas-eating dragon, stood at the end of the runway, ready for her last partnership run. Loading her had been a quick, simple job—done in full daylight from trucks that arrived at the airfield at separate times.

Papa Hung had explained that to load at night would only have created suspicion. During the operation he wandered about the ramp and administration building to see if he could spot any secret police and on that score he seemed a little uneasy, but satisfied enough to

go ahead with the trip. As for me, I shuddered every time I thought about it.

Here was Beulah, then, turned at a forty-five degree angle to the runway, her insides bulging with canvas covered boxes and packages. The arms, apparently, had been broken down into the smallest possible parcels so that they might pass for ordinary freight.

Thorson was in the left hand seat, today. While he waited for tower clearance, he made his final check-off. I saw him touch the mixture and propeller pitch controls.

"What's the squeeze-juice say?" he called over to Cassidy then.

"Hydraulic system seven-fifty," said Cassidy, in a very formal tone. He didn't like cute names on operational checks.

"Tanks?"

"Right and left main," Cassidy checked.

Thorson shoved the booster in. "Low blower."

"Check."

"Fix the kiddy-car," said Thorson.

"Landing gear control neutral," Cassidy answered coldly, turning in his seat to check the lever. "Ditto wing flaps."

"Ram that icy breath," said Thorson.

"Carburetor air temperature control—full cold," answered Cassidy stiffly.

And that was the way it went, right on through the trim tabs and cowl flaps and tail wheel lock. A game to Thorson, a business to Cassidy.

And to me, it was something akin to diving in after wild crocodiles armed with a butter knife.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Under Fire*

**W**E swiveled to the runway. Thorson rammed the throttles forward, and Beulah was on her own. She leaped hungrily at the wild, blue yonder.

"What's the course?" Thorson asked after we'd climbed.

Only the three of us were forward. Papa Hung was relaxing back with the cargo. Cassidy had unfolded an aeronautical chart in his lap, and he held an E-6-B computer in his hand. He'd been adding the wind drift to his other calculations.

He gave Thorson the heading, then added, "We can take a couple of fixes with the loop from time to time."

Thorson snorted.

"Look, a double check once in a while doesn't hurt," said Cassidy. "Even on a good day like this. Besides—look at those broken clouds. This weather won't hold all the way to Yunning. There's a front forming now over Central China."

"Fronts don't bother me," said Thorson. "I just use 'em for check points. Cassidy, if I spent all the time that you do worrying about what's going to happen, I wouldn't have any time left for enjoying what finally does happen."

This time Cassidy snorted. "If I hadn't been worrying about this airline for the past six weeks, we wouldn't even be here today. I'd hate to see you go it alone, brother. You've got no idea how many details there are—mileage reports, profit and loss, depreciation—"

"Fat lot of good they are without a guy to do the heavy work," Thorson boomed.

He adjusted the knobs, then, and threw the auto pilot in. We flew in comparative silence for a couple of hundred miles. Both pilots smoked, nibbled on candy bars and gazed at the scenery. Once in a while one or the other would get up, stretch, and go back to shoot the breeze with Papa Hung. They started being quietly polite to each other again.

I didn't like this silence, this relative calm. It made everything too easy, somehow—and I'd learned a long time ago to be suspicious of things that go too easy.

I saw our visitors first. I was on the jump seat up front, staring idly at the line of thunderheads forming some miles ahead of us. They looked like cardboard stage cut-outs, standing against the horizon, and I was seeing things in the shapes they took. One looked exactly like something gorgeous modeling a bathing suit. It's one of the reasons I've always been fond of clouds.

I saw three little swift-moving dots against the cloud backdrop.

"Eleven o'clock, high," I said—surprised at the matter-of-factness of my voice. I touched Cassidy's shoulder.

Both pilots straightened in their seats and looked where I pointed. Thorson killed the auto-pilot and put his hands on the wheel. Cassidy unhooked the

headsets and clamped them over his ears, then began to crank the coffee grinder to see if he could pick up a signal.

"They look like fighters," said Thorson, squinting.

I got up and fetched the binoculars from the radio compartment. It took me a moment to focus, and to get used to controlling the image in the eye pieces. I finally centered the three airplanes. They were stub-nosed and slim winged. "They are fighters," I said, finally. "P-42's."

"Government planes, probably," said Cassidy. A number of the type had been shipped to China before the war.

"You don't think there's been a leak about our cargo, do you?" asked Thorson. His heavy face looked heavier when he frowned.

Cassidy shrugged irritably. "Don't know." He brought his fingertips to his headset suddenly. "Wait a minute, I've got a strong signal."

Thorson waited for as long as he could stand it, which was about five seconds. Then he said, "What is it? What are they saying?"

"I don't know. It's in Chinese," answered Cassidy.

"Well, don't you speak it?"

"Not that well. If you'll shut up, I might be able to catch a few words."

THE little fighters came nearer. The specks grew wings, and it was clear, now, that they were headed directly toward us. Thorson took the binoculars and squinted at them.

"I don't like it," he said. "I don't like it one little bit. That's for sure."

"Might be just a routine patrol," I suggested.

He grunted. "They don't waste gas and pilots on routine patrols."

Cassidy said to me, "Go back, Eddie, and have fat boy grab a bucket seat and fasten his safety belt."

"Check," I said. I made the check sign with thumb and forefinger.

I pushed into the waist, then, and had Papa Hung belted down before he could even ask questions about it. When I came back forward Cassidy was still holding the earphones.

"They're talking about us," he said. "Mei-kuo fichi. They said it a couple of times. I'd better try to raise 'em." He reached for the mike.

"Don't do that," said Thorson.

"Why not?"

"Play dumb. If they come over here and start messing around, play dumb."

"And have them shoot us down? Look, Thorson, you're not going to get a Purple Heart for it this time."

Thorson pointed to the cloud bank ahead. "We just might be able to make that bowl of soup over there, and we might lose 'em in it. Especially if we go in about icing level. They wouldn't have boots on their wings."

"Are you crazy?" asked Cassidy. His blue eyes were blinking rapidly. "Go into a front deliberately at icing level?"

"I've done it a hundred times," said Thorson. "Sure, it's a little rough. But you're a transport pilot, aren't you? Or are you a zero-to-ninety Sunday afternoon hedge hopper?"

"Well, it *might* work," admitted Cassidy. Flux lines went across his forehead. "On the other hand—"

"Relax," Thorson said. "Everybody's got to take a chance once in a while."

The fighters were near enough to waggle their wings at us now. They flew in a fairly sloppy formation, a loose V, and kept a position about two thousand feet above us. On one of them we thought we could make out the pale blue circle and the white-pointed sun insigne of the Chinese Air Force.

Cassidy watched their wings rock back and forth, then looked at Thorson. Thorson shook his head.

"Just ignore 'em. Keep 'em puzzled."

"I don't like it," said Cassidy softly. "I don't like it at all."

But I could see by the drawing-in of his slender cheeks that he was still weighing all this trouble against the freedom at the end of the line. Both men were sure they'd win the final toss. They were like the lads in the late unpleasantness who were sure the flak was meant for everybody else but them.

The Chinese fighters made a wide circle, and banked at right angles to our course, then the flight leader waggled his wings again. Thorson sat silently, his face held tightly together so that all the folds in it became horizontal. He sat straight and taut in the seat, and held the wheel with just the tips of his fingers.

"I think they're going to attack," said Cassidy, holding the earphones again. He was pale.

"They'll give us a warning shot, first," said Thorson.

The fighters re-grouped about two or three miles ahead of us, and at a higher altitude. The lead ship banked hard, brought his wing and tail around, and then came diving toward us. He looked incredibly fast. Added to gravity and the pull of his own engine, there was the speed of our own ship coming toward him. He seemed a huge missile hurled at us.

I felt a little numb, but not quite numb enough to forget the knots into which my stomach appeared to be tying itself. "I don't know whether to cuss or pray," I muttered.

"Try both," said Cassidy.

**M**AGICALLY, the smoke of the tracers appeared in front of the P-42's wings. The lines looked as though they had been drawn with light ink on the blue sky in the blink of an eye. They gave the illusion of hanging there for a moment before they moved. We saw the line of them cut across our course, some hundreds of yards beyond the nose of the Douglas.

"That's it," said Thorson. "The shot across the bows."

The P-42 dropped past us, and came out of his dive below us. Thorson banked the transport hard, and started to drop toward the terrain.

"What are you doing?" asked Cassidy. He didn't entirely control his voice.

"They'll think we're landing. That's what they want. But I'm gonna try and make that cloud bank."

I measured the distance to the cloud bank, the distance to the ground, and the relative speeds and positions of the three patrol planes. Then I looked back at the clouds again.

They extended northwest and southwest as far as the eye could see. They were just massed, formless stuff where they hugged the earth, but towering thunderheads grew from the mass and blossomed their spread tops all over the sky. Plenty of weather in stuff like that. Our original plan had been to enter the frontal surface at right angles, and at perhaps fifteen thousand feet—wherever we could find a hole between the taller clouds. That would keep us above the overcast on the other side, according to the data we'd studied before taking off.

But now the only thing to do was to go right into it. The thickest, the worst.

Scud clouds were already whirling past our wings by the time Thorson leveled off, several hundred feet above the terrain. The fighters had disappeared momentarily, and we were all twisting our heads about, trying to spot them again.

There was movement beyond the left wing tip. We saw one of the P-42's come by with throttle back and flaps down, adjusting to our slower speed. The face of the pilot was visible under the canopy. We could see how his open oxygen mask dangled from his chin and how his goggles were shoved up on his forehead. We could see that he was pointing down—repeating the gesture.

Thorson grinned and waved to him cheerfully.

The fighter's flaps crawled back into their nests, and he pulled away. He circled hard to the left, climbing at the same time. The clouds were getting thicker. Every once in a while we'd barge into one, and our propellers would chew it to shreds, and send it hurling back across the wings.

Cassidy was leaning far forward in his seat, but had his head and shoulders turned to the right so that he could look upward out of his window.

"Here they come," he said suddenly.

Thorson yanked the airplane violently to the right, then pulled it up hard, then leveled, then banked to the left again. He dove and climbed. He wagged the wings. He flew a straight course for a second or two, then began to jink violently once more.

I rose from the jump seat and steadied myself on the racks. I could feel the varying pressures of the ship's movements through the floor, in the balls of my feet.

*Tack, tack, tack, tack, tack!*

I heard that noise even above the thrum of the engines, and I knew that bullets were chewing the fuselage somewhere behind us. Phantom shapes whirled past, slightly above. Engines roared, making quick crescendoes—*vrmm! vrrrm! vrrrm!*—as they passed.

"Chinese can't shoot worth a holler," muttered Thorson.

"That was as good as I want to see," I told him.

I was breathless, panting, and my

chest was in a vise. My legs, from the knees down, felt asleep. They prickled.

I sensed a movement behind me, turned, and saw Papa Hung's immense bulk in the doorway to the waist. His face looked like a green balloon.

"What is happen? What is happen?" he chattered.

Thorson turned and saw him. "Get the devil back there!" he roared.

I think the fuselage trembled with the sound of that roar. Papa Hung nodded hastily, frightenedly, and slammed the compartment door again, disappearing.

**WE** found ourselves suddenly in a cloud large enough to surround us completely. The light dimmed. Outside, it was a milky gray, and in the cockpit it was gloomy. For just a moment the luminous paint on the instruments glowed. The airplane bumped up and down as though it rode an exercise horse. We broke out of the cloud again, and the brightness was almost painful. There was another cloud ahead of us, larger and more ragged. And, beyond that, all the clouds began to group together until they became a dark, solid mass.

*Tack, tack, tack, tack, tack!*

They'd caught us again, coming out of the cloud. Caught us on the fly. I saw holes dance across the wing. I was thrown violently against the rack as Thorson jinked the plane again.

We were engulfed by the next cloud. Handfuls of rain were being thrown at the windshield and the wipers began to push them away. I heard a soft drumming on the fuselage, and then I knew from the shape of the windshield spatters that some of those drops were hailstones.

Cassidy reached forward and gave the windshield de-icer handle a quick jerk. Thorson turned around and brought up the rheostat on the prop de-icer.

Outside, the milky gray turned to an opaque yellow for a moment, and I thought we'd break into the clear once more. But an instant later it thickened, and it was dark again.

The rain and hail on the fuselage was noisy enough now so that it made a steady drumming in spite of the green, sound absorbent padding on the bulkheads. We had to shout slightly to be heard. Cassidy leaned toward his husky partner.

"You'll do better higher," he said. "Rougher air, but less ice. Better on the carburetor. There'll be a temperature inversion, according to the way it looked before we left."

"Okay, professor," said Thorson, grinning a little. He was happy to use Cassidy's forethought on occasion, but he still considered it a waste of time, that grin seemed to say. He called for the low blower.

Beulah climbed through the thick, gray stuff, and then the real turbulence began. The airplane would bump and shudder, and the shock would seem to run all the way from the nose to the tail. The wings would tremble and flap with each bump. You can tell yourself that that is a good thing, that wings must do that to absorb shock—but your stomach never quite gets used to the idea.

The first lightning flashed. We seemed to be right in the middle of an explosion, and the plane rocked and bucked, and the sound of the hailstones began to get curiously like the sound of the machine-gun bullets, but a little more irregular in tempo.

We shot up suddenly, like an elevator. Then we dropped the same way. I looked at the altimeter to see how many feet—but the needle wasn't holding still enough to read.

Now there was snow outside. We were deep in the guts of the thundercloud.

"Let's have the boots!" called Thorson.

I looked past his shoulders at the leading edges of the wings and saw the rime ice beginning to form. I could see from the way that he slapped the yoke around that the controls were getting sloppy. The big rubber leading edges of the wings breathed in and out like giant eels, and the rime ice broke in places and flew back into the slipstream.

We bounced again. The plane went up and down, and my stomach followed. Then a great big invisible hand grabbed us by the right wing and flipped us over on our back.

"Hang on, hang on, hang on!" Thorson was calling.

He was trying to right her again without putting her into a spin. Beulah whirled, heavily, yet swiftly, and I felt myself bounced back and forth between the two racks, the floor and the roof. The engine noise went up and down as

though murmuring a protest. We hit another bump, we shuddered with it, and, suddenly, the airplane was right side up again.

I rose from the floor. My palms felt as though I'd just passed them across a wet cake of ice. Thorson was pale. Cassidy looked green.

The lightning flashed once more and then—curiously, unbelievably—we were suddenly in the clear, with nothing but blue sky all around us, and a woolysheep overcast below! I got ready to push out a long, long breath, the granddaddy of all sighs of relief.

Just then, the starboard engine sputtered, shook, and barked once, sending a momentary sheet of flame out through the cowl flaps.

## CHAPTER V

### *Teamwork*

**T**HE two pilots—Thorson and Cassidy—worked as though one brain, one set of nerves operated both of them. Thorson dipped the nose of the airplane to maintain any speed that might have been lost. Cassidy hopped for the shut-off valves. While Cassidy worked on the bad engine, Thorson readjusted the good one, and all this took a matter of seconds. Cassidy was punching the feathering button as Thorson was re-trimming the ship.

We all watched the starboard propeller coast, rock a bit, and finally come to a standstill with its blades turned forward.

"What is it, Eddie?" Cassidy asked me. "What's wrong with the engine?"

"I don't know," I said. "Not offhand, anyway. I'm just a mechanic, not somebody with X-ray eyes." I gestured. "You forgot to take the cowl flaps control off," I reminded him.

Cassidy reached forward with his right hand and turned the handle.

The airplane limped along as we talked it over. One engine wasn't going to get us to Yunning, and both pilots kept looking at me, fully expecting me to wave a magic wand and make everything all right. I shrugged. Engines are engines, and they almost have minds of their own. You may learn to compute brake mean effective pressure from

brake horsepower and foot pounds per minute—but you still won't know why engines choose to go blooey sometimes.

"Nell's bells, try starting it again," I said.

Again they worked the routine as one man. Thorson put the prop control on full decrease rpm, and adjusted the ignition switch. Cassidy fixed the fuel tank selector valve again. Thorson put the booster on. Cassidy held in the feathering control, and the big blades started to windmill. He let go when they reached seven hundred rpm. The oil pressure came up. When it reached sixty, Thorson put the mixture on auto-rich.

And that fool engine started. It purred along merrily as though it had never stopped.

Well, once more we were on our way to Yunning. But each of us kept throwing sidelong glances at the engine, waiting for it to go out again. No doubt of it, Beulah had had a rough time in the last hour or so. You could hardly blame her if she decided to get sick in places.

Papa Hung, back in the waist, was sick all over. I checked him several times and found him on the floor, moaning, completely helpless. He wasn't very intelligible, but I gathered that what he meant was that he'd pay anything, *anything*, if only we'd save his life. I told him that his life was already saved, but wouldn't be if he didn't shut up. Then I went forward again.

We were near Yunning now. The clouds had broken sufficiently for us to make out the character of the scarred, eroded red and black earth. Here the rice paddies hugged the valleys and the lower slopes. When the Chinese can't put rice paddies somewhere, you can be sure it's bad land. Mighty bad.

Cassidy, about then, began to hear the first faint chatter from the tower at Yunning. He saw a winding road, a couple of peaks, and checked the map.

"About thirty-five miles to go, he said.

Thorson leaned back. He sent his muscular arms out in a long stretch. "Well, I guess our troubles are about over," he said.

I knew he shouldn't have said it. I knew it the moment I heard it. Not that I'm superstitious or anything, but—well—there's no use sticking your head in the lion's mouth as far as luck is concerned.

The starboard engine went *bang!* again.

Both men leaped to the controls, and feathered it. And then the port engine began to sputter!

"Whoa!" groaned Cassidy. The sweat appeared on his forehead—glistened there like sequins.

I leaned forward. "Look, we better bail—"

Both pilots whirled at me, and both uttered the same words together, "*And lose the airplane?*"

"You can bail if you want to, Eddie," said Cassidy.

"Yeah, go ahead," Thorson seconded. "We're taking this crate down with us if we can."

I STARED back for a moment. I have a strong aversion toward parachute jumping, and I was thinking fast. I swept my eyes across the engine instruments.

"Listen," I said. "You've got just one chance to bring this thing in."

"What is it?" asked Cassidy.

I jerked my thumb toward the rear. "Jettison that cargo. Lighten the thing. You just *may* be able to glide in if you do that."

"Dump the stuff?" Thorson's brows came down, hard. "That means no dough. That means we're back where we started today. That means we can't settle this thing—"

I pointed at the altimeter. "Take a look. You're losing fifty feet a minute. Maybe more."

Cassidy put his arm on the back of the seat. His expression was very grave. "Eddie's right," he told Thorson. "We can't crash land in this rugged country. We can't bail. We'll only have a chance of making Yunning if we dump that stuff. That way we'll at least hold on to the airplane."

"All right," said Thorson, bitterly. He popped from the pilot seat. "Hold her, Cassidy, Eddie and I'll kick all the junk from the hatch. But it's breaking my heart to do it."

A moment later I found myself in the waist, wrestling cargo with Neil Thorson. Boxes that I could scarcely lift gave him no trouble at all. I worked from a position slightly forward, untying the stuff and sliding it back, and Thorson would maneuver it to the lip of the open door, then boot it into space. Once or

twice he looked at the stuff tumbling away, and groaned.

Papa Hung looked up long enough to see what was happening, then let out a piercing yell. He worried himself to his feet. He came running toward me, and tried to tug at my arm.

"Hey—what you do?" he said. "You crazy? What you do?"

"Beat it!" I said. "The engine's out. The plane won't fly with this stuff!" I shoved him back on his parachute.

There was one more box left a few minutes later. I stood at it, puffing, sweating.

"Come on, Thorson," I said. "That's enough, I guess."

He shook his head. "Let's do it all the way," he yelled back. "I don't want anything around to remind me!"

I shrugged and maneuvered the box toward him. He gave it a mighty heave, a final shove, and he stood there for perhaps a second with his hands on his hips, watching it fall. He turned then.

"Let's go," he said.

Cassidy was having his troubles up forward. He looked, as we came in, like a one-armed man trying to play the *Stars and Stripes Forever* on a four bank pipe organ.

"It's going out!" he yelled. "Look at that manifold pressure! The oil's dropping. And no rpm—the whole thing's going plumb to the devil!"

A mountain top went by the left wing-tip. It was so close that I could see the twigs on one lone tree on that mountain top. Thorson hopped into the copilot's seat, and as he did so he pointed ahead.

"There's the field! It's in sight!"

"Call the tower," said Cassidy. "Tell 'em emergency. Tell 'em anything. But get 'em to clear that runway!"

We could make out the runway, now, and see that we were practically on a heading for final approach. All Beulah would have to do would be to stretch her glide long enough to make it. But the port engine was already making what sounded like its death rattle.

"I can't raise 'em," Thorson said, after several calls.

"You've got to," said Cassidy. He nodded toward the windshield. "There's a B-25 in the middle of the runway."

Thorson saw it, and groaned. He tried to call the tower again, but he shook his head finally.

"It's no use. They're dead."

"Okay," Cassidy said, in deep resignation.

"What in blazes is a B-25 doing at Yunning?" I asked, but nobody seemed to hear me.

CASSIDY was calling instructions to Thorson. "Call out the airspeed, and don't let her get below a hundred. We won't drop the wheels until we're about two thousand feet from the end of runway."

"Roger," said Thorson.

His head was held straight, and his eyes were glued to the field. He seemed about as serious as I had ever seen him.

"Fuel on main wing tanks," called Cassidy.

"Got it," said Thorson, complying.

"Booster on—"

"Check."

"Low blower—"

"Watch that manifold pressure. See that it stays low," said Cassidy.

I had to hand it to him. He was a walking manual on flight procedure. A pilot might make a thousand landings without having to do it on one engine—but Cassidy had the routine down cold.

I looked up and watched the field come toward us with agonizing slowness. We were perhaps a mile from it now, and flying low, painfully low. I was certain that when we touched, it wouldn't be on the runway. We might even pile into one of those low hills or eroded slopes. My teeth began to hurt and I realized that I had had them clamped too hard together all this time.

"Gear down," called Cassidy. "Half flaps."

Beulah bucked slightly with the added flaps. She served to left, and for a moment I thought she'd wing over and spin in. Cassidy fingertipped her out of it.

"One-ten!" cautioned Thorson, calling out the air speed.

We hung in the air like a moving umbrella, the ground passing beneath us and every detail of the houses and village streets quite clear now. We listened to the broken purr of the one good engine, and no one dared say anything for fear of missing that first significant bark or sputter.

I saw that the B-25 in the middle of the runway was parked slightly to one



side and that with luck, and no ground loop, we might roll past it if we managed to make the runway. There was a group of men around the ship, and already I could see them scattering. I had a quick impression that the blue and white Chinese Air Force insigne was on the flank of the Mitchell.

A house came toward us—head on. There are always houses at the ends of runways in China. Don't ask me why, but there are. It loomed in our windshield. It was too late now to bank away from it—and we hadn't enough speed to give us any stick altitude without stalling. "Look out!" Thorson yelled.

I threw my crossed arms in front of my face and closed my eyes. Tight. I waited. One second. Two seconds. I felt a bump, and heard something go *VMP! VMP!*

I opened my eyes and saw that we were rolling down the runway. I knew then that the nearness of the house had been an optical illusion, and I was glad that Cassidy flew this plane, not me.

"We made it! We made it!" Thorson was yelling joyously, and slapping Cassidy on the back. My knees got too weak to support me all of a sudden.

Moments later, we had rolled to a stop several hundred feet beyond the parked B-25 and the group of men. Most of the group were running toward us. I saw that several of them wore the uniform of the Chinese Air Force. And the B-25 *did* have the C.A.F. insinia.

**P**APA HUNG pushed his way into the pilot's compartment just after Cassidy had flushed the remaining engine and cut the switch. There were white rings about his shoe button eyes. All of his chin trembled. He pointed excitedly to the rear.

"Hey—is gov'ment men! They come to see what you bring General Lo!"

We all stared back at Papa Hung for a full moment before the significance of it meshed with our brains.

"You mean," said Cassidy, "there was a leak—and they got here ahead of us?"

"Yes, yes," nodded Papa Hung. "They ready to execute General Lo if finding guns and bullets!"

Cassidy and Thorson looked at each other. A slow grin came across Thorson's rough-hewn face.

"But they won't find any arms. Not a doggoned thing," he said. Then his

grin disappeared just as quickly. "And we won't get paid either."

Papa Hung held up one fat finger. His voice dropped from its usual squeak to a conspiratorial hiss.

"Listen, kiddos," he said, "don't be blasted fool. Be smart like Papa Hung. You telling General Lo he got to pay you for cargo anyway, see?"

"What good'll that do?" asked Cassidy. "He won't pay for something he didn't get."

A grin folded the fat around Papa Hung's mouth. "If he don't pay you, you tell gov'ment men where you dumping cargo. They find it, they shoot General sure!"

"But that's blackmail," said Cassidy, aghast.

"Well, now, I wouldn't say that," boomed Thorson. "The General wasn't supposed to have that stuff in the first place. After all, it was against the law. And it's not as though we lost it through any fault of our own. After all, we did risk our lives getting mixed up with fighter planes, and that's probably what conked the engine out in the first place."

"Hm, well—" said Cassidy, frowning. . . .

The return trip from Yunning was as uneventful as the trip out had been exciting. We flew C.F.R. all the way. Scarcely a cloud was in the sky. After forty-eight hours hard work, both engines were singing like happy cats. Papa Hung snoozed lightly in the waist compartment and remarked once or twice that he might almost enjoy air travel if it were always like this.

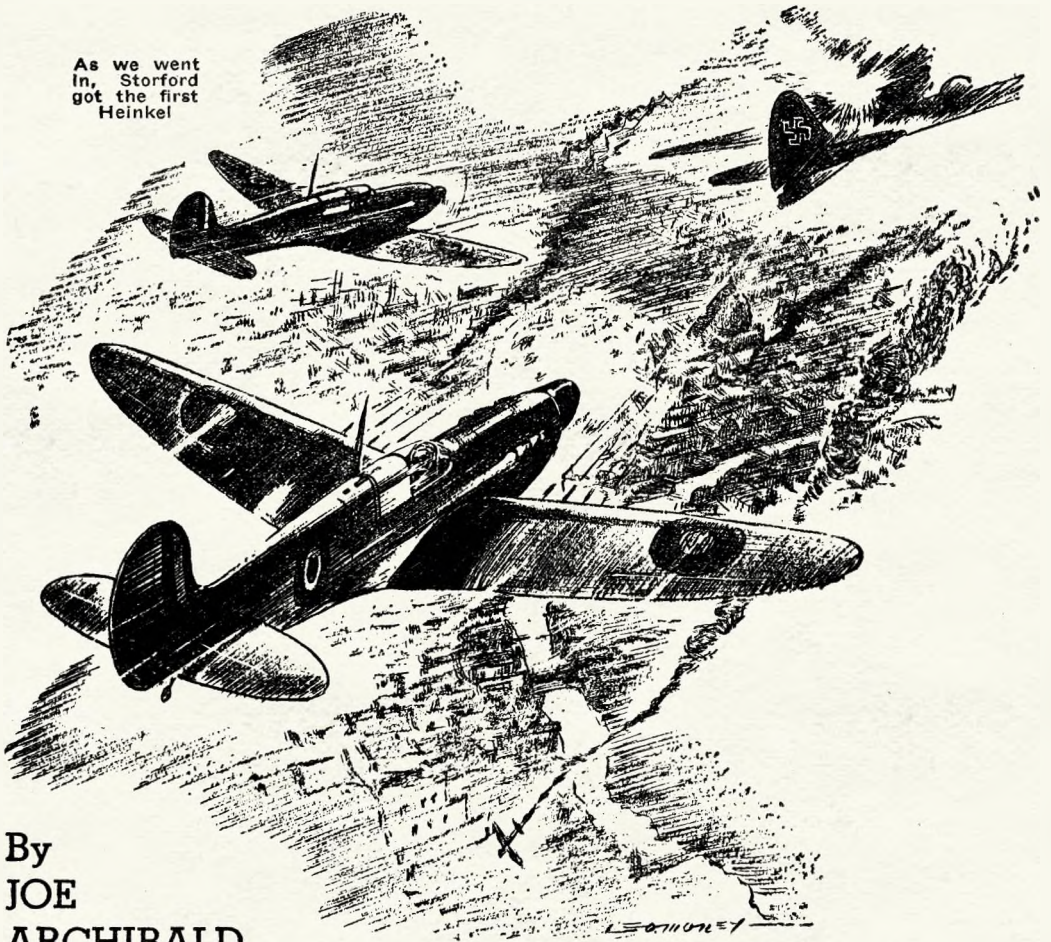
Cassidy and Thorson kept up a long, exhaustive and animated discussion of plans for Dragon Airlines, and included the possibility of adding a second ship to the fleet pretty soon. They figured that by pooling their very different talents, they would have a combination that couldn't be beat.

They seemed to have forgotten completely their intention to flip a coin so that one could buy the other out.

I watched them as they sat there, talking, laughing, slapping each other on shoulder and knee. Something told me that they never were going to remember about flipping that coin.

Something told me that the world would lose one devil of a good airline if they ever did.

As we went  
in, Storford  
got the first  
Heinkel



By  
JOE  
ARCHIBALD

# Flight from DARKNESS

**I**T WAS a strange and almost unbelievable ritual. We drove slowly out to the dead oasis south of El-Sollum, crawling through the sand in the squadron car at not more than fifteen miles per hour.

The chill of the North African night raked along our bones, but something stronger than the elements had put a clamminess all over our bodies. The stars seemed lower in the sky than they'd ever been and it seemed as if we could

all reach up and pick off the one we fancied. One burned much brighter than all the others and took our thoughts back almost two thousand years.

We had to do this thing before everything else. Even Rommel could wait until we saw fit to get up there in the Hurricanes again and pound his tanks along the road to Tripoli.

Leftenant Virgie Crisp had the little sack on the floor near his feet. None of us wanted to come in contact with it.

*The weight of two thousand years cast a sinister spell upon the members of an R.A.F. Squadron on patrol in the Holy Land*

It was a little over twenty miles to the dead oasis where the well had failed and which was now but a dark and deep hole filled with muck and filth and slimy stagnant water. It was just the place we needed to get rid of something that must never be found again.

An hour before midnight, we approached the eerie oasis, a clump of decaying desert vegetation marked by two tall palms. The dying fronds of these rustled weirdly although there was no trace of a wind. Smell of rot met us as we came ever closer, and Crisp gingerly picked up the canvas sack when the car came to a stop. We got out with him and walked with feverish haste to the old well. Captain Angus Pippet said:

"I won't draw a full breath again until we're blarsted well rid of this! Ditch the sack and let's be off, Crisp."

No sooner had the padre spoken when there was the crack of a rifle followed by the spine-curdling whine of a bullet. It clipped stone off the side of the crumbling well and caromed off to go tearing through the shoulder of "Baby Joe" Carsley. Lieutenant Crisp quickly threw the canvas sack into the well, and we were all lying prone when we heard the splatting sound it made deep down in the well.

"Arabs, of course," I said. "The curse was with us to the last."

We waited, and the silence all around seemed something tangible that pressed against us and forced us deeper into the sand. Finally we withdrew from the oasis, two of us helping Baby Joe along, and made for the protection of a high dune.

We had no sooner reached it when a plane thundered overhead, and it threw the silhouette of a Hurricane. It nosed down, its wing guns chattering, and we heard high-pitched yells and the beat of hoofs from somewhere beyond the dune. Then the plane was gone and all sound went with it.

I felt Captain Pippet shudder, he was crouched that close to me. Virgie Crisp said, "We got rid of it none too soon, what? I think it's safe to make a try for the car. How is the packet, Joe?"

"Not too bad," the Hurricane pilot said. "Took it like a bloomin' grouse on the ground. Fancy that, old chap!"

Once aboard the squadron car we lost no time getting back to the airdrome, and hardly a word was spoken until we

were safely in our tents.

It is necessary now that I turn this story back to England during the days when Hitler seemed to have the world in the hollow of his hand and when the future for England looked dark indeed, and tell you how this crazy business began.

**F**LIGHT LEFTENANT CLYDE STORFORD shared quarters with me in the attic of an old manor house near Barnsley. We had Spitfires then. There were Blenheims in a neighboring field and always it seemed, there was the sound of airscrews in the sky. We got very little rest, but during the brief respites Storford would take out his stack of numismatic journals, his collection of coins, and revel in their fascination. He would tell me about Parthians and Sassanians and Caliphates and how much they were worth, until I started yawning.

Of course, I had no objection to his collecting coins, I often told him, if they happened to be the kind that were honored in pubs. The trouble with coin collectors was that they never seemed to want to sell any of them no matter how valuable they were supposed to be.

Storford was a good flyer and promised to become one of Albion's best. We had been forced to make an air force ready almost overnight and try to do in a few short weeks what the Luftwaffe had accomplished over a period of many months.

The Nazis were going to destroy London, then Southampton, and then Liverpool. Shipping facilities would become paralyzed, and then the Heinkels and Dorniers and Junkers would swarm over the Midland cities and chew them up one by one. Goering, we heard, had put in a bid for Sandringham, the King's big country estate, and high Nazis had already divided England into provinces and had named the men to rule them.

"They'll never take us," Storford said in the mess bar one night. "The Spitfire has saved us and it can jolly well outfight the Messerschmitts. Already we have destroyed hundreds of Hitler's bombers and I'll wager my *Northumbrian styca* that the Huns will never set foot on our shores."

"Rather!" I said smiling. "We've paid the bandits back in their own coin, Lieutenant—if you'll pardon the joke."

"Joke?" Storford asked gravely. He glanced at the other pilots to see if they thought my remark was funny, was about to say more when the loud-speaker lifted us right off our seats.

"Green Flight! Blue Flight! Get ready, pilots! Jerries approaching the coast in force!"

There were ten of us. We rushed out to the Spits, chutes bouncing against our backs and phone-jacks dangling. The mechanics were already checking up our supply of petrol and ammunition, and Merlin engines whined as they warmed, their exhausts reflecting little bluish-green gobbets of light on the oil-soaked ground. Toward London the searchlights were groping, rapidly feeling for the high-flying Huns.

Storford yelled, "Good luck, Lieutenant!" as he ran past me and leaped for a Spitfire's pit. There was Johnny McMinn, Pharis Colton, and Baby Joe Carsley going along with us. We'd all come up from Gosport together and had managed to remain intact, but each of us was well aware now of what the other thought as we settled into the Spitfires.

I thought I could already hear the uneven pounding of Nazi bomber engines as I closed the canopy and watched for the signal to take off. The mobile truck with the Aldis lamp lumbered in close, and I felt pre-flight unease, those cold lumps in throat and chest.

We were airborne in a few minutes and streaking up and toward London, the powerful Merlins filling the night sky with a defiant impatient roar of sound. Up ahead the bursts of anti-aircraft shells looked like quick-blooming flowers with fiery petals and crackling pollen. Above their racket came the thick voices in our earphones, the mocking words of the bandits. Crisp called to us.

"Not unloading yet, men. Those bombs are not for London. How are you, Welland?"

I said something, but have forgotten what it was. Crisp was a magpie in the sky. He kept talking.

"Southampton, I'll wager. Got an aunt there. Can't let them have a go at her, can I? There they are, the blighters! Scramble, Welland. Mind you now, Joe. Tailing tactics! The one kissed by the searchlight—I'm having a go at him!"

We went in. It was Storford who got the first Heinkel. I did not actually see

the chap's tracers knife through it and touch it off, but I heard Storford's strident voice in my phones just after the bandit burst into flame. We were on the backs of the bombers and the Messerschmitts scorched down from above to clear us away. A grim shape squirted a burst at McMinn's Spit, and then overshoot. We caught him, Crisp and I, and blew him right out of the sky.

**A**FTER that, it was like a monstrous clattering nightmare. A man has no time in which to realize any of it until he is back on the ground thanking God for putting him there. Seven Hun bombers were destroyed a few moments after we'd intercepted, and the others were letting their bombs drop at random and swinging back across the channel.

I remember saving Storford once. I put a full deflection shot through the office of a Messup that was on the bloke's tail and beginning to turn loose all the death it carried. I saw that the bandit's plane had a yellow nose and tail, as it sheered off with its engine vomiting flame. It went down without lifting its nose and I was sorry I was unable to see it hit.

I heard McMinn's and Baby Joe Carsley's voices in the infernal racket. "Storford, are you there?" It was air battle. We had never lived before, had never been anywhere else. You had no time to remember or to look ahead. This was the grim business of living or dying. Everything else was in the abstract.

A Messerschmitt streaked past me, throwing a wing away, and I caught a glimpse of the Hun trying to slide his canopy back that seemed to have stuck, and I remember laughing crazily over his plight and wishing him a hot trip home. There were broilys drifting down out of the whirligig and I saw an anti-aircraft shell burst close to one.

Then a bunch of flattened silk fell swiftly to earth. And all this time I had teamed up with Virgie Crisp, battling the bandits until the last of them was no longer visible in the crisscrossed beams of light that still swept the sky.

"Stubborn devils!" I heard Storford say as we flew back to Barnsley. "They'll get it thicker with every tomorrow!"

Crisp's voice sounded unreal in my phones. Crisp was checking Blue Fight. Baby Joe Carsley and Pharis Colton did not respond, and I felt a terrible empti-

ness inside of me. The staccato voice of Green Flight's leader drummed into my head.

A half hour later we counted seven Spitfires on the strip. Ten had gone out. Storf's plane was bullet-bitten from prop to skid and we wondered if he had a patron saint.

Two hours later a call came in from Baby Joe Carsley. He had dropped into a pippen twenty miles away. "Smells like Heinkels," Baby Joe phoned.

None of the others came back. We got Colton's belongings together and sent them to his parents in Coventry. And that same morning two auxiliary constables found a wounded Jerry pilot hiding in a spinney only six miles from our airdrome, and they dragged the Hun to the Barnsley constabulary.

In due time the C.O. had the bandit brought to the drome, and he was one of the most cold-blooded blokes I'd ever seen. He was young and hawk-faced, and as blond as my little baby sister Eileen. His eyes were the hue of cold Bavarian ice.

The constables had searched the Messerschmitt pilot in Barnsley and had relieved him of a Luger, and so the C.O. was not too wary when he briefed him. It was Storf who suddenly leaped forward and fired the Webley. The German spun around stiffly and then pitched forward on his face, and something fell from his hand and thumped against the board floor.

It was a pistol a man could palm easily. We examined it and found that it had a trigger with no guard, that folded back in place when not in use. The deadly pistol fired a .25 calibre bullet.

"Rather close, what?" the C.O. said. "Thanks for saving my life, Lieutenant Storf. Have the Jerry taken out of here."

Intelligence found nothing of importance in the dead pilot's pockets. Just a small snapshot of a German girl, and several coins in a small leather wallet. These were dumped out onto the table and one of them rolled off and hit the floor. Pilot Officer Harry Blackwell of Green Flight retrieved it and studied it closely.

Storf said in a hoarse voice, "I say, let me look at that, Harry," and took the coin from Blackwell's fingers. The pilot officer said protestingly, "Now see here, Storf!"

I noticed it then. Storf's passion for old money transcended all other emotions that were ingrained inside him. He said:

"You wouldn't understand or appreciate this coin, Harry, if you aren't a numismatist. I am quite sure this is a thaler of the Salzburg series—and very old."

"Perhaps," Blackwell said dryly. "But it is more than that to me, Storf. A luck piece. A bit of the hair off the dog that tried to bite me up there. Rather good, don't you think?"

Storf's lips tightened. "Hardly gentlemanlike, bickering over loot, don't you think, old chap? Come now, I'm sure we can settle this quickly enough. There must be something in my quarters you'd rather have than this coin, Harry."

The pilot officer laughed. "Of course, Storf. I even have the bauble in mind."

**T**HE next morning Blackwell had an identification bracelet fashioned from sterling silver. Storf had received it from the girl he intended to marry and had not gotten to the engravers with it.

None of us liked this at all and none of us were sure which officer we blamed the most, Storf or Blackwell. I was sure in my own mind, however, that a man could set too high a value on material things. Storf's stature dwindled a bit in my mind from that day on, and I realized that too close an acquaintance with him was not doing my nerves any good.

Things generally work themselves out sooner or later. We were up for a go at the Huns two nights later and drove another heavy force of bombers away from the Thames Estuary before they could empty their bomb bays. We scrambled in a terrific concentration of searchlights and tracers and Harry Blackwell caught a packet and went down in a great sheet of flame. Defense volunteers in the service of the King found him the next morning and removed the bracelet from what was left of him.

Storf himself had a narrow escape when he caught a heavy burst from a Dornier's blister, and when he came out of a spin, two 109's boxed him and drove tracers through his Spit as he desperately evaded. I lost him then, and had to think of my own precious skin when

I heard the whiplash of bandit lead around the Spitfire's pit.

Storford had not returned when we trudged through the chill morning fog to the mess. Operations had had no word from him so we marked him down for lost. We packed his coin collection with the rest of his stuff and tagged it with an address, and then turned our thoughts to cheerier things.

That night, Storford arrived at the airdrome in a lorry. He had been burned a bit, but he was grinning. He opened a clenched fist and we saw the old German coin flattened against his palm.

"A lucky piece, what?" he said, as he stepped into the briefing room a few moments later. "Had to bail out, gentlemen. They tried to pink me on the way down. Sportsmen, those Huns!"

"Blackwell was not so lucky, Storford," I said coldly. "That bracelet couldn't save him."

Storford stared at me, his smile fading. "Come now, Welland, you aren't really superstitious, are you? I was only joking a bit. You mean Harry—"

I nodded. "We packed your things, Storford. The new chap has already unpacked his in my quarters. A pleasant little bloke named Watson. You see—"

Storford studied my face for a long moment and I knew he had read my mind. "That's quite all right, Welland. Let the chap stay with you. I'll make myself comfortable elsewhere, of course."

The Air Ministry had to deal the cards in such a way as to insure success in the British scheme of things. One afternoon five of us learned that we were being sent to the Near East, where Raschid Ali, the pro-Nazi premier, was directing operations against the British forces in Iraq. The pipeline from Haifa was threatened and Nazi plans were active in Syria and Transjordan. Storford was one of us.

We made the hazardous and tiresome trip by ship and plane to Cairo, and from there we flew Hurricanes over Suez and landed on an airdrome not far from the Sea of Galilee. The barracks and tents had been thrown up quickly by native labor and they were like furnaces in the heat of late afternoon. And the flies were very bad.

Jerry did not long postpone the welcoming ceremonies. That night, as we talked of the things we had to see in

this holy land, two Stukas and four Messerschmitts roared in and raked the 'drome. A flight mechanic was killed, and a Hurricane burned far into the night. When we crawled out of our holes to inspect the damage we saw that Storford's tent was smoldering and ripped and torn with machine-gun fire.

Our stomachs turned over as we went closer, and then we saw Storford standing near empty ammo cases, calmly smoking a cigarette. There was no doubt that he had that lucky coin in his pocket. It would have been better for all concerned if the flight lieutenant had decided to sweat it out in his tent during the strafing.

Storford sauntered over to us. "I am beginning to believe it myself, old chaps," he said.

**T**HE first scramble with the Luftwaffe in that area took place late the next afternoon after a scouting plane came back from the skies over Mt. Hermon and Damascus. We took off and flew in the direction of Nawa, a small Arab settlement, and above it we ran into the 109's.

There seemed to be more room in which to fight over this land than there had been over London. Perhaps the Huns here felt the heat or else were less skilled in aerial tactics than the Nazis that flew the channel, for we smashed three of them to bits in less than two minutes.

There was a 109 with a blue nose that nearly did me in, and I sensed that he was the leader of the bandits. Baby Joe Carsley blew him away from my tail once and he dove into a great pile of fleece drifting lazily across the sky at about nine thousand. When the Hun came out I was sitting over him, and I winged over and got him with a burst that sent pieces of his Messup flying. But he stayed up and came in to mix with Storford.

I watched for a brief instant, but that had been too long. The mental lapse nearly cost me my life. Pilot Officer Morley, from Sydney, blew the Hun up right in my face and something heavy smashed against my Hurricane's belly.

The plane was jarred its full length and I had a long and bad moment before I was sure I hadn't been injured badly. Then I looked for Messerschmitts but there was only one in the sky and it was

far away, a Spitfire nibbling at its tail. That was Storford fighting it out with Blue Nose, and we let him have the fun all to himself.

Two planes were missing when we left the briefing room back at the 'drome an hour later. Storford's and a Hurricane flown by the nineteen-year-old lad from Sussex. But Storford came back again and landed a Hurricane that resembled a colander.

There was something different about the man, an unnatural brightness apparent in his eyes. His temper was edgy. He reported that he had shot Blue Nose down and then had made a forced landing near Metulla. He'd spent the night in the town and had managed to get some petrol this morning.

He answered some of the questions put to him by Intelligence like a man stirring in his sleep, and his irritableness increased. A muscle in his face jumped once. He kept opening and closing his hands, and little sweat beads glistened around his mouth.

"Perhaps the bloke met a woman," Baby Joe said at noon mess. "One of those veiled gals from Bagdad. Maybe he found Ali Baba's old cave and has a pocketful of lucky coins."

Storford looked up from his plate and glared at the pilot. "There was nothing funny about any of it, I assure you, Carsley!" he snapped.

"Possibly you met one of the apostles, old chap," Virgie Crisp grinned.

Storford banged his fork down and immediately left the mess. We looked at each other. Storford's nerves! He was getting the wind up. The heat and the flies could torment a man more than Messerschmitts. We shunted the conversation into impersonal channels and exchanged conjectures as to the reason for the presence of a British foreign agent on the 'drome.

We'd heard talk about a meeting of high brackets in the area. A French general would attend, and a high government official from Iraq who was at odds with Raschid Ali. Baby Joe Carsley said:

"Heard it will take place at Safard."

"You should jolly well trap what you hear, Leftenant!" Cobham, the C.O., snapped. "Hitler has big ears. They've got legs on them and they're everywhere."

"As long as we have control of the air

over Palestine," Carsley said, "there should be no cause for us to worry too much, sir. The R.A.F. armored unit will see that the roads are kept clear."

We did not hear Storford come in. His voice jerked our heads up.

"You talk too much, Carsley!" the pilot said. "Some of these natives are in the pay of the Nazis, too. Two of them are standing not more than fifty yards away making out they're busy stringing wire!"

"I'll be buzzing off," Cobham said. "Storford, you look as if you needed a checkup. See the flight surgeon, will you?"

"I'm quite all right, sir!" Storford said, a snap to his words, and he looked at us defiantly as if daring us to disagree. We kept our own counsel. Crisp said easily:

"Tomorrow I'm going to have a look at things, Welland. Nazareth, Mount of Olives, and all. They say it does something for a chap to visit Calvary and stand in the Garden of Gethsemane. Want to come along?"

I told Crisp I would be delighted.

THE next morning, I stood with Crisp and Baby Joe in a hallowed spot at the foot of the Mount of Olives, and a great feeling of peace came over me and put a lightness in my very soul. We took the road to Nazareth, and spent some time there, then returned to the airdrome.

Storford, we learned, was airborne somewhere between Damastus and Kunetra, covering for the advance of British armored columns that were striking deep into Syria. Two other pilots were with him.

It was late in the afternoon, in intense heat, when the three Hurries returned. Intelligence briefed the pilots at great length. Storford had lost the others after he'd climbed high toward the coast of Lebanon to engage a lone 109.

"The Hun slipped away from me," Storford said, that unhealthy brightness still in his eyes. "Just when I was sure I had him. On the way back I spotted another Messerschmitt, but he ran away from me."

"Your prime concern, Leftenant!" the C.O. said brittlely, "was to remain close to the other planes! I will not countenance free-lance flying, you understand? You shall adhere to the same disciplinary measures as we used back in Eng-

land. Is that clear, Storfjord?"

"It is, sir," Storfjord ground out, and I saw that little muscle jump in his lean face again. One end of his mouth was curled up into the semblance of a smile. It was apparent that he was laboring under a suppressed emotion, a secret elation that had got a firm hold on him. Storfjord was slowly becoming a man we'd never known.

Several days later, as we tried to tolerate the heat under a canvas canopy, the news came from Safard. The armored car sent up a great billow of dust that was visible for miles as it came down the long slope and clattered into the air-drome. A red tab climbed out and strode into Operations, and soon after we heard that Messerschmitts had strafed Safard at the precise hour the important allied meeting was taking place. A British agent was seriously wounded, and Raschid Ali's enemy was dead.

Cobham summoned all Hurricane pilots to Operations. Loose talk, the Intelligence officer said, had been overheard and relayed to enemy agents infesting the area. I saw Storfjord squirm in his chair. His face was very white.

"I warned Lieutenant Carsley!" he cut in. "He was the only one of us who seemed to know where the meeting was to take place."

Baby Joe Carsley leaped to his feet and took a step toward Storfjord. I had him in a firm grip before he could use his hands.

"That was pretty rotten, Storfjord!" Carsley yelled. "Of course we've talked of many things together, naturally assuming that every one of us was loyal to his King and country. I want an apology, Storfjord, or by the—"

"I'm sorry," Storfjord said irritably. "I did not mean to accuse anyone deliberately!"

Virgie Crisp snapped, "I'm sort of fed up with you, Storfjord! You've been flying somewhat on your own lately, and if anyone has left himself open to any suspicion—you'd sell your soul for an old ha'penny!"

We had to hold Storfjord back. When order was restored Cobham reprimanded Crisp for his too plain an inference. The C.O. made it plain that he trusted us all and abruptly ended the matter. Storfjord went off by himself and we did not see him again until it was time for patrol.

We went straight north toward Beirut looking for signs of the Luftwaffe, but did not flush up any of the bandits until we were flying back. Storfjord, during the brief scramble, sent a 109 down in flames toward Tyre. The other Hun managed to break loose after we had shot part of his tail away.

Storfjord, we had to admit, had proved that his hatred for Jerry had not cooled. But when he got out of his Hurricane there was a tortured expression in his eyes and blood was running down his bare leg and into his boot. It was, we all knew, the first time Jerry lead had touched him.

At mess, Storfjord ate very little and spoke less. He appeared to be putting himself in Coventry and suffering under an intense emotional strain that was driving his feverish eyes deeper and deeper into their sockets. He seemed terribly afraid. He got up quickly and left, and it was a little over an hour later, when we saw him again. He had shot himself through the head.

There was an inquiry. A pilot officer named Maule, who had shared the tent with Storfjord, told us something that was altogether puzzling and incredulous. For the last two nights, Maule divulged, Storfjord had tossed restlessly on his cot and had muttered words loud enough for Maule to hear.

"I am positive he said, 'An Arab plowing a field. And he laid them bare and dug until he had them all.'"

"He was balmy," Crisp said. "Storfjord was cracking up."

"Perhaps," I said. "But I'd like to know why he had changed the very morning he came back from Metulla. Ever after, he became a different man. And then he went off on his own. 'Chasing Messerschmitts,' he said. I'm trying to think—"

**N**OTHING developed from the investigation, unless it was the worst luck ever to befall an R.A.F. squadron the world over. Storfjord was gone but he seemed to have left a part of him behind.

With Maule, I gathered up Storfjord's personal effects. The man had most of his coin collection in a large leather case. The rest he'd put in a small rotting canvas sack. Maule took charge of the coins until he could see his way clear to ship them back to England.



Twenty-four hours later we were on our way back from an uneventful patrol when Maule's Hurricane, for no good earthly reason at all, burst into bits before our eyes. All talk died. Our ear-phones held nothing but a shocked dead-ly silence as we watched the fragments drift down through the sky.

When we landed we got out of the Hurricanes like so many robots, and the mechanics stood near with wondering eyes. We converged on Operations and sat down there and tried to grope for any plausible sane explanation. None of us seemed to want to be the first to speak, for we all were thinking of the same thing.

Cobham said testily, "It's happened before, gentlemen! Get it out of your minds."

"Not in quite that way, sir," Crisp said in a voice not quite like his own.

We were thinking back to the day Storford took that coin from Harry Blackwell. It had been a talisman that had stood him in good stead. How had it failed him? It was on his person when we'd found him. Maule had taken the collection. And now Maule was dead.

Cobham banged a fist against the table. "I'll listen to no more of this silly nonsense! I'm disappointed in all of you, and gave you all credit for a modicum of ordinary intelligence!" Cobham laughed at us and we tried our best to cooperate. Then he said with a fierce grin, "A curse among poor Storford's old coins? Well, I shall take charge of the collection, gentlemen—if it will help to dispel your silly superstition!"

I knew it was a foolish gesture, but I put my hand on Cobham's arm. "I wouldn't, sir. I—"

The C.O. swung his glance toward me. "Welland, I thought you were the most sensible of them all!"

I got up and followed Crisp and Baby Joe Carsley out of Operations, and Crisp said, "There's something in the air, Welland. It is in my bones—a feeling I can't explain. It is one of evil and rottenness hanging over everything here. And I have never been one to believe in those tales the fishwives tell."

I felt it, too. Everybody felt it.

Forty-eight hours later I stood with Crisp and watched a young Australian pilot bring a Hurricane in from a scouting trip over the pipeline. The lad's landings had always been beautiful to

see, but now he seemed to lose all control of the swooping fighter. Cobham was standing near a Bren carrier just off the strip when the Hurricane hit heavily and lurched sidewise. It caught fire and catapulted toward the carrier and we screamed a warning.

It was too late, we knew, and we had to stand there numbed and watch it all take place.

The horrible sounds of the crash were still ringing in my ears when the ambulance rolled out. I saw the pilot of the burning Hurricane slowly picking himself up from where he had been thrown clear. The C.O. was sprawled out by the Bren carrier and he seemed very still. His uniform was burning. We knew he was dead when they put him in the ambulance. Crisp said, standing close to me:

"I want to get out of here, Welland. I am convinced!"

We talked to the Australian pilot later. The medicos had put splints on his right arm and had greased his burns.

"I can't tell you how or why it happened," he said. "Something just seemed to take hold of me and do all the thinking itself. I don't know, really." The pilot's eyes were frightened. He set his lips hard together and would not talk any more.

It came to pass that some of our prayers must have been answered, for not long after Cobham's passing we received orders to leave for North Africa, where the tide of battle was turning in Britain's favor. Rommel had been stopped at Alamein and all the air power we could muster was needed there to keep driving him westward and into the sea.

We packed our flight bags and bed-rolls and put them aboard a service-weathered Vickers Valentia, a bomber-transport plane. Storford's coin collection went with the stuff.

Virgie said before we took off for Alexandria, "You'd think everything would have gone rather smoothly for us here, Welland—the Holy Land and all. Yet—"

"Just a combination of mysterious circumstances, don't you think?" I replied. I did not want to think. "Just a bit of bad luck."

**I**T WAS a tedious flight from Galilee. Our Hurricanes were like three flights of geese against the torrid sky. Below us the Valentia lumbered along, under-

side bumping a sea of thin white vapor. We were not far from the airdrome outside Alexandria when Crisp's voice bonged in my earphones.

"I say, the transport is in trouble, Welland! An engine has caught fire!"

We all saw it. Smoke trailed from the transport and suddenly it was tinged with red, and the Valentia heeled over and tumbled earthward. We peeled off and followed it down, and below the thin cloud strata watched the Valentia flounder uncertainly and lose altitude with every passing moment.

I had a big cold lump under my breastbone and crazy thoughts ran the gamut of my mind when the transport became engulfed by smoke and fire: *Storford's coins are stowed in a bedroll in that plane! Crisp, are you thinking the same as I am?*

The Valentia was doomed, and we all yelled for the crew to jump. A few seconds later a broily blossomed in the sky. Then another. Two more. The transport crashed in the sand far below and sent up a great puff of smoke and flame, and inside my head a voice whispered and told me not to go daft. Storford hadn't had a thing to do with it!

We wanted to go down and make sure our belongings were not all destroyed, but the nature of the topography warned us against the urge and so we kept on going to the airdrome. When I got out of the Hurricane my knees were watery under me and I knew my face must have looked horribly pale under the tan it had absorbed in the Holy Land.

The Valentia pilot had radioed his position at the first sign of distress, and even as we trudged to Operations three armored cars and a big lorry were on the way to the scene of the crackup.

Late that afternoon we went through the stuff the lorry brought back. There wasn't much of it. In Crisp's partially burned bedroll we found Storford's small sack of coins. Baby Joe Carsley guessed that one of the lorry's crew must have put it there.

"The ones he brought from England," he said. "Looks like they're lost."

He picked up the bag and shook it and we heard the ugly metallic sounds. Baby Joe suddenly dropped the sack into the sand. A tall man with a carefully trimmed military mustache strode up, and just behind him was Captain Angus Pippet, R.A.F. Chaplain.

We stood at attention for a brief moment. Then the vice air-marshal made us at ease and he looked at the canvas sack that was in the sand not far from where Virgie Crisp stood.

"This weird story I've been told about, gentlemen," the high bracket said stiffly. "Reports have been coming in from Transjordan about some air squadron being accursed. Has to do with some old coins, I believe. What is this rot, gentlemen?"

"Sir," Crisp said, "it is difficult to explain, but in view of certain events—"

Captain Angus Pippet picked up the old canvas sack. He said in a strange voice, "Let us have a look at these coins, Sir Arthur. It is possible that they'll shed some light on something."

We followed the vice air-marshal and the padre to Operations and took seats around a long wooden table. The Captain cut the cord loose and then dumped the coins onto the table, and we all stared open-mouthed at the ancient money that was encrusted with the dirt and tarnish of centuries. They were not perfectly round coins; their edges were irregular like crudely-fashioned wooden cart-wheels.

The padre's face seemed tightly drawn as he began to scratch and dig with the blade of his knife. After a while he looked at the one he held closely, and said:

"You can just make out the outlines of a head here. I'm sure this is an old Roman coin bearing the head of Caesar." He looked at me. "The man Storford, Lieutenant? He shot himself, what? For no good reason they said."

We all thought of Safard. "I don't know, Captain," I said. "Unless he paid a certain price for this treasure he found in the Holy Land. That is only a supposition, sir, not an accusation."

The padre picked up a coin and studied it, hefted it in the palm of his hand, and then a look of horror came over his long thin face and he dropped the coin as if it had suddenly become red-hot.

"Silver, right enough, gentlemen. Is it possible that—"

**A** STRANGE silence held for a while. Crisp suddenly broke it and went back over the story as we knew it. He spoke of Storford's suicide, of Maule's inexplicable passing, and of Cobham's violent death.

"And the coins passed from one of those poor chaps to the other," Captain Pippet said, and now he seemed to be breathing with great difficulty. "What was it that chap heard Storford say in his sleep? 'An Arab plowing in a field?' Gentlemen, have any of you counted those coins?"

We shook our heads in fearful wonderment. "What is the significance of that, sir?" I asked.

Captain Angus Pippet looked off into space. "I am thinking of betrayal, gentlemen. And suicide! It's incredible—yet—count those coins, Leftenant."

I used a pencil to scrape the coins toward me one by one, a realization beginning to gnaw at my brain. I counted and recounted. There were thirty old coins! Yes, thirty pieces of silver! I yelled:

"Thirty coins, sir! Thirty!"

The vice air-marshal's face was covered with the oil shine of sweat when the padre began speaking.

"An Arab plowing in a field—not far from Jerusalem—they said Judas bought a field with the thirty pieces of silver. Another version has it that he threw the coins away from him in a temple, and men gathered them up and purchased a patch of ground for a cemetery. And it was also believed that Judas carried the money away and buried it. An Arab would see nothing significant in the fact that there were thirty—"

"It could not be!" I heard myself say.

Captain Angus Pippet looked at me. "Evil and misfortune, Leftenant, would harass any man who carried these filthy coins. They are accursed! Considering the events following Storford's—"

I thought back. I knew Baby Joe and Crisp were thinking back, too. Storford

could have first set eyes on the coins in Metulla, and craved them with his very soul. The Arab, no doubt, had brought his treasure to Metulla and it had fallen into the hands of a man on the side of the Nazis, and finding out, somehow, of Storford's passion—it looked as if Storford had betrayed his King at Safard!

The padre said quickly, "The evidence of something almost beyond our comprehension is before us, gentlemen. The circumstances are such as to substantiate our suspicions even though they are wildly incongruous. Be that as it may, we have to get rid of the filthy stuff as quickly as possible! Tonight!

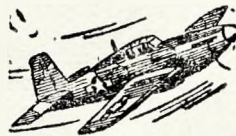
"We must not bury them in the clean sand, for the winds would bare them to the sight of man once more. Find a place of filth and decay and bury them deep. I know of such a place. An oasis south of El Sollum. Human hands should never touch these things again!"

**P**ERHAPS the padre's words would have sounded melodramatic under ordinary circumstances, but we had seen Storford's mental torture and the result of it. Crisp said hollowly:

"I'll go along with anyone who cares to handle the job, sir."

The Captain put on his gloves and picked up the thirty pieces of silver and dropped them into the canvas sack. We felt the weight of almost two thousand years pressing heavily against us when we walked out of the tent.

And so now you know why we dropped the bag of coins into the fetid, crawling water of the deep well in the dying oasis. Yes, it is incredible, I'll admit, and if there had not been thirty pieces of silver, an even thirty, I still might have my doubts.

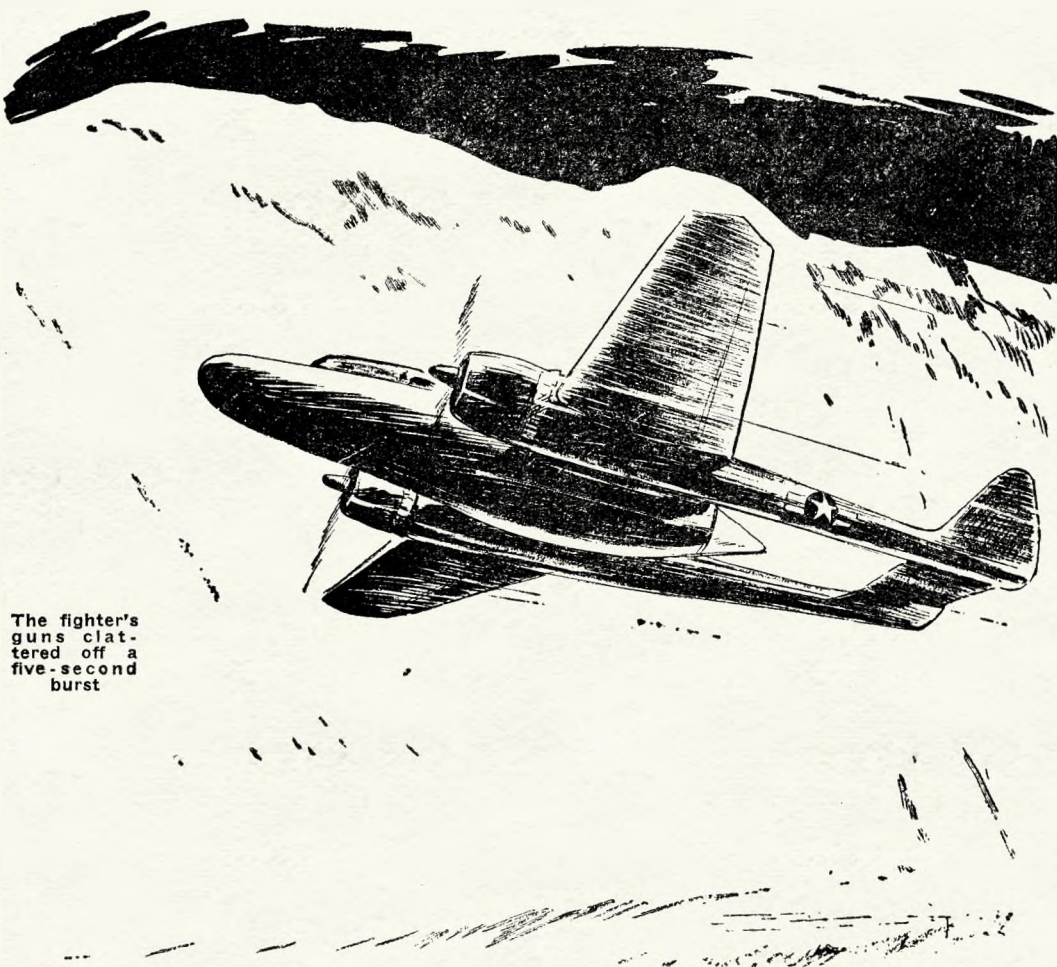


COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

## FIFTY YEARS OF FLYING

By **HARRY HARPER**

The Famous Pioneer of Air Reporters!



The fighter's guns clattered off a five-second burst

# THE ICE

A Novelet by

## CHAPTER I

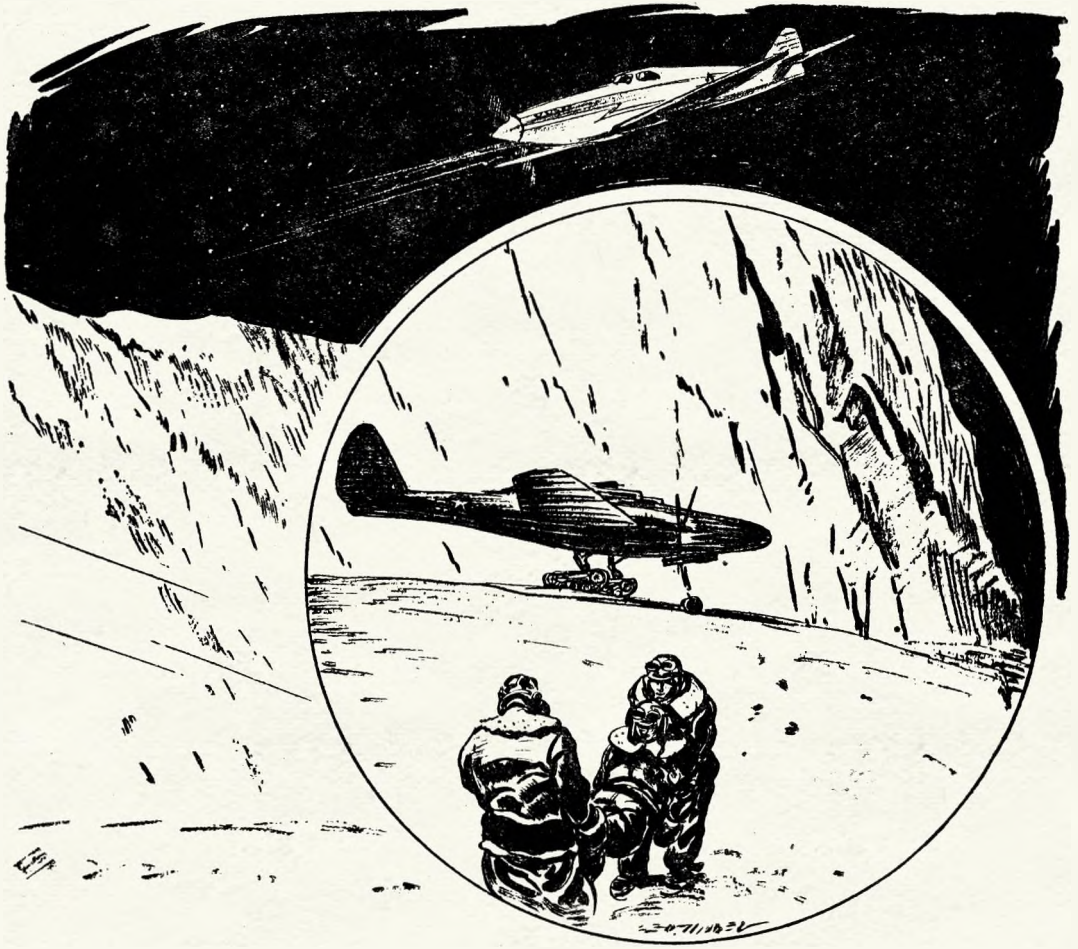
### *Operation Flatfoot*

**A** GAINST the distant, snow-capped mountains the P-61 was black as death. Never repainted since its original tour of duty as a night-fighter, it looked grotesquely out of place in

these icy Arctic latitudes—like a molting crow in a flock of aigrettes.

It made a wide sweep on the downwind leg and, curving easily for the far end of the runway, lowered flaps and landing gear. Now it looked even more like a crow. Instead of wheels, the main gear was equipped with what resembled a couple of miniature tanks, or the rear

*Operation Flatfoot, Beyond the Arctic, Was a*



# CURTAIN

O. B. MYERS

half of a half-track. This tracked gear, six or eight feet long, was mounted on the lower ends of the oleo struts, where once had been wheels. Retracted, they disappeared into the wheel wells. Lowered now, they poised like two great prehensile claws.

In the bright, cold sunshine the Black Widow settled slowly to the runway, as

a vulture settles next to its prey. Touching the meshed steel mat laid on the flat tundra, the misshapen landing gear gave forth a raucous, crackling roar. The nose wheel jounced uncertainly for a moment or two, but then the big airplane rolled smoothly, slowing.

Before coming to a halt it swung left off the runway end, disregarding the

*Veiled Secret Known Only to Three Airmen!*

perimeter track, cut straight across the muddy, rutted surface of the tundra to the vacant hardstand beyond Hangar G. Here, lurching drunkenly in a half circle, it came to a stop. With a long sigh the engines died on idle cut-off.

Up in the cockpit, although the cabin heater had been on, the temperature was only slightly above freezing. The pilot pulled off a heavy pair of single-fingered mittens and rubbed his hands together briskly. A captain, his name was Waite. Christened Orvis, the Air Forces had for years called him "Heavy" Waite. At his side Gray Farnsworth, his copilot and navigator, was busy entering figures on a ruled page of the flight log.

"How'd we do, Gray?" asked the pilot.

The navigator held out the page for him to see.

Heavy grunted. "We had weather," he growled, almost apologetically. "As close to CAVU as they ever get here." Then, peering out into the watery sunlight that seemed only to accentuate the cavernous gloom inside the nearby hangar, he barked, "Let's get out of here! It's almost midnight, and I could make with some hot chow!"

Moving awkwardly in his heavy togs, he clambered to his feet. Behind him the center section of the big, fat nacelle was almost empty, for the landing gear was not the only feature of this P-61 that had undergone modification. The power turret had been removed, and all the radar and electronic apparatus that had once crammed this space to the skin was gone. The guns had been taken out of the nose and the tail-warning device disconnected. This was now a military airplane in name only.

The changes had both lessened weight and increased room. Heavy could now look straight through to what had been the radar officer's cockpit at the rear end of the nacelle.

He saw that Johnny had already opened the rear hatch and jumped down. At the same time he heard Johnny's voice calling his name. His ears, still half deafened by the engine roar, heard indistinctly through the flaps of the fur-lined Arctic helmet, but there was a note of urgency in the faint shout that made him hurry to open the front hatch and squeeze through it to the ground.

Johnny Cole, the crew chief, was a heap of bulky clothing on the tundra directly below the rear hatch. He lay

hunched on his side, one leg folded under him. His face was contorted with pain.

"Johnny! What goes on?"

"The ladder—I missed it—my heel—"

The man on the ground was propped on one elbow; his breath was a frosty cloud about his face as he spoke. With a gathered effort he shifted his weight and tried to straighten out the crooked leg. He sank back with a hoarse gasp of pain. "I'm afraid I busted—something, Heavy."

The pilot knelt by his side for a moment. "Lie still, Johnny."

Then he straightened up and looked around. By the corner of the hangar, out of the wind, stood an F-2 fuel truck with a blue-and-white-checkered flag atop its cab. The driver had to be somewhere around. Heavy started shouting and waving his arms—and it wasn't long before Johnny was headed towards the hospital.

THE next morning, when Heavy entered the group of linked Nissen huts that housed Base Headquarters, the sun was somewhat higher in the sky but no warmer. The air was loaded with a chill, freezing mist that scudded before the wind and seemed able to penetrate any number of layers of clothing.

He spoke first to the adjutant, and then spent a few minutes with the personnel officer. A short time later he was delivering one of his top-drawer military salutes in the office of Colonel Corning, the base commander. The latter was in his forties, though his habitual frown made him appear closer to sixty. He displayed four Hershey bars on his left sleeve, and above his silver wings wore the wreathed star of a command pilot.

"Captain Waite? Ah, yes—you're up here on that test mission from Materiel Command, aren't you? What do you call it again?"

"Operation Flatfoot, sir," Heavy reminded him. "Special service tests on that tracked landing gear on the P-61."

"Oh, yes, I recall now. How are you coming?"

"We were doing all right, Colonel, until yesterday, when we had a little accident. We came back from a long hop and my crew chief was stiff and cold from hours in a cramped position. He jumped down from the rear hatch without using the ladder. It's a six-foot drop.

He's done it often enough before, but somehow this time he hit wrong and broke a bone in his foot. He's in the hospital and the medics say he may be there for a month."

The colonel nodded. "So you need a new crew chief?"

Heavy made an apologetic gesture. "I'm authorized to draw on the base for supply and maintenance, sir, but I'm not supposed to ask you for personnel. If I teletype Wright Field, of course, they'll send me a replacement. But you know how those things go—it may be weeks. Meanwhile the summer is running out, this weather won't last much longer. When the fogs close in my mission is shot."

"Have you spoken to the personnel officer—Major Haven?"

"Yes, sir. He's checking the files now, to see if he can find a replacement. But he said I'd have to get your okay."

The colonel, without giving a definite yes or no, eyed Heavy curiously. "Your mission—tell me more about it."

Heavy described the new type of landing gear briefly, but with obvious enthusiasm. By distributing the dead weight of the plane over three or four times the bearing surface afforded by wheels, it was possible with half-tracks to land and move about on terrain so soft that a wheeled airplane would sink to the axles. Turf, mud, snow, ice, sand—it was all the same to the tracks, if not absolutely liquid. Preliminary tests had already been very successful, and the half-tracks were now being tried on packet transports and medium bombers.

"If the preliminary tests have been okay, why are you testing it on a P-61?" asked the C.O.

Heavy tried to maintain his air of complete frankness. The capabilities of this gear opened up possibilities of offensive operations against a mythical enemy across vast distances of wilderness, on an entirely new scale. It would be feasible, by establishing an intermediate base for refueling, to operate at nearly twice normal range.

Such a base could be explored, tested, and set up in the remotest area where nothing existed but a fairly level space. Since no concrete or other runway construction would be necessary, this could be done entirely by air, with no dependence on ground or sea forces whatsoever.

The old colonel grinned appreciatively. "We don't even concede the navy a supporting role, eh?"

"That's it," declared Heavy. "With tracked gear, an airplane can land almost anywhere and becomes practically self-sufficient. At least that's the theory—that's what I'm trying to prove."

"And how are you trying to prove it?"

"By doing it. My instructions are to pick an isolated spot at close to full turn-around range, and in the course of three or four round trips from here to stock it with a full load of gas and oil. Then I'm to land there, gas up, and fly a maximum-range mission beyond that point. I come back to it, refuel again, and return here. If one airplane can do it, a thousand could do it."

"I see. And have you picked your spot?"

"Yes, sir. We've landed there twice and have started our cache of fuel and a few other things."

"Where is it?"

Heavy's eyes took on a certain vagueness. "Out on the tundra," he said. "Sir, my instructions were, in order to prove the complete self-sufficiency of the operation, to choose a spot a long way from any possible assistance and to notify no one of its location unless we got ourselves into serious trouble. That's a sort of guarantee that we're entirely on our own."

The colonel's eyebrows lifted. "Rather risky, isn't it?"

Heavy shrugged. "We've had no serious trouble, sir—yet."

THE colonel's frown deepened in worried concentration. He stared silently at a blank spot on the wall, then shifted his penetrating gaze to Heavy's face, equally blank. "Mythical enemy . . . twice normal range," he muttered, half under his breath. "Sounds as if it might be planned in the direction of, er—our friends behind the curtain, the bearded boys."

Heavy's expression remained perfectly impassive. "I wouldn't know anything about the eventual plan, sir. At present, my orders are merely to conduct an experiment."

His words were literally true. If he was doing, or planned to do, something considerably in excess of his orders, that was, up to now at least, his own affair. Still, he hoped the colonel wouldn't

question him too explicitly. It would be embarrassing to have to lie outright, not to say dangerous.

But the C.O. was thinking of other dangers. A man who felt his responsibilities deeply, he delivered the same phrases of anxious caution that Heavy had heard before leaving Wright Field. The delicate nature of the international situation, the bold, uncompromising attitude of certain powers, the numerical weakness of American forces, the impossibility of adequate intelligence through the curtain. It all added up to a powder house in which a single spark might start an uncontrollable conflagration.

No one wanted war less than the military men, who had to bear the brunt of fighting it. Under no circumstances must the military be responsible for striking such a spark. Extreme caution in operations—

A knock on the panels of the open door interrupted him. Major Haven, the personnel officer, had a large yellow card in his hand.

"I think we have a man for the captain, sir," he announced, glancing at the card. "A tech sergeant, now in the engineering squadron, base unit. Qualified crew chief—experience on B-26's."

The colonel nodded. "Good! It's not necessary to write orders. Just have him notified verbally to report to Captain Waite."

The major said briskly, "Yes, sir," and had turned toward the door when Heavy spoke.

"By the way, Major, what's his name?"

The reply came, "Whorf. Sergeant Victor Whorf."

Heavy felt as if he had swallowed a golf ball and it was sticking in his throat. His mouth opened, and closed; a light flush crept up his cheeks. His eyes glared as he started to object. But then his lips compressed as he realized that it was impossible for him to protest. A protest would have to be backed up by reasons, and explanations, and his reason was precisely the one which could under no circumstances be mentioned.

He had not been able to conceal his reactions entirely, however.

The colonel asked, "You know him, Captain?"

Heavy turned, strode to the door, turned again, and executed a slow and careful salute. This gave him time to col-

lect himself.

"No, sir. Just a similarity in names, I guess. Thank you very much, sir. I'll remember what you've said."

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## CHAPTER II

### *Plans for Take-off*

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OUTSIDE, Heavy followed a path made by having strips of perforated planking on top of the soft, half-frozen mud. His eyes were clouded in concentration, his fists clenched inside the pockets of his quilted Arctic packet. He turned automatically on the edge of the perimeter track toward the hut, half buried in banked earth, which housed operations and weather.

He found his navigator using a pair of dividers to scratch his ear as he leaned over a polar projection chart spread out on a flat table.

Gray Farnsworth, with his pinched nose, flat gray eyes, and narrow skull, looked more like a mathematics instructor or a biochemist than an Air Force lieutenant. But appearances are often deceptive; he was a rated pilot, checked out on twin-engine stuff, as well as a navigator of unusual skill, and—what appealed to Heavy—had nerve enough to exceed his orders. He also possessed the prime virtue of being able to keep his mouth shut.

"What luck?" he asked, looking up as Heavy came in.

The pilot scowled. "The worst in the world." In response to Gray's unspoken question, he added in a low tone, "Put on your cap."

The outer walls of these buildings were triple thick, layered with insulation, but the inner walls were like paper and there were footsteps beyond the first partition.

When they were out on the perimeter track Heavy turned and said bluntly, "They're assigning us Vic Whorf."

Gray only looked puzzled.

"Don't you know him?" asked the pilot in surprise. "He was at Alamogordo last year. What a barracks lawyer! He shoots off at the mouth like a garden hose and he's the biggest pacifist in the army."

Gray asked curiously, "What got him that way?"



"He's a good mechanic—he crew-chiefed a B-26 in the Ninth Air Force during the war. After V-E day he transferred to a recon group; they were at Eschwege up in the middle of Germany. The Jack Benny troupe came around, entertaining, and put on their show in front of a big empty hangar that the Germans had half wrecked before leaving. Of course the G.I.'s clambered all over the walls and beams to get a good look. In the middle of the show, a roof-beam collapsed and his best friend was killed in a fall."

Gray was sympathetic. "After V-E day? Kind of tough."

"Whorf had seen plenty of men killed in combat, but somehow that accident got under his skin. The complete futility of it galled him, convinced him that war is an idiotic mess. I agree on that—but his idea of preventing it is appeasement."

"He favors—and out loud—scrapping the atom bomb, reducing our forces to a skeleton, discontinuing all research on weapons, and letting our red-bearded boys have whatever they want. He thinks they're our best friends."

The navigator exhibited surprise. "In that case, what in blazes is he doing in a uniform?"

"He's an old-timer, and only has two or three more years to serve to twenty-year retirement."

Gray frowned disgustedly. "If he's such a blasted international diplomat, he ought to get in the State Department instead of the Air Force. Why can't he just obey orders and shut up?"

Heavy grinned at him crookedly. "Like us, I suppose? If we've got a right to use our brains to exceed orders, so has he. But you know perfectly well that if anybody finds out and starts talking, we'll darned quick get a direct order *not* to do exactly what we're doing, and then we're stymied. And Whorf will talk, sure as shooting."

Gray shook his head thoughtfully. "I keep a dummy log now, with figures one hundred-eighty degrees off. I can talk jumbled compass readings. With the magnetic pole where it is, they're jumbled enough anyway up in these latitudes. Maybe we can fool him."

But Heavy shook his head. "Not a chance; he's too smart. Remember—he's flown before. You can juggle instrument readings all you want, but you can't push

the sun out of its course, and it's up there in the sky for him to see twenty-four hours a day. One flight to our cache and he's going to be wise that it's a lot more west than it is east. A few cracks about that around headquarters and we'll have the whole War Department on our necks!"

THE navigator stared glumly at the P-61, parked far down at the end of the field. Heavy kicked moodily at a lump of mud. Then half under his breath he repeated a phrase he had just used: "One flight to our cache—" A faint gleam came into his eye and he peered sharply at Gray. "How much gas have we got there?"

"About half a filling. And plenty of oil, but we still need—" He wheeled to stare at Heavy. "You mean—try to make the next hop our last?"

The pilot seized his arm and began to draw him along in the direction of the hangar, where they had been given a tiny room in the lean-to for an office.

"D'you think we could make it?" Heavy asked.

They had talked this thing out, worked it out on paper, a dozen times before, until Heavy dreamed gallons and pounds and miles per hour every time he lay down in his bunk. But suddenly, with the nearness of the crucial effort, it all took on added significance. There could be no sleight of hand with these figures, he knew too well. Their very lives would depend on the correct answer.

Side by side they leaned over the broad shelf which served as a desk, poring over their lists. These lists, covering equipment and supplies considered essential, had at first been generous on the side of safety. They now consisted chiefly of items with lines drawn through them.

In addition to fuel and oil, however, there were some things they dared not to forego—the disaster kits, for example. Three knapsacks, each crammed with a week's concentrated rations, knife, twine, fish-hooks, matches, cake sterno, and other light essentials—they were the last resort in the face of failure.

"Those spare radio batteries," muttered Heavy. "Do we have to lug them? Can't we depend on the batteries in the plane?"

"Not if we crack up and have to leave her," countered Gray.

Sergeant Whorf found them there right after noon chow, intent on their calculations. He was a tall, ungainly fellow with gnarled hands and an awkward gait. His eyes, deepset and solemn, stared unblinkingly as he answered Heavy's questions.

"Yes, sir, I've had a lot of time on engines. And I've worked on P-61's, too. We put them in storage at Furth."

"Sounds fair enough, Sergeant. We'll go out and look over the airplane later. In the meantime, I'll give you an idea of what we're up here to do."

Heavy described the project very much as he had told it to the commanding officer, except that he refused to be drawn into any implications of its eventual usefulness against an enemy.

The sergeant, eyeing him steadily, said, "It sounds like the development of an offensive weapon, doesn't it, Captain? The sort of thing that might be used to start a war with some day?"

Heavy replied coolly, "Offensive or defensive, it's not our business. We're here to run a project, and we're running it the best way we know how. Somebody else can worry about the future use of this gadget, if they want to. Come on; let's go out and give those engines a preflight, and daily. I want to watch you handle 'em."

From the moment when Sergeant Whorf climbed up through the hatch it was obvious that he knew his airplane, and particularly his engines. To begin with, he sat for nearly ten minutes in the pilot's seat, checking with eyes alone the location of every instrument, gauge, and control before touching a single button. Then he set throttles, mixture, prop pitch, and carburetor air, brought the fuel pressure up with the booster and started the left engine.

After the right engine was idling, too, Heavy leaned over close to his ear, grinning. "I notice you checked landing gear controls twice!"

The sergeant looked at him without a smile. "I've never retracted my gear sitting on the ground, but I've seen others do it. It sure wipes an airplane out for keeps!"

Heavy watched while Vic Whorf warmed the engines and then ran them up one at a time, checking pressures, temperatures, voltages, and operation of various controls. He eased the right engine back down to idling, gave them

both oil dilution for precisely four minutes, and stopped them on idle cut-off. As his fingers ended by flicking the switches to OFF, Heavy nodded in satisfaction.

"I guess you know what it's all about, Vic."

He deliberately used the "Vic," waiting for a reaction. In the Air Force, where the officer-to-man relationship was pretty much man-to-man, especially among flight crews, the fact that he was a captain and Whorf a sergeant didn't cut much ice. If this grim-visaged fellow was going to be riding behind him on a mission which might throw them together into the jaws of death, Heavy wanted to get on as intimate terms as possible, and as soon as possible.

But the other man did not rise to the invitation.

"I'll crew your airplane, Captain; don't worry about that part," he said soberly. "When do we start loading up?"

THEY started right then and there. Heavy sent Gray to the motor pool for a weapons carrier, and led the sergeant back to the hangar to recheck equipment. Johnny Cole had already packed an outfit of hand tools. Whorf went over it deliberately, and ended by discarding two special propeller wrenches.

"We'd never be able to open up a propeller hub out on the tundra, anyway, Captain," he declared. "If we have *that* kind of trouble, we'd do better to start walking." But then he looked about the strewn floor. "You got a fuel pump and hose?"

Heavy shook his head. "I figured on pouring in the gas."

The sergeant frowned thoughtfully. "It's possible to pour into those tanks by hand, yes. But you'll waste a lot in slopping, increase the risk of fire, and it's gosh-awful slow. I think a hand pump and ten feet of hose is worth the weight, Captain."

Heavy pondered, and finally agreed, though doubtfully.

When Gray returned with the weapons carrier, they started hauling loads out to the airplane. First equipment and tools, then gas and oil in five-gallon cans. The stowage had long since been minutely planned, but like any other operation laid out on paper, the plan had to be modified when actually put into practice.

Heavy found that by lashing tool kits and pump to the roof, just behind the cockpit, it was possible to make room for a few more cans of precious fuel. He also found that three pairs of snowshoes were about as awkward to dispose of as a five-legged giraffe. He was ready to abandon them entirely, when the sergeant found that they could be stowed in the wheel-wells without interfering with the retraction gear.

"We're not going to need them unless we crack up," declared Heavy doubtfully. "And if we crack up, they'll be mashed to pieces in those wells."

"In a belly landing, yes," admitted Vic Whorf. "But I thought we never had to make belly landings with this gear?"

When everything was packed, there was barely room for the three of them to crawl into their respective places. Heavy and Gray, in the pilot's cockpit, and Vic Whorf back in the plexiglas bulb at the tail end of the nacelle, were separated by a thick wall of gas cans. Through a single crevice, by leaning to just the right angle, they might eye each other narrowly; otherwise they had no means of communication beside the ear-phones of the intercom.

Heavy looked at his watch. It was four P.M.

"All right. We'll meet here in exactly twelve hours, ready to go. Remember what I said about underwear, Vic. And I'd advise both of you to put in most of that twelve hours sleeping. Once we get off the ground here, we're going to be on the go for close to twenty-four hours, even if everything goes smoothly. If it doesn't—" He made an eloquent shrug.

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### CHAPTER III

#### *Behind the Curtain*

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AT FOUR A.M. the sun was almost the same distance above the horizon as at four P.M., but in the opposite direction. There was a steady blow from the east, which brought only a thin mist off the distant snow-capped mountains. To a man from Texas it was cold; to a man acclimated to Alaska it was pleasantly warm. The air temperature registered two degrees below freezing.

Heavy taxied slowly, keeping on the perimeter track to the end of the runway.

He called the tower for clearance. With a last sweep of the eye across the instrument panel before him, he reached for the throttles.

More than four thousand horsepower swelled into a brutal roar, driving the back of the seat into his shoulder blades. Beneath him the odd landing gear cianked and crunched. Half a mile—three quarters—he was still on the ground. Just off the far end of the runway stood an ambulance. When he first opened up it had been a mere speck; now, he saw with a shock the cross painted on its side.

Then at last he was in the air.

His finger flipped the retraction switch, the gear began to fold upwards. The engines were bellowing at full power, but the P-61 was lifting a load such as it had never lifted before. For breath-catching moments it flew without climb. The whirling propellor blades were ready to nick the earth disastrously at the slightest dip. But then the gear retreated into the wheel wells, the drag lessened, and with mounting speed the big plane began to climb.

Heavy held steady, easing manifold pressure down, for ten miles before he began to turn in a wide, flat sweep. He kept on climbing slowly. Every foot of altitude, he well knew, cost him additional precious gallons of gasoline. But there were mountains between him and the open water, and whatever else the Black Widow would do it would not fly through a mountain.

They cleared the last divide with the black wingtips sweeping ice-clad crags, the powerful gusts tossing the whole airplane like a pebble in a concrete mixer. Ahead of him Heavy saw the vast, inexorable reaches of the Arctic Ocean, sullen, wind-lashed and cold. Rotten pack-ice fringed the rocky shore; inhospitable bergs rode the vague horizon. Staring at that utterly hostile and barren sea, Heavy had a sudden qualm.

What right had he to risk, not only his own life but two others, as well as close to a quarter million dollars of airplane and equipment, on what he had now turned into a personal adventure? In laying this course, he had gone far beyond his orders—and for what? What was he going to prove? A terrible doubt assailed him and he turned to peer questioningly at Gray.

The navigator had just finished tak-

ing a shot with his sextant and was bent over his clip-board, his pencil busy with figures, His features were calm, his eyes intent, his whole attitude as relaxed and confident as if he were at a desk in Chicago.

Gray's complete absorption in his job, his unquestioning acceptance of whatever the future might hold, restored Heavy's poise more effectively than a speech of encouragement. If Gray could take it like that—well, he could, too.

He touched his throat mike and spoke curtly.

"Everything okay back there, Vic?"

"All okay, Captain!" came the sergeant's reply. "Kinda cold! But the sun's on my back. Can our drift be that heavy?"

"Leave the navigation to the navigator," Heavy hedged. "I'm just following his dope—he'll get us there."

As if to confirm his statement, Gray at that moment gave him a new course. In these polar regions, where the meridians of longitude all converged and the magnetic pole did not coincide with true north anyway, navigation by compass became an almost impossible affair. Even based on the gyro-compass, a great-circle course necessitated constant calculation and re-calculation.

Due to the proximity of the pole itself, an airplane heading directly for a point to the west of its start might within a half an hour be closer to a northerly heading according to the gyro-compass and flying due south according to the magnetic compass.

But Gray had laid out this course and followed it once, and had then followed it a second time—proof of the correctness of his computations. Gray would get them there and get them back. But without Gray—Heavy shrugged uneasily; he would, he thought, be lucky to hit the right continent.

**T**HE SUN disappeared behind a thick layer of alto-stratus. In the cockpit, the cold began to bite through quilted jackets and three pairs of socks. The navigator kept giving Heavy a fresh course every fifteen or twenty minutes, but without a sight at the sun this became more and more of a guess. Drift due to wind could only be estimated; it could easily throw them off by more than a hundred miles.

Below them the Arctic sea was a bitter, frigid green on which was scattered the glaring white of snow-covered floes. Off to their right the horizon was a solid line of ice-pack. From four thousand feet the ice looked level and hard, but Heavy knew better. It was actually crumpled and hummocked into a nightmare of badlands where even a belly landing meant smashing disaster.

An island grew out of the misty horizon ahead and slid past below the right wingtip. Heavy had seen this island on their previous trips—or was it a different one? He could not be sure; it was no more than a semicircle of rocky crags half buried in ice and snow, with no signs of life, either animal or vegetable. Not even a blade of grass grew in these latitudes. Heavy shivered, beat his mittened hands together to quicken circulation.

After what seemed interminable hours over that freezing ocean, his searching eye picked up a low, dark line ahead on the horizon.

Land!

He studied it eagerly, seeking a headland, a bay, a river mouth—any shape that he could identify. But Gray, he saw, was not even looking at it. The sun had momentarily broken through a rift in the clouds and the navigator was busy getting a shot with his sextant. He resumed his seat, calculating furiously.

Heavy noticed that the course Gray now gave him was more than fifteen degrees to port. Their drift had been fairly strong to the west. Below them the land was bleak, stony tundra cut up by a dozen muddy streams that made the delta of some unknown river. Even in late summer, snow and ice lay in the sheltered hollow and fringed the barren banks of the streams. No trees, no roads, no sign of habitation, nothing that he could recognize.

Ten minutes later Gray leaned toward him. At the same instant Heavy let out an exclamation. He saw the towering range of mountains that rose to meet him in the distance, and one saw-toothed peak was familiar. He angled right at once and began to let down.

The P-61 slid across the first range of hills. Beyond was a valley shaped like a chemist's retort—a round cuplike depression at one end with a long straight arm extending toward the west. The

round part was a swamp, and both slopes of the straight section were pockmarked with snow drifts. But up the middle ran a shoulder, a fold in the ground that was exposed to the sunlight and had drainage in both directions. This was firm and solid; he could see the marks of his former landings in the soil.

He made a pass, spotting the outcrop of rock where they had stowed their cache of gas, then came around in a flat U-turn. The landing gear went down with a jarring clunk and the air speed dropped. Heading straight down the long, narrow valley, he set her down gently, almost on top of his old tracks.

The soil was very stony. It froze at night and thawed at midday, but the heavy proportion of gravel kept it from being muddy and the long, flat surfaces of the tracks rode it without sinking in. Heavy slowed quickly and taxied to within fifty feet of the rock.

When the engines coasted to a stop, he looked at the navigator with a grin of satisfaction.

"Gray," he ejaculated, "you're a pip-pin!"

The navigator did not look up from his Form 1 on which he was making meticulous entries. "Better wait till I get you home again, before you throw any bouquets."

Heavy unlatched the exit hatch and clambered slowly to the ground. The temperature in the cockpit had scarcely dropped as low as freezing, but during hours in the same position the dank chill had eaten into his limbs and his joints felt as if they were poured in concrete. He unbuttoned the outer layers of clothing, swung his arms and danced in circles to loosen up.

**H**EAVERY saw in every direction a landscape of silence and desolation. Gray rock, gray sky, gray soil, relieved only toward the foot of the slope where a stream ran and the stony earth wore a thin fuzz of coarse, wiry grass. This weedy stuff was a sickly, lifeless green and gave off a slightly sour, nauseous odor.

"Say, Vic!" he called toward the rear hatch. "Bring a cake of that chocolate down with you. I'm hungry!"

The sergeant's long legs dangled from the rear of the nacelle and dropped to the ground. But in his hand he carried

neither a package of chocolate nor anything else. His pale, angular face wore a stiff and ominous expression.

The sun, behind the clouds again now, gave evidence of its direction by a faintly lighter area in the sky something less than forty-five degrees above the horizon. Sergeant Whorf glanced up that way. Then he stared at the jagged, ice-capped mountain, and peered back in the direction from which they had come.

"Where are we?" he asked abruptly.

"The I.B.—intermediate base," Heavy replied promptly. "Approximately a thousand miles from home field. And," he went on, in as casual a tone as he could muster, "with several thousand more to go, we'd better get busy on this fuel business."

"More to go—in which direction?" queried the sergeant.

Heavy swung an arm vaguely. "The same general direction we've been pointing. There'd be no point in going backward, would there?"

Gray dropped to the ground from the front hatch. He looked at Whorf, then looked at Heavy questioningly. Heavy sensed an approaching crisis. A cooling manifold gave out a sharp crack.

"We're—" the sergeant lowered his voice as if there might have been a listening ear within a hundred miles—"we're behind the curtain, aren't we?"

Heavy saw no point in hedging further. "So what?"

The sergeant, as if triggered by that abrupt retort, burst into a perfect flood of words. This whole thing was insanely wrong. He should have been told. They must be crazy, to think that they could get away with such a flouting of authority, such a breach of common sense.

They were intruding over, and onto, foreign soil—an affront and an insult to a friendly power. It was just the sort of incident that provoked wars. It constituted a deliberate strain on relations, already in a delicate state. He was sure that whatever orders they had received were being outrageously exceeded. The risk—

Twice Gray tried to interrupt, to explain what they were trying to do, and why. But the sergeant would not listen. He continued to pour out a steady stream of protest until he was out of breath.

When he fell silent, Heavy faced him

soberly. "You're right, Sergeant. We're beyond our orders. You think it's stupid; we think it may be smart. Let's skip it. Now I'm giving you an order: Keep your mouth shut about politics and international diplomacy and get to work readying this airplane for the next hop."

For fully a minute Whorf faced him in silence, motionless, his features rigid, his eyes slitted. Then he drew a deep breath. "The next hop—that will be to the south?" he asked finally.

"That's the general direction," nodded Heavy.

"I won't do it," declared the sergeant flatly. His lips twisted nervously. "I want no part of it! If you're going to carry out this—this invasion, I'm going to report that I didn't lift a finger to help!"

Heavy stared at him darkly; he could feel the blood tingling in his ears. "I'm giving you a direct order, Sergeant."

The sergeant gestured loosely and muttered through his teeth. His words were unintelligible, but he was shaking his head.

Heavy was swept by a feeling of helpless disgust. He had expected to deal with almost anything but this—a sit-down strike. He saw that against this wall of stubbornness further conversation was useless. He drew a long breath and expelled it with a snort.

"Pfa-a-ah! You know where you can go, Sergeant!" He stripped off his outer jacket. "Come on, Gray, let's go to work."

## CHAPTER IV

### *Secrets Beyond the Arctic*

**H**EAVY and the navigator proceeded to unload the jammed nacelle, handing cans down through the open hatches. When they had shifted about fifty to the ground, Heavy broke out the hand pump, opened up the filler caps, and they began filling the fuel tanks.

It was slow work for two men. Five gallons at a time, the wing tanks seemed bottomless. The high-octane gas numbed their fingers and shriveled the skin, and the steady east wind had the bite of frozen razor blades.

After an hour and a half Heavy's patience, if not his muscles, was ex-

hausted. He hurled an empty can across the gravel and strode to the rock where Whorf sat in sullen silence.

"Get up!" he ordered. "Take off that coat."

The sergeant came to his feet, his eyes puzzled, wary. "I won't work," he growled. "What are you going to—"

"They say," snarled Heavy, "that any good sergeant can enforce his orders with his fists. I'm only a captain, but I'm wearing no insignia. I'll see what I can do."

The sergeant opened a zipper, then hesitated. "It won't make any difference," he grumbled. "You can't make me—"

Heavy delivered a light straight left to the collar-bone that made it plain that talk had been replaced by action. Whorf flushed, and flung aside his jacket. They were sparring, their flying boots slithering over the loose stones.

The sergeant had reach and determination, but not much else. Heavy, besides packing more weight of hard, clean muscle, knew something about boxing and was just angry enough to be aggressive. He drove a bulletlike fist under Whorf's guard, crossed another to the cheek above a dropped shoulder. In a few minutes the sergeant, his long arms flailing wildly, was being slammed about savagely.

Heavy heard Gray shouting protests, but paid no attention. He stepped in close, swung a vicious jab. His foot slipped. It was just enough to take the sting out of the blow, and to destroy his balance. He fell sideways. The sergeant half fell with him.

Heavy's head struck a protruding flint; sparks flashed in front of his eyes. With the sergeant on top, they were wrestling about on the ground. Heavy clenched his teeth, and rolled. In another moment Whorf was on his back, his arms pinned down by Heavy's knees, who sat firmly on his chest. "You had enough?" demanded the pilot furiously.

The sergeant, panting, powerless, shook his head obstinately.

"Never—make me—help—" he gasped.

The blood trickled down into Heavy's left eye from a cut in his scalp. The futility of his position overwhelmed him. He could easily beat this man to a pulp, but he saw that it would do no good. In fact, it might have the opposite result.

Three men marooned on an Arctic tundra were in a position precarious enough in itself. If one, or perhaps two, of those men were injured, their position at once became desperate. The gash in his own temple, not serious in itself, showed him how easily injuries could come about. He perceived that he was jeopardizing three lives in an attempt to prove by force something that could *not* be proved by force. He was biting off his own propeller to spite his airplane.

He slapped the face of the prostrate sergeant once, but half-heartedly.

"All right, you win," he growled, getting stiffly to his feet. "I can't beat any sense into you. Do as you like."

**T**HE sergeant remained flat on his back, motionless. Only his eyes, rolling in their sockets, followed the movements of the other two as they resumed the task of readying the airplane for flight. It was nearly an hour more before this job was done.

When all was ready, Gray climbed into the forward hatch and went to work on his navigation figures. Heavy took a good look at the terrain, making sure that the empty cans were weighted down with stones, out of their path, and that the remaining full ones were properly stacked. His eye came to rest on Vic Whorf.

"Coming with us?" he asked with barbed sarcasm.

The sergeant got up, reaching for his outer jacket. Heavy saw that he was shivering. He muttered something under his breath and climbed up into the rear end of the nacelle, snapping the hatch closed behind him.

Heavy taxied far back, turned, and warmed the engines carefully. The take-off called for a little delicate handling; to angle off the hump-backed ridge that constituted his runway would spell disaster. The P-61 now had full tanks, but no load in the nacelle. It gathered speed quickly on the gentle downslope and lifted into the air before passing the cache by the rock.

"Two-oh-five," Gray told him calmly, giving the compass heading.

Heavy made a wide, climbing circle to the right. He was at three thousand and still climbing when he passed precisely over the odd-shaped valley. Gray took a last bearing, and they droned on into the vast unknown.

The mountains in places stuck up into the overcast. Rather than go on instruments and then let down blind, Heavy diverged from the course Gray had given him to follow a pass between barren, snow-streaked ranges. It seemed but for a few minutes only—but the navigator, knowing it for enough to spoil their homing on the return by many miles, took quick note of time and compass readings and started recalculating all over again.

The plane sped on over a wilderness of rocky hills and broken defiles while the hour hand crept across the dial. Slowly the country changed complexion beneath them. First, as they edged south across gigantic latitudes, the dead brown of the tundra became scarred by patches of weather-beaten brush. Then in the valleys, where streams foamed between ice-rimmed banks, firs grew green and dense. As one hour stretched into another, these became immense forests, an evergreen carpet stretching as far as the eye could see.

But never a town, a railroad, a hut; not so much as a beaten path to give a sign of human presence. A vast ocean of frozen forest and icy lakes, it was awe-inspiring in its sheer immensity.

Heavy quit staring at the limitless floor below and began to watch the clock and the fuel gauges. He had not expected to see anything here, where the maps showed nothing but meridians of latitude and longitude. His intention was simply to fly to the limit of his turn-around range, allowing a certain margin for safety, fix the spot by a sextant sight, and fly back to the I.B. A feat so simple as to be boring, if everything went well. If it didn't—

Studying his instruments, he muttered, "Fifteen minutes—perhaps twenty," and looked up. Gray was peering ahead with fixed intensity. On the horizon to the right lay the dull gray floor of a lake. In between, and straight ahead, sprawled countless square miles of dark-green forest—the same endless green rug at which he had been staring for hours. But was it the same?

He caught the direction of Gray's stare and was himself transfixed. A tiny, slender line, roughly at right angles to their course, cut the green. In places it was as straight as a ruler; other sections rounded hills in regular, sweeping curves. A road!

Finding a road here was as astonishing as finding an ice cube in the middle of the Sahara Desert. It was no sheep-track, either, writhing in and out of gullies, but a broad, modern highway laid out in geometrical curves to make the most of grade and direction. He blinked, looked again.

It was still there.

Then, to remove all doubt, he saw the vehicles. Mere specks from four-thousand-foot altitude, they were moving at what appeared a snail's pace from left to right, roughly northwest. And not one or two, but a whole group in an evenly spaced line—to Heavy's war-experienced eye, a convoy of trucks.

**W**ITHOUT pausing to think out the consequences, Heavy instinctively tipped the P-61 into a bank to follow that road.

For once the navigator forgot his instruments and his slide rule. With his eye following that thread that coursed far ahead of them, he reached around to grab Heavy's shoulder.

"Look there! What's that?"

The road branched, then branched again. The carpet of forest was slashed by a clearing. Then another—six, a dozen clearings. Some were sprinkled with buildings of various sizes. Some were narrow and very long, the surface paved, with roadways at the ends. Heavy did not need to see the airplanes parked here and there to know that these last were runways, the connecting roadways perimeter tracks.

It reminded him of Foggia, in '44—not one field, but a dozen, spaced so that traffic from one should not interfere with take-offs or landings at the next. Not a hundred hardstands, but a thousand, dispersed along miles of taxi strips. Hangars, shops, control towers, warehouses, barracks and fuel dumps—all there, half hidden, widely scattered, connected by a network of modern, hard-surfaced roads. Here in the wilderness he was staring at the biggest air base in history.

His first reaction was, "What a report this will make!"

But that idea changed almost immediately. He was struck with apprehension and dismay. This was far beyond anything he had expected. He had looked forward to flying over nothing but barren tundra and trackless forest, observed at most by a few aboriginal Eskimo trap-

pers whose stories, when told at an outpost, would be dismissed as fantastic. But now—

Sauce for the goose was sauce for the gander. If he was seeing, he was also being seen. And those men down there in the control towers were not ignorant trappers; they knew one airplane from another when they saw it. Their amazement at seeing a P-61 must equal his, but they would not wait for an explanation of its presence before snapping into action.

Doubtless wires were already crackling with orders, propellers turning, pilots scrambling for cockpits.

Even worse, it dawned on him that what he had started as an adventurous exploit had suddenly overreached itself. His presence here was an intrusion and a threat, the impertinent snap of a finger in the face of a neighbor. He realized in a flash what he had done, and was seized with dismay.

"We're gettin' out of here!" he barked hoarsely.

He saw small, trim fighters begin to rise from two strips.

Gray coolly put down the small camera with which he had been snapping obliques and picked up his navigational notes.

"Heading, twenty-five," he told Heavy calmly. "Until I get another shot at the sun, anyway."

Heavy swung the Black Widow back into the northeast, but did not attempt to get more than two thousand feet. He had no immediate need for altitude, but was going to have desperate need for the gas that altitude would cost him. Besides, the fighters were beginning to crowd his flanks. He watched them closely.

At first it was obvious that they did not know exactly what to do. They could not divine the purpose of this visitor. Cautious, they waited for him to land. He did not land, but streaked off for the northern barrens. They made tentative passes from the sides.

Heavy switched his radio to liaison and twirled the dial. He heard the high-pitched gutturals of a language utterly strange to him. But the tone, regardless of words, was unmistakable; it was the tone of command.

A moment later he heard the crackling hammer of machine guns as the first fighter opened fire.



## CHAPTER V

*A Chase and a Captive*

**R**ELUCTANTLY Heavy reached for his throttles, at the same time plunging for the carpet. There was no question of fighting; he had no guns. He could only run. Fortunately he had speed, and plenty.

The P-61 was heavily overpowered—nothing short of a jet could stay with it. A handful of incendiaries hissed threateningly past his wingtips; then his first power-dive put him beyond reach of bullets. Skimming the treetops at terrific speed, the Black Widow began to leave its pursuers behind.

As soon as he had a clear quarter mile, Heavy eased up on his throttles. Full power meant full speed, but it also meant high fuel consumption. For a few minutes the fighters held their place; then they dropped farther astern. Heavy eased up some more, until he was finally down to normal cruising. There he stayed.

It was evident that when he opened up the fighters could not catch him. When he cruised, they could hang on to his trail by using, perhaps, fifty percent more throttle. This they were content to do. Confident that he had no place to go, that he must soon either turn back or land, they simply stuck there, half a mile behind his tail, while he bored on hour after hour into the wilderness of the northeast.

At first there were six or eight of them, flying roughly in echelon. After about an hour there was a lot of chattering on the radio and all but two turned back and disappeared. Those two continued to keep him stubborn escort into the Arctic sky.

They were still with him when, on the last of his reserve tank, he skimmed the mountain and swooped into the valley beyond. They must have been further astonished to see him land on his strange gear without crashing. For a time they circled overhead, while the crew of the P-61 piled out and labored furiously with gas and oil cans. But then, confident that this odd black craft was down for keeps, they disappeared into the leaden sky to the south.

The Yanks did not slacken their frantic activity.

"What do you suppose they're going to do now?" asked Gray.

"Search me," muttered Heavy anxiously.

Though the sun had vanished and a bitter wind blew from the north, he was sweating. The gash in his scalp had opened up. He must have struck it on the hatch, climbing down. The blood, oozing down in front of his ear, was frozen stiff and solid, so that he looked like a toreador with one exaggerated sideburn.

"You sure that's the last of the gas?" He hurled an empty can toward the gully. "Let's go to work on the oil, then."

"The oil is all taken care of, sir," said Vic Whorf.

Heavy straightened up abruptly. For the first time he realized that the sergeant, too, had been working like mad.

"How come, Sergeant? No more sit-down strike?"

The crew chief reddened, or perhaps the flush was caused by his exertions. "I'll explain later, Captain," he murmured.

The P-61 carried only a half load of fuel now; it left the ground with ease. Just as he flicked the switch that retracted the landing gear, Heavy saw the fighter. It came in a long power glide from the mountain ridge. To keep out of range, Heavy had to turn and climb full out, burning precious fuel for several extra minutes.

Whether it was one of the same that had followed him originally, or another directed by radio, he could not tell. On the side of the waspish fuselage was painted "YUK-7," and a long number. The latter meant nothing to him, since he had not noted the numbers of the first two. At any rate, it was the same type of airplane and hence no faster. After a single attempt to make a pass, the fighter settled back into a stubborn stern chase.

Heavy climbed to three thousand, which was now just below a sullen gray overcast, and cautiously eased down to normal cruising. The fighter hung on, a mile or so behind. They crossed the barren, ice-rimmed coast and headed out over the blank green Arctic sea.

An hour later a snow squall met them. For ten minutes the interior of the cock-

pit was so dark that Heavy switched on instrument panel lights. When they emerged he peered back; the fighter was still coming.

"He must be from that base," mused Gray. "His fuel capacity can't be more than four hours, possibly five. That means he's beyond turn-around range now. But he can't possibly last to our destination and he must know it. What's his idea?"

Heavy scowled. "He's probably got orders to keep an eye on this airplane at all costs, and he's taking his orders literally."

The intercom was on and all three of them were plugged in; yet it was a surprise when Vic's voice broke in hoarsely.

"Go back! Turn back, you fool!"

Heavy snorted through his nose. "You won't have him to worry about much longer, Sergeant! He has to use close to full throttle to keep up with us, cruising. That'll burn him dry pretty quick."

Only a confused mutter from the rear cockpit answered him.

IT WAS a half hour later that Heavy noticed the fighter closing up. Obviously on maximum power, it gradually crept up on the tail of the P-61. Heavy, watching, did not change his settings. It must be on maximum power now, making top speed, he figured. A thin plume of black smoke trailed from its exhaust. It inched closer . . . closer . . .

The fighter's guns clattered off a five-second burst. But the range was still too long, the smoking tracers lashing well below. Heavy's hand touched his throttle but did not move it.

It was the final effort, the last gasp. For the plume of smoke now changed to a dirty gray, broke up into puffs and sputters. The last spoonful of fuel was being sucked through the carburetors of the Yuk. The plane itself lurched, nosed down, and dropped back.

Did a hand gesture under the canopy, in defiance or desperation?

Heavy swung the P-61 into a bank. The fighter was going down, tracing a helpless spiral. The telltale trail of smoke was thinner now. A last black burst marked the final backfire as the engine died. The propeller was windmilling.

Below lay the ice pack, checkered by half-open leads as far as the eye could

reach. Not an island, not a morsel of land broke the eternal horizon, immensely and unapproachably solemn. In the frigid remoteness of these awful latitudes, a man could die without the faintest echo of his last gasp reaching his fellows.

The pilot of the Yuk, moved by the strongest of all instincts, headed for the new ice of a lead which had but recently frozen over. From altitude the difference in blue-green shade was quite apparent, much darker than the old floes, snow-covered and rough with hummocks. He made a belly landing without lowering his wheels, and made it deftly, too.

For perhaps a half a mile he slid smoothly, hardly seeming to lose speed. Then a slight miscalculation in direction, which he was helpless now to correct, brought him to the edge of the lead. A wingtip caught a hummock, the fighter spun once and then cartwheeled among broken ridges into a shattered heap.

Heavy, spiraling above, peered down in grim silence. Then the breath caught in his throat. From that heap a tiny dot emerged, moved across the field of ice a few puny paces.

In the P-61 no one spoke for fully a minute. Heavy, scowling angrily, was nursing his engines as he swept down in a wide curve toward the pack. The curve straightened out. Without a preliminary pass he lined up on the straight section of that frozen lead. The engine mutter dropped to idling, the plane slowed abruptly as the landing gear and flaps went down.

Gray's voice sounded faint and thin over the intercom. "You going to try it, Heavy?" It was not a question so much as a statement of accepted fact. His tone said, "I know you're going to try it and I'm with you!"

Heavy peered tensely through the plexiglas, rimmed with frost.

On either side the pack ice made a jagged horizon, higher than his head, but the newly frozen ice in the lead was like spun glass. The gear gave forth its usual rumble, and they were down, hurtling along that sheet at a hundred miles an hour.

Heavy used the brakes gently, with extreme care. It may have been his imagination that told him the ice was bending like rubber under him. He took

up the whole width of the smooth lead in his turn, and taxied back as close to the edge as he dared.

"For Pete's sake, make it fast, now!" he barked into the intercom. "We're burning gas, remember!"

The navigator and the crew chief piled out through the hatches the moment the airplane came to a halt. Heavy, remaining in his seat, saw them scramble across the rough fringe toward the figure in the one-piece quilted suit. The air that rushed up through the open hatch was bitter cold and he cursed in impatient haste.

The fighter pilot, swathed in thick clothing, seemed almost as broad as he was high. He wore a dazed expression of unbelief in his eyes, which narrowed at the outer corners above prominent cheekbones. The lower half of his face was hidden by a curly bronze beard, the common mark of his national origin.

"Get him in here—get him in!" bel-lowed Heavy, forgetting that the others, down on the ice, were not connected to the intercom.

**T**HE stranger seemed stolid, unhurried, as if he scarcely understood what was happening. The other two half hoisted him up into the rear cockpit.

As soon as Heavy heard the hatch slam shut, he set the P-61 in motion again. He switched to a full tank for the take-off, and was lifting his screeching gear from the ice by the time Gray crawled up forward to the co-pilot's seat.

Heavy climbed no higher than six hundred feet now. There were no mountains between him and the Alaskan shore, and climbing used up the precious fuel that might be needed to make the last few miles. He nursed his mixture down to the leanest he dared and prayed to stretch every drop. That circling, landing, and take-off had cost them hardly ten minutes time. How much gas it had cost he could not be sure.

Gray checked the tanks, one by one. Then he studied a chart spread on his knees and made some fresh calculations. He looked very serious as he plugged in his intercom.

"We going to make it?" asked Heavy bluntly.

The navigator shook his head. "I don't think so. Not the base, anyway. We've got a better chance for Point Barrow. It's about sixty miles nearer, I figure.

Here's the course."

Heavy looked at the figures neatly penciled on the margin of the chart. Without an instant's hesitation, he made his decision. His foot applied left rudder until the plane had shifted course exactly ten degrees. Then he settled down to grow gray hairs while the needles of his fuel gauges trembled closer and closer toward the zero pins.

After half an hour the sun broke through briefly, just long enough for Gray to get a shot with his sextant. He recalculated position rapidly, then checked his figures slowly. The point of his pencil made a tiny prick on the chart.

"How's it look?" asked Heavy.

The navigator muttered soberly, "Keep your fingers crossed."

The sun vanished once more in deep clouds and it turned icy cold. Heavy readjusted his cowl flaps minutely. He could feel the sweat, trickling down in front of his ears, turning to ice on his jowls. His breath came out a thin puff of frosty fog as he scrubbed at the windshield with the heel of his glove.

The ceiling came lower and lower; even at six hundred feet they were sometimes flying through racing scud. The weather was making up for snow—the first blast of Fall. Except for scattered bergs, the ice pack was behind them now. Open water stretched beneath them, a gray-green prairie that lost itself in a murky, vague horizon.

Visibility was indefinite and seemed to vary from minute to minute, and even with direction. At one moment Heavy could see ten miles to his left; the next moment he could barely see a mile to his right. He wondered how soon he would begin to see mirages.

When he was past the mid-point of his last tank of gas, he turned the controls over to Gray and stood up. His joints all creaked, partly from cold and partly from fatigue. He was weary to the point of exhaustion, less from physical exertion than from interminable tension. He moved back through the middle section of the nacelle.

The crew chief sat hunched in the revolving chair, his breath a frosty cloud against the curved plexiglas of the enclosure. At his feet, stretched full length on his side, the bearded fighter pilot lay. His eyes were closed, but Heavy's steps on the metal flooring roused him and he turned his head to look up.

His eyes were a flat, solid brown, showing scarcely any whites, and were as expressionless as a blank wall. Heavy returned his stare in silence. They were within a few feet of each other, yet were separated by thousands of miles. Between them rose the barriers of language, of race, of history, of tradition. Their lives, so far, had been completely unlike. Only now might their deaths be similar.

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## CHAPTER VI

### *Crash Landing*

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**W**HEN he got back to the controls, Heavy felt wearier than when he had left them. The cabin heater was full on, but seemed to do little good. The merciless cold was eating into his flesh, the mounting suspense was gnawing at his will.

For as long as he could, he kept his eyes away from the gas gauge. When finally he looked, he felt as if a hand had seized him by the throat. He blinked and caught his breath. Gripping the control column with both hands, he leaned forward to peer tensely about the wide horizon. He saw just that—the horizon. Nothing else.

He forced words through his dry throat. "Five minutes to go. . . . Prepare to ditch. . . ."

To his own ears the sound of his voice seemed miles away. He noticed that he had forgotten to plug in his intercom—the others had not heard him. For a minute his hands shook, so that he could not hold the flexible cord. Then he jammed it in place and repeated his command.

Gray turned to look at him but made no other move. The words were well-nigh meaningless. The only possible preparation for ditching was inflatable vests, which they already wore under their outer jackets. There was nothing to do. This plane had comparatively little enclosed air space; it would sink within a minute or two.

The freezing water would kill them in twenty minutes, or perhaps half an hour. After that the Mae Wests would merely serve to keep their bodies afloat. It was hardly worth while jerking the triggers that discharged the carbon dioxide capsules.

With every muscle tensed, Heavy listened to the monotonous drone of the powerful engines, his ear attuned for the first choke. Resolutely he kept his eyes from the instrument panel, peering grimly ahead into the shifting gray gloom. A squall, dark with swirling snow, blew across their path and was gone. For a moment the empty sky seemed brighter. The minutes ticked away.

The intercom seemed to explode in his ears. The sergeant's voice, frantic with haste, crowded words into a hopeless jabber.

"What's that, Vic?" Heavy cried.

"Land!" he screamed. "Behind us, Captain—land! Land!"

Heavy twisted in his seat to look over his shoulder. Under a clear patch of sky, a long way off, a headland stood out bold and clear, the rock jutting black and plain through its sheathing of old ice and snow. With shifting visibility, he had almost passed it in the squall—Point Barrow!

He stood on right rudder, hauling the P-61 round in a stiff bank. At the same instant the left engine coughed and shuddered.

His hand leaped to the valves and switches. As quickly as he could he cut the left engine entirely, feathering the prop. The right engine alone would hold altitude, and get them there—if the gas held out. A big IF!

The last pints were being sucked through the lines. The right engine was laboring jerkily, losing power in roughness. He changed the prop pitch, fiddled with the mixture controls. It did no good. The plane lost altitude foot by foot. The surging waves came closer. The headland, like a tantalizing mirage, seemed farther away the lower they sank in the sky.

In agonized frustration Heavy rocked the wings from side to side. As if by a miracle it produced a surge of power. The last hatful of gas in the bottom of the tank rushed into the line, was caught by the suction of the fuel pump. For close to sixty seconds the one engine roared full and strong. Then it choked, gasped helplessly and faded to a futile sputter.

With every nerve in his fingertips Heavy stretched the last glide. There was a bay, nearer than the headland itself, filled with old, rotten ice banked up

on shoals. It was, perhaps, a little better than open water. This was no new-frozen surface, but cakes and floes jammed on edge at crazy angles, badlands molded in ice. There was no question of lowering the gear. He cut all switches and tried to float into a belly landing at minimum speed.

The crash and scream of tortured metal went on and on. It was like riding on a fantastic roller coaster as the big airplane bounced and lurched from one misshapen hummock to the next. Heavy was thrown up into his safety belt, then slammed back against the seat. He saw the nose before him crumple like tissue paper. Then in an instant all motion and sound ceased as if cut off with a knife.

He grabbed the navigator by the shoulder, shook him.

"We made it, Gray!"

The other man howled in protest; his arm was broken.

Heavy helped him gather charts, log, and notebook. The plane lay pitched forward on one wing. The nose was jammed into a mountain of ice and the forward hatch was jammed, useless. They started to creep up the slanting floor of the nacelle to the rear cockpit.

The sergeant had opened the rear hatch but had not descended. He was on his knees by the prostrate form of the bearded pilot.

"Let's get out," barked Heavy. "There's water under this ice, and the ice is rotten— What's the matter?"

Vic Whorf, looking up, croaked, "He's dead!"

"Dead!"

**H**EAVY dropped what he was carrying and went down on his knees. It took him several minutes to discover the truth.

The bearded man's hand was buried under his quilted tunic. When Heavy finally dragged it out, it held a small, blue pistol. He had shot himself through the heart. The sound, muffled by layers of clothing, had gone unnoticed in the roar of the engines. His eyes were closed, his features in rigid repose.

They descended to the ice, and after some struggling got the body of the fighter pilot down through the narrow hatch. It was already beginning to stiffen and was quite heavy. They saw at once that it would be impossible to carry it with them.

The headland was out of sight around a shoulder of the shore. If it was really Point Barrow, there would be a settlement somewhere in the sheltered hollow behind it. With the deceptive visibility, that might be two miles or it might be twenty. The going on foot would be tough on the rugged shore, even after they got off this dangerous floe ice. Men had died in this terrible region within less than twenty miles of help, men better equipped than they were.

In single file they started off across the heaving, jagged floes. In half an hour they had covered something more than a hundred yards. From behind them came a loud report. They turned.

The floor of ice, surged by the tides, was constantly splitting and shattering. It had cracked now where the weight of the plane rested. The crack widened, the floes on either side tilted and cracked again. The plane heeled and started to slip.

Then in one moment, while a man could draw a full breath and exhale it, the P-61 and the body that lay under it vanished together in a swirl of foaming green water.

The three Americans stared at each other in awed silence. Gray muttered something under his breath. Heavy shrugged, and then shivered. They turned slowly toward the bleak shore.

As they struggled over jagged ridges, slid into valleys of slush and leaped seething fissures, Heavy was aware that Vic Whorf was muttering between his teeth. For some time his words were just an unintelligible grumble. Heavy, too weary to listen closely anyway, paid scant attention. But when they had finally set foot on the stony shingle of the beach and paused to rest, the sergeant confronted Heavy with a determined air.

"Captain, how much of this are we going to report?"

Heavy eyed him darkly. "Vic," he said slowly, "I see now that you were right, and I was wrong. I thought I was smart, but I wasn't. Instead of running a successful test, I've stuck my neck into a diplomatic incident that's loaded with dynamite. I had no idea that base was there, of course. But when we report it—"

Vic seized him by both elbows. "No!" he grated. "An incident only becomes an incident when it's published and gets into official channels. Until the big-shots

get hold of it, it's nothing. Who's goin' to say anything, if we don't? Not *them!* They didn't catch us. They let us get away, so they've got no proof. Nothing to protest about. Captain, they'll never say a word!"

Heavy muttered thoughtfully, "They saw that landing gear, at the I.B. They know we've got something that would enable us to reach their bases with fighters, because they saw us do it. But that base—if Washington knew—"

"Why tell 'em!" cried the sergeant. "What's the difference? They've got bases—we've got bases. Okay. But that don't mean anybody wants a war, does it? We darned near kicked over the bucket, we three, but we were lucky. We can save things by keeping our mouths shut. Don't you see? If we keep quiet, there's no incident, no argument, no shooting—nothing. That's what we want, isn't it?"

Gray turned to gesture back toward

the bay. "Everything is under that ice now—plane, films, records. Everything," he glanced at Heavy's hands, "except the chart and the log."

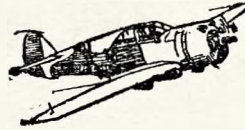
The pilot gnawed his lips in thought. Then slowly he climbed to the crest of a rugged shoulder. From here the headland was visible across two or three miles of sloping tundra, and buildings behind it.

At his feet yawned a crevasse in the rock, at the bottom a mush of snow and ice. He extended his hand, holding the chart with its telltale pencil marks, the flight log and the navigator's notebook—the records of the toughest day he had ever lived through. He sighed wearily, and then let go.

They fell, fluttering, to vanish finally in a sodden splash.

In solemn silence the three nodded at each other and started across the empty tundra.

Snow began falling gently.



## FLYING MAPS

**M**AP-MAKERS of by-gone ages pictured the world as flat. Columbus and Magellan changed that and, by proving the world was a sphere, gave map-makers the problem of showing a round world on a flat map. Global flying changed our idea of the world again, and calls for newer and better maps to show air-distances in true perspective.

**A** GLOBE, of course, gives the only completely accurate picture of the earth's surface, but flat maps or charts are invaluable in that they are easier to study and handle. Mercator solved the problem of putting the world on a flat map by wrapping a rectangular sheet of paper around a globe, tracing the outlines of the land areas and then flattening the resulting chart. This is the most popular of all maps.

**P**RINCIPALLY valuable because it shows true compass directions, the Mercator map nevertheless has many drawbacks. Chief among them is that it distorts the size of land areas and their relationship. On a Mercator map, for example, Greenland appears larger than South America when, actually, it is only one-tenth as great. For airline planning, and to get a true picture of air distances, the Azimuthal Equidistant map was created.

**S**INCE a straight line drawn from the center of the Azimuthal Equidistant map to any point on the globe is really a great circle, it gives the shortest airline distance. But one thing must always be remembered. In the air-age, distances are no longer measured in miles—but hours. And there is no place on earth more than fifty hours away!

# THRILLS IN THE AIR

BY *Jack Kofoed*

## A BABY WAS THE ONLY SURVIVOR IN THIS TRAGEDY

**T**HE National Aviation Corporation flies regularly scheduled routes in China. Many of its pilots are Americans. They like the feel of strange countries; the excitement of changing scenes; the good pay and small expense that go with such a life.

One day a National Aviation plane took off for Shanghai, with Captain John Papajik, of New York, at the controls. Ships in the air were his life. He was an old timer, who had flown everywhere, and knew all there was to know about his business. His ship carried twenty-six passengers, twelve Americans and fourteen Chinese.

Among them were a pair of missionaries, the Rev. and Mrs. R. A. Vick. They had given their lives to spreading religion among the Chinese, never thinking of themselves in terms of success or dollars or comfort. With them was their sixteen months old son, Paul, whom they hoped to consecrate to their own way of life.

The Vicks were sitting quietly in their seats, with little Paul asleep on Mrs. Vick's lap as the plane, piloted by Captain Papajik banked to come into the Shanghai runway. There was nothing to bother about. Everything was under control. Landing and taking off were maneuvered a dozen times a day by every experienced pilot.

As the plane slid toward the hard strip something went wrong with the controls. Papajik fought them with every bit of experience and knowledge he had, but he could not keep the ship under control. It missed the runway,

crashed in the marshes and burst into flames.

When the plane began going down too fast, the Rev. Vick lifted the boy from his mother's lap, and cradled him in his arms, bracing his feet against the expected shock. He saw the horrified whiteness of his wife's face, and whispered a prayer as they rushed earthward.

The plane struck with a smashing impact. There was a burst of flame that shot high into the air. Vick, thrown forward in spite of his efforts, was stunned, the baby still gripped in his arms. There



was enough consciousness in him to grasp what had happened. His wife had been thrown to the floor, ripped loose from her safety belt. The interior of the plane was a shambles, and the glow of

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*EDITOR'S NOTE: This feature by Lieutenant Colonel Jack Kofoed brings you in each issue true stories of gallantry and courage, achievement and adventure in the skies—exciting, inspiring episodes that form a deathless saga of flyers in action.*

*As a former officer of the Eighth Air Force in England, Lieutenant Colonel Kofoed is equipped to give you the "inside story" of many stirring events that will make you proud of America's airmen. In civilian life, Jack Kofoed is famous as a radio commentator, newspaper columnist, sports and air writer.*

fire came from the pilot's compartment. The missionary saw no one around who had not been knocked unconscious by the crash.

Shocked, bruised and bleeding, he staggered to his feet. There was an emergency exit a few feet ahead of him. He looked at Paul. The baby's eyes were wide, and he was crying with fright, but it was apparent he had not been hurt.

The missionary fumbled with the door release. It opened. The heat of the flames

became searing. He looked down. There was a fifteen foot jump to the ground, but he made it without hesitation, holding the child tight to his breast. It was the last he knew . . . the last he was ever to know, for he died a few hours later of a fractured skull. It was a strange quirk of fate that the only survivor of twenty-six passengers and four crewmen of that ill fated National Aviation plane should have been a sixteen-months-old baby!

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## THE AIR FORCE MAKES A DARING JUNGLE RESCUE

**I**T WAS in May, 1947, when the big bomber conked out over the green hell of a Nicaragua jungle. How can you tell why such things happen? The crate had checked out in good order, but something went wrong. The B17 was traveling from the Canal Zone to Kelly Field, the West Point of the air. For officers and enlisted men it was just a routine flight. You took off from one spot, and set down on another. That's all there was to it . . . unless something went wrong.

When it happened, there was nothing to do about it, but pancake in on the best bit of terrain. There weren't many open spaces in the jungles, and if you hit mahogany, there'd be a crackup that might kill everybody. The airmen knew what the score was. Calculated risks. It sounded silly, but that's the way it was.

Over the inter-com the pilot's voice sounded easy and without strain. When you are the captain, responsibility is yours. A quaver in the voice . . . a wrong word . . . and panic can spread. Panic is the worst thing in the world. It rides over everything; makes men crazed beasts.

The pilot was a young man in his twenties, but when you guide a bomber through the skies you grow older than your years. He told the radio man to send out an SOS . . . informing possible rescuers what was likely to happen; and their radio fix, so they could be found in a minimum passage of time.

Routine. That's all. It sounds easy. But, every man in that plane knew what might happen, and their guts crawled into their throats, and made them dry. They didn't lose their nerve, though. Every man was in his post, and ready for any eventuality, from the pilot to

the sergeants. They were scared. Hell! Everybody is scared at a moment like this, but nobody was scared enough not to know what to do if the worst came to worst.

The cool, detached words of the radio man went into headquarters at Morrison Field, near West Palm Beach, Florida. There were veterans at Morrison . . . veterans of air-sea rescue, of hurricane hunting, of combat in the air against Germans and Japanese. The men in West Palm Beach were young just as were the men in the bomber over the Nicaraguan jungle.

There was no excitement. Everything was routine like the flight from Balboa to Kelly Field. Operations were alerted. The crews roused out of whatever they were doing from sleeping to playing gin rummy. Planes were checked and gas upped. Supplies were assembled. The medical officer and aerial photographers were alerted. These fellows knew the jungle. You just don't fly over, and see what you want. The green hell covers everything. A plane that crashes can be covered by the jungle growth within a week.

Living in the swamp heat and muck, with snakes and insects and insufficient food and water, makes each week seem like a year. Weak men die. Even strong men shrink to skeletons. Rescue squads leave nothing to chance. Seeking a plane in the jungle was like sweeping thousands of miles of the Pacific for a life raft, but nobody hesitated. This was their job.

It's a long way from West Palm Beach to Nicaragua, but the planes took off . . . looking for the spot in the green hell, marked on their chart by the radio fix.



An excited navigator could be wrong by a degree, and such an error would spread the search over a wide area. A smashed plane could slam into the mud under palms and palmetto brush, all the lush vegetation of the jungle, and be hidden, with the bodies of its crew. If any escaped, they would wander emaciated and half crazed until they died of the horror.

So, the crews went looking. It wasn't just a problem to them. Some of the guys in the downed bomber were pals. They had wives and kids, who would be



worrying and waiting and depending on the men who flew out of West Palm Beach.

Civilians don't know what a rescue job like this entails. They think it's just a question of flying to the longitude-latitude point indicated by the navigator before his plane hit. Simple. Just a mathematical problem a college freshman should be able to figure out.

Yeah? In the first place, it meant flying thousands of miles . . . criss-crossing back and forth across the jungle, when they didn't see the plane where calculations indicated it should be. Human eyes are fallible, but the eye of the camera is less liable to error. The cameramen shot thousands of feet of film that were developed and studied by photo experts. A plane is a pin point in a picture taken from high altitudes . . .

a pin point for experts to discover. The work was not only in the rescue planes, but in laboratories, and operations office.

They finally found where the bomber had fallen. That was fine, but knowing the spot, and getting the men out was another matter. Do you know what jungles are . . . how difficult they are to penetrate? When the downed ship was centered, a doctor and supplies were parachuted. There might be desperately hurt men down there. There were certain to be hungry men.

Binding up wounds, and feeding air-men who have hit the ground was just a start . . . a temporary measure. Ground men were landed as close as possible to the scene of the accident. With machetes, they hacked their way through the tropic growth, sweating, muscles aching. They opened a space in the green hell, where a helicopter could set down, bearing other necessities, and able, a few at a time, to take out the crewmen.

There was a revolution in Nicaragua at the moment, and little help to be had from the people of the country. They were too occupied with their own business of living and dying. But, the Air Force was throwing all its personnel and materiel into saving its own. Nothing was going to stop them . . . nature or the wars of men, or anything the elements could do.

Some of the bomber crew were hurt. They were taken out first. The others followed. Two had sought help by hacking their way toward what they thought might be a civilized community. It took several days to find these men, and pick them up. But, eventually, the job was done. The crewmen were brought out, and the skeleton of the B17 left to corrode and rust in the jungle heat and moistness.

Nobody bothered to figure what the cost of the rescue was in dollars and cents. Who cared? American lives are much more important than greenbacks . . . more important than sweat and effort and sound thinking.

The Air Force had gone into the green hell, and brought back its men, and that was all that mattered.

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## DICK MERRILL'S A GREAT PILOT—AND HERE'S WHY!

**O**NE of the great pilots of all time is Captain Dick Merrill, senior Eastern Air Lines star, who also has the distinction of having one of the prettiest

wives of America, Toby Wing, the blond ex-actress.

Back in 1935 Dick . . . who has something like 25,000 hours in the air to his credit . . . made what he still considers the most exciting flight of his career. It was from Kansas City to the Magellan Straits at the southernmost tip of South America.

Merrill left Kansas City in a snow-storm on December 4. There were no radio beams to follow. He borrowed maps whenever he could; wherever he landed. Sometimes there weren't any, and sometimes they were not very accurate. During those four days Dick flew through all four seasons, and most of the weather was atrocious. Thirteen days after he started, the veteran Eastern Airliner was back on his Miami-New York run, a commonplace job to a fellow who had done practically everything there is to do in the air.

In 1936 Merrill had one of his few accidents. He pancaked a passenger ship into a hill near Manhattan, and fractured his jaw, but the passengers came through all right. A little later, he made a round trip Atlantic flight with the night club star, Harry Richman, as passenger. That was a day when flying the ocean was one of the most daring feats man could accomplish, and we shouldn't forget it just because it has become commonplace.

In the following year Dick made the first commercial round-trip Atlantic flight with paying passengers. As a matter of fact, Merrill has quite a number of firsts to his credit. He had been flying for a quarter century when he took off from Burbank, California, in 1947, with his sights set on Miami. He wanted a record, and made it. The Constellation traversed the continent in six hours and fifty minutes. Later, he took the plane from Miami to New York in three hours and twenty-nine minutes, which was also a record. Dick also piloted a Boeing Stratosphere cruiser from Seattle to

Washington, D. C., in six hours and nine minutes.

Merrill is no kid. He couldn't be, because he started his aerial career in 1922, which is a long time back, and in a day when planes were hardly more than box kites. He has never found monotony in his career, whether trying for records or following a regularly scheduled run he knew as well as he knew his own home.

Eastern is willing to make Dick Merrill an important executive of the company, with a plush office, a pretty secre-



tary and plenty of importance. Dick doesn't want it. An office would hem him in. He loves the wide expanse of the sky, and the ground thousands of feet below.

"I think I'll be able to keep flying until I'm sixty," he says. "Maybe I'm like a fighter, who's always saying his last bout is the final one of his career. I don't want to stop piloting planes until I find out I've lost the touch, and this seems like a pretty fair distance away. I hope so. No one who has ever known the thrill of taking a ship off the runway wants to give it up. It's the greatest job in the world. There isn't anything else to touch it, and you can take my word for that."

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## A FANTASTIC PARTNERSHIP OF EARTH AND SKY

**W**HEN men first took to fighting in the air, they were strictly on their own. Their ships were rickety, and if they were beaten, they died, for they had

no parachutes, with which to make their escape.

Now, the pilot in the air, and his teammate at a radar station on the ground,

work together in fantastic cooperation that would have been considered black magic only a few years ago. Take the ground intercept stations of a radar network as an example.

An officer sits at a panel. He sees only a spot of light where his pilot is in the air. Then, another spark moves in. Since the spotter knows what American fighters are up in the dark, and where they are, this must be an enemy. Not surely, but probably. He asks a question of the newcomer, and gets no answering signal. Now, the radar man is certain. He marks its course and altitude. Then, he calls his own pilot, giving target range, altitude and estimated speed.

Up in the blackness, the night fighter sees nothing. He knows, through the miracle of science, that an enemy plane is ten miles away, and quickly coming closer. He starts to climb. If the man on the ground has calculated correctly, he should come up on the enemy's tail. But, so far as the pilot can see with human eyes, there is no one near, and the roar of his engine prevents him from hearing another plane approach.

The fighter turns on his finder. The orange colored gauge is blank for a moment. Then, he catches it. A tiny light moves across the gauge. The man on the ground is as right as rain. The pilot says "contact" in a voice that is tight with excitement, so his earthbound teammate knows the fight is about to begin.

Still, the fighter is unable to see the plane and the man he is about to destroy, but the light grows bigger and bigger, which means the enemy ship is getting closer. He looks through his windscreen, trying to pierce the darkness. Then, the plane comes within range of his vision,

an almost formless shape in the dim moonlight. She is several hundred feet above, and apparently quite unconscious of any danger.

Up goes the pilot, closing in fast. The doomed man above still thinks he is



alone in the sky. When he is close enough, the American lets go with his tracers. They are long, yellow fingers reaching through the velvet night. Sparks bristle, where the armor piercing incendiaries go in. Other sparks dance along the wing. Suddenly one of the gas tanks blows up in an obscene burst of color. One of the wings disintegrates, and the enemy falls in a tight spin. He is easy to follow, because the pilot is sitting in a holocaust of flame.

The night fighter draws a long breath, and calls his team-mate on the ground to report what has happened. Has there ever been a more fantastic partnership in all the history of war?

## LEATHERNECK PILOTS MADE AN AMAZING RECORD!

**T**HE Marines have always been the smallest unit of our fighting forces, and this is just as true of its air arm as of its ground forces. The leathernecks have comparatively few fliers, but they are of the best.

Despite a paucity of numbers, no less than 120 Marine fighting pilots became aces during the last war. An ace gains his rating by shooting down five enemy planes. Top man was Lt. Col. Greg Boy-

ington, with 28 to his credit; Major Joe Foss runner-up with 26. Among them, this gallant 120 of the Marine air arm were credited with shooting down 959 enemy planes, a marvelous and breath-taking record.

An even dozen died in action. Seven were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest award within the gift of the American people. They upheld to the limit the reputation for cour-

age and resourcefulness that has always been part of Marine Corps tradition.

These fighter pilots were all young men. They had to be, because years take away the physical capabilities and lightning reactions needed to keep a man alive through aerial combat. And, since rank is important in the service, it might be interesting to break down these aces according to the rank they held.

Twelve of the 120 were lieutenant colonels.

They were credited with destroying 122½ planes, or an average of ten each, with Col. Boyington having the top bag of 28.

There were twenty-eight majors, with a total bag of 243½, or an average of about 8.7. Maj. Joe Foss led the gold leaf

wearers with 26 enemy planes destroyed.

The captains numbered 49, with 378 1/3 enemy ships on their charts, an average of 7.7 each. Head man among the two bar boys was Captain Kenneth A. Walsh, with 21.

There were 24 first lieutenants among the aces, topped by 1st Lt. Robert Murray Hanson, with 25. Their groups' total statistics were 170 1/3, an average of 7.1.

Only six shavetails showed their faces in this select company, with 37 1/3 planes and an average of 6.1. The leader was 2d Lt. Caswell Dean with seven. The only ace not commissioned was Warrant Officer Henry B. Hamilton, who destroyed seven planes before being killed in action.

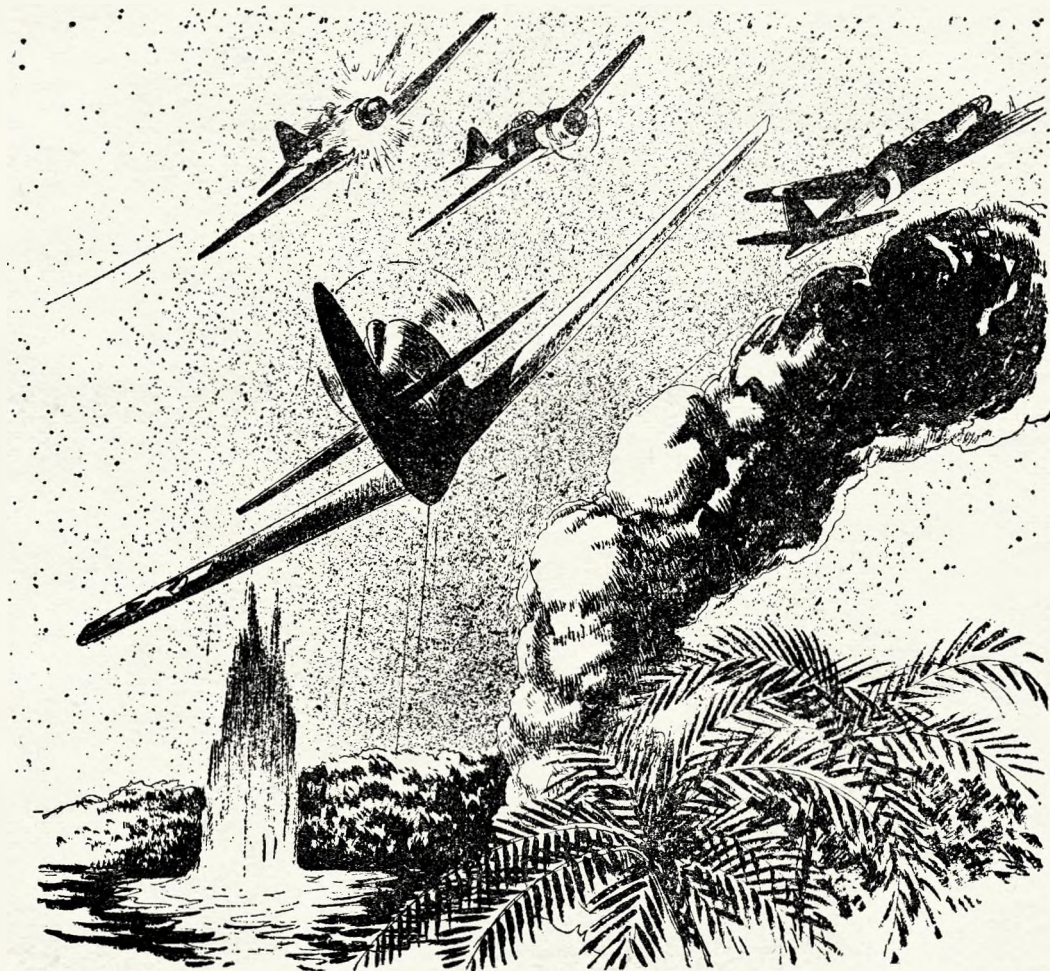


## PILOT'S QUIZ

**A**RE you a hot-rock when it comes to air-info? Do you know the difference between a blip and a blimp? The following questions are designed to test your knowledge of flying and add to your store of information as well. Give yourself 10 points for each question you answer correctly. A score of 0 to 30 is unmentionable. 40 to 60 gives you a co-pilot's rating. 60 to 80 makes you boss. 80 to 100? The gremlins must have helped!

1. The first heavier-than-air craft to lift a human passenger was not an airplane. It was a ----- ?
2. Incidentally, what are gremlins?
3. How is a plane's "landing run" defined?
4. Can you unscramble the following pairs, correctly matching the name of the famous plane with that of the flier associated with it? a. Spirit of St. Louis—General Carl Spaatz. b. Question Mark—Wiley Post. c. Winnie Mae—Charles A. Lindbergh.
5. Tricycle landing gear, retractable wheels, flying wing, and twin tails—would you say these plane inventions came before or after 1920?
6. What is the advantage of a "throat microphone" over the conventional hand type?
7. In what cities are these famous airports? If you get two out of three, score yourself correct. a. Tempelhof Airdrome. b. LaGuardia Field. c. Lambert Field.
8. Is the pitot-static tube—a. a radio signaling device? b. an intake for a plane's airspeed indicator? c. a wind tunnel?
9. Which one of these engines is air-cooled? Be careful, this is a tricky one. a. Rolls-Royce. b. Allison. c. Hispano-Suiza.
10. What man, more than any other, is associated with the development of the helicopter?

*(Answers are on page 129—if you must look!)*



Suds' cannon shell smashed the Zero amidships

# THE LAUNDRY PILOT

by JOSEPH BLAUFOX

*It's a case of do or dye  
for Suds Malone when he's  
relegated to the washbins!*

**S**UDS MALONE's dark brown eyes flashed angrily. He glared at the half-ugly expression on the face of the squadron leader poised in front of him.

"Okay, Lieutenant," he said quietly. "You're the skipper of the squadron and I've got to take your orders. I'll stay in the rear of the formation. I'll take what the Japs have to offer right in *my* unprotected tail. But get this," he added with emphasis, almost sticking a long, lean finger in the other's eye, "I'm looking out for myself from now on!"

"That's what you think," came the surly reply.

With controlled anger Suds studied the overconvexed profile of his superior officer and ached to push it back to Pekinese proportions.

He had longed to do that for years. But somehow it never happened. Principally because the other weighed at least thirty pounds more than Suds; stood almost a foot higher; spread sideways at the shoulders three inches more to the left, and three more to the right than Suds. And the flyer knew instinctively that he would never make it. Suds and the squadron leader were more than superior officer and pilot. They were cousins.

They had been raised about two blocks from each other. Suds Malone came from the shanty Irish side of the family, his cousin Tim Malone was broken off from the upper crust of the clan. And the crusty Tim never for a single minute let Suds forget that.

Tim's father founded the family fortune on a hodful of bricks he lugged up a rickety wooden ladder years before. But now the highbrow branch of the family preferred to leave that part of their history mouldering under the mortar of the Malone genealogy.

**A**T HOME Suds and Tim lived two blocks apart in the midtown section of Manhattan. But what a difference those two blocks made. On Suds' street the subway clacked high over the ground; where Tim lived the Central buried itself in the earth. Cobblestoned Third Avenue and asphalted Park Avenue were separated by very chic-chic Lexington, and that was something else Tim never let Suds forget. But Suds made up in brains what he lacked in bulk and civilian social standing. Tim recognized this and feared it—and inherently envied and disliked his cousin for it.

Suds enlisted in the Army as a buck private, learned his job well, transferred to the Army Air Force and through promotions he earned legitimately his present rank of second lieutenant. Tim, on the other hand, immediately got into Officer's Candidate School through a senatorial appointment his father was able to manipulate for him. His grades were so close to the passing edge, that if the examining officer had not blinked his good eye Tim would have flunked out.

His present job as squadron leader had been obtained through seniority rather

than ability, because so intense had been the fighting for months around his area in the Pacific, that several squadron leaders had been shot down until not one officer of sufficient rank save Tim Malone remained to fill the job.

And now Tim awaited the promotion that went with his new assignment. To keep Suds from being moved up, he refused to recommend him for his silver bars when the wing C.O. asked him, in view of Suds' fine record in the squadron, if he would not promote his cousin. He told the C.O. he would not, and gave some flimsy reason for not doing so. When Suds learned of this, it added fuel to the fire of his discontent.

Even as a kid, Suds knew that Tim resented his keener intelligence. Tim resented the higher marks Suds got in school. By using his heavier build as a physical threat, coupled with his fat bankroll, Tim often embarrassed and humiliated Suds, especially on dates when he could splurge and Suds couldn't.

Now in the Army Air Force, as Suds' superior officer, Tim was once again on top. Here he really sat in the seat of the mighty. He enjoyed his position and took advantage of it to ride Suds on the least provocation. Perhaps now Tim Malone hated Suds more than ever for the man from under the El had shot down five Jap aircraft, and his hot rock cousin was credited with a puny pair.

That Suds happened to be in Tim's squadron at the moment was due to a fortuitous oversight on the part of the Dispersal Center. When Suds arrived in the Solomons, the captain in charge did not know the relationship between the two, nor did he know they had been at cross purposes all their lives. Without consulting either of them, he put the newcomer in the same squadron with Tim thinking that the two men of the same name would take to each other.

When Tim became leader of his squadron, to belittle and keep Suds down and under him in more than rank, he maliciously and deliberately, without making it obvious to the others in the squadron that he was doing so, stuck Suds in the dead spots where he would either be bored to tears, or laid open to greater risks from enemy attack. Quietly he pressured Suds until the suppressed steam in the pilot's soul could be suppressed no longer, and it almost blew off on the morning patrol for which he was

now being reprimanded.

Suds' resentment to the reprimand was only natural. For the day before Tim had ordered him to fly a rear position in the formation where in a hot combat his tail was shot away and he had to jump to save himself. Instead of permitting him to knock off for the day on his return to the squadron that afternoon, Tim had ordered his cousin out again on a late afternoon mission again spotting him on the rag-tag end of the formation.

Suds was redheaded, with a redheaded Irishman's temper. His lean face was almost as red as his hair as he turned suddenly away from Tim Malone, his head down, his eyes peering at the ground. As if he were looking for a good sized brick. His thin lips tightened over his flawless teeth as he muttered bitterly to himself: "To hell with him! He can stick me in the rear if he wants to, but he can't make me stay there. I'll show him!"

**H**IGH in the blue on the following day Sud's intercom cackled, "Attention! Airacobras!"

It was Tim Malone's voice calling to the squadron of P-39's escorting a flight of Liberators loaded with bombs for the Jap base on New Georgia Island.

"Stick close to the 24's and keep them covered—squadron of Zeros at three o'clock!"

Suds studied the azure from the unobstructed vantage of his ship's bubble, observed a battery of white scudding clouds traveling at fifteen thousand feet above the boiling Pacific and then saw the Japs. There were at least forty of them. The Liberators were sandwiched in between the two flights of Airacobras—one flight protecting them from below, the other from above.

Tim's voice came through Suds' headset again.

"Evade combat!" he ordered. "Keep the bombers covered. We're only five miles from our objective." He directed his next order to Suds. "You, Malone, don't ride so close in on that right rear bomber. Move back!"

Tim seemed always always to single him out. This new order was an odd one. He should have ordered him to get nearer to it and cover it. Why off and away from it?

The Jap formation of Zeros, too, seemed to be evading combat with the Yanks. They, too, had a batch of bomb-

ers they were escorting to some objective.

The evasion on both sides galled Suds. Since the Liberators were so close to their objective, why couldn't Tim send them in alone now, leaving the fighters free to knock out the Nips and prevent them from bombing an American base. More of Tim's incompetence!

As Suds watched the Japs, he saw one of them cut out of the formation and nose up for altitude. Several minutes later, the man was about five hundred feet above and behind him. Suds spoke into his throat mike.

"Malone to Squadron Leader. Jap at 6 o'clock and right on my tail. It's the same guy who knocked me down yesterday. I recognize his markings. He's getting ready to jump me again. Over."

His face flushed at the order that came through his headphones.

"Evade combat!"

The Jap was roading down behind Suds and his Mitsubishi guns were chattering.

"But he's diving on me!" shouted back Suds.

And the dull monotone that was Tim's voice came through again.

"Evade combat. That's an order!"

Suds thought he detected a slight chuckle in Tim's voice. He almost screamed into his mike in uncontrolled fury: "What the hell are you trying to do, have me murdered?" The chattering, staccato sound of the Jap's guns was closer. Suds looked up quickly as the shadow of a Zero fell across his Cobra. The Zero was not alone now. There were three others with him. Certainly Tim Malone could see that as well as he could. A large, gaping hole suddenly appeared in his right wing.

"They've smashed a hole in my right wing," Suds shouted again to Tim. "They'll blow this Cobra apart and me with it!"

"Evade combat," came back the order.

Then Suds saw a flaming red. "The hell I will!" he screamed. But Tim didn't hear that. A stream of Jap slugs entered the plexiglass canopy over Suds' head, and ended by spraying the radio transmitter components all over the inside of the cockpit. Suds wasted no more time. The Cobra fell over on its right side as he suddenly jammed on right stick and left rudder, and it dropped in a sickening slide slip out of the line of Jap fire.

**H**IS finger fell upon the gunbutton. His eyes gleamed eagerly and narrowed as he nosed up again looking for a kill. He wanted particularly to get the man who thought he was such a push-over. He pressed his eye to the sightcup and waited breathlessly as the man fell full upon his bead. Slowly, firmly, he pressed down on the button with a grim determination to wipe the Jap pilot out of the sky. All seven guns poured a stream of burning death into the blunt snout of the oncoming Mitsubishi.

Suds saw his tracers draw a phosphorescent, elliptical pattern between the leading edge of his ship and the belly of the Zero. The nose of the Jap reared as the Yank lowered his fire and drove it full into the Zero's heart. Another of the attacking Japs fell in his ringsights as his first victim blew to splinters in the air behind him.

With one eye pressed against the rubber cup on his telescopic sight, the other caught a battery of six other Zeros winging past him in the direction of his own bombers. But he gave no thought to them because two Mitsubishis were diving on him simultaneously from the left and right sides of his P-39, spraying his crate with bullets.

His guns were suddenly silenced and he was holding the useless upper half of his neatly sliced control column with the electric wires which operated the guns and cannon cut and dangling from its end. Only a quick dive with throttle wide open kept the next bursts from slicing into his chest. But the Jap pilots managed to send their lead into the screaming Allison behind Suds' seat, and the mortally wounded power plant coughed and died.

Suds quickly grabbed his rubber dinghy. Unfastening his safety belt, he kicked the door to his cabin open and jumped frantically into the sky just as another burst of Jap fire smashed his plexiglass canopy to splinters and sprayed the back of his empty chair, slashing it to ribbons.

As he dived head first in a delayed parachute jump—he remembered not to open his chute too close to a Jap's waiting guns—they followed him down like vultures waiting for the easy kill when he'd hang helpless from his shroud lines. Suds plummeted through the thin air for ten thousand feet. At two thousand feet the Nips abandoned the trail of their

plunging prey and swung up again to rejoin their squadron. Suds yanked his ripcord then, and watched the white shining nylon open up above him like the fresh petals of a gardenia.

A mile off he saw a small, jungle-capped island and men in a large rubber dinghy paddling toward the shore. Just off-shore, its twin tail sticking up out of the shallow water, its nose buried deep in the sands beneath it, lay a battered Liberator—one of those he had been ordered to protect—the one doubtless, that he had laid open to Jap attack when he was forced to leave it unprotected.

**T**HE Court Martial was brief. The findings were simple and quick. Or so they seemed. Suds Malone stood in front of the Operations Office under the protective shade of a group of mangrove trees and listened to the C.O. read him the riot act.

“ . . . and it is the finding of this Court Martial that the accused deliberately and willfully disobeyed the orders of his superior officer, caused the loss of a Liberator bomber in addition to endangering the lives of its crew, and the success of the mission upon which his escort squadron and the bomber squadron were embarked.”

That sudden, unexpected attack by superior numbers of the enemy from the rear and his forced departure in an effort to save himself from death did not count at all in his behalf! He had disobeyed the order to evade combat, this, according to Tim Malone, had laid the entire mission and the men open to attack.

What in heaven's name was he to have done, Suds thought, let them murder him? What was the matter with them? Couldn't they see there was nothing else he could have done but fight back? The whole court martial proceedings were stupid.

Out of the clamor of his thoughts he suddenly heard the firm voice of the Commandant continuing with the sentence: “Therefore, it is the decision of this Court Martial that the said officer, Second Lieutenant Michael “Suds” Malone, be stripped of his rank in the Army Air Force of the United States of America and that he be dishonorably discharged from its rolls.”

Suds paled at the sentence. His eyes filled at the injustice of it and he low-



ered his head so that the others standing about would not see how deeply he was affected by it. Colonel Harley removed his glasses and looked up at Suds.

"Unfortunately," he said mercilessly, "as much as we should like to carry out this sentence at once, our isolated location and the lack of transportation make it impossible to do so fully. You will therefore temporarily assume the duties of a private without rank and pay until such time as transportation can be arranged."

All that Suds had said in his own defense had availed him nothing. The Colonel had not finished.

"Until such time as the sentence can be carried out," Suds heard the Colonel say, "you will be attached to the base laundry under orders from Sergeant Collins of the Quartermaster Corps."

Suds saluted the Colonel, turned to Sergeant Collins who was standing nearby, marched hurriedly off with him to a small, bamboo hut that housed the washing machines.

Suds burned with shame and anger under the unmerited disgrace. What added to the broken pilot's discomfort was the half smile he had seen playing on his cousin's mouth when the sentence was being read. Under his breath he cursed Tim Malone and swore that someday, somehow, he would make him pay for the disgrace. Just what he would do he didn't know. "But I'll find a way," he mused to himself.

Sergeant Collins was the only person who was in any sense sympathetic and understanding. "I wouldn't take it too much to heart," he said. "Worse things than being kicked out could have happened."

"But I had to defend myself," said Suds. "I just couldn't let those Jap pilots murder me! The order was deliberately given to get me into a jam." Then he added, "And nobody came through for me—nobody!"

**C**OLLINS showed Suds—an appropriate name now for an equally appropriate job—how to operate the electric washing machines. The gasoline engine had to be primed and started. He explained the switches and the speed at which the gasoline engine was to be run.

"Here are some duds to be cleaned," Collins said, handing Suds two chino khaki uniforms. "One of them's the

C.O.'s," he explained. He was a big man, Collins, with the bulk of him above the waist, and a goodly portion of him extending out and down from it. His big red chins, hung from his jewels like beef on a butcher's rack, but he had a pair of big, kindly blue eyes that were eloquent in their silent sympathy.

He explained the proportion of chlorine to water, or soft soap to water, depending on the stuff that was to be washed. He spoke to Suds not without some respect in spite of the change in the younger man's Army status. Suds was an apt pupil and he took over after only a couple of lessons with Madame La Collins.

Left to himself and the company of a mealy-mouthed wisecracker named MacWilliams to whom he took an immediate dislike, and who quite consciously returned the affection, he started to put the two uniforms into the washing machine. MacWilliams had just been given two stripes to pin on his shirtsleeves and he felt the importance of his new rank. Felt it more in the presence of a broken officer in whose pale face two gray eyes burned with flaming hate.

"How does it feel, civilian," he asked, "to be pushin' a throttle on a one-horser after shovin' a twelve hundred horsepower Cobra around?" He looked down at Suds bent over the washer door as he was plugging the uniforms into it and his face was covered with a nasty grin.

Suds didn't like the man's tone. He particularly didn't like the word civilian. He didn't reply but kept on filling the washing machine with clothes.

"What's 'a matter, baby," taunted the new corporal, "cat got your tongue?"

Suds still ignored the man. As he was putting the blouse of one of the uniforms into the washer he noticed the name on the label. It was Tim Malone's. He threw it into the opening with a vicious epithet.

Collins had warned him to be careful with those uniforms as they were the only ones the C.O. and the other officer had left now. "The others they got is rags an' they can't wear 'em," he said. But Suds slammed the door shut on the machine and let the hot water in.

MacWilliams was getting thoroughly riled at Suds' silence and began swearing. "Who in blazes do you think you are," he said, "General MacArthur?"

The machine would run for half an

hour, Collins had explained. It would work automatically. It would wash them, rinse them, dry them partly, and then the job was done, Suds would need only to hang them outside in the sun to dry completely.

Suds added the right amount of soft soap and water and started the gasoline engine. The machine also caught on.

"I must be crazy to talk to a punk like you," MacWilliams snarled. "Nobody else does for a damn good reason."

Suds could not go on ignoring that kind of talk.

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, soldier," he warned, "or you'll get your teeth kicked in." Suds was losing patience with the man.

"By who?"

"It's by 'whom,' not by 'who,' you illiterate idiot," retorted Suds.

MacWilliams' naturally pale face grew livid.

"Don't you call me illiterate," he screamed angrily. "I ain't illiterate. My father married my mother and I'll kill you if you start talk like that!"

Suds stood suddenly upright, his eyes fairly bulging with surprise and amusement. He could hardly believe he'd heard correctly. He tried not to laugh. But he could not contain himself and he exploded. The seeming ridicule increased MacWilliams' fury. He came for Suds with clenched fists. Both men were about evenly matched in height and weight. As he came on, Suds squared to meet the attack.

"Don't you laugh at me!" shrieked the infuriated MacWilliams and his fist shot out aiming badly for Suds' face. "You stinkin' Yank-killer!" he added.

**T**HAT was a mistake. The laugh was suddenly wiped from Suds' face with the precision of wet rag wiping chalk from a blackboard. His jaw tightened. His lips compressed until they were almost invisible. He hadn't killed or caused to be killed anybody in this man's army. His own fist suddenly shot up and out from his hip. There was a resounding crack of bone against bone, and MacWilliams' nose leaked crimson. The corporal went back head over heels in a sickening somersault and landed under two of the washing machines.

With an epithet of disgust with himself, Suds turned on his heel and stamped out of the laundry hut and headed for

the jungle before his hot temper drove him to knock MacWilliams into a coma.

When he returned to the hut a half hour later to remove his washing, Collins, MacWilliams and Colonel Harley were waiting for him.

Colonel Harley addressed him.

"The crimes for which you were court-martialed, Malone, weren't enough. You had to attack with intent to kill a non-commissioned officer in the United States Army."

Suds would have laughed at that last one if he'd dared. But he felt he was in deep enough trouble without offending Harley personally.

"He provoked the attack, sir," Suds defended but with respect. "He called me a stinking killer—which I am not, sir."

Harley turned to MacWilliams.

"Did you say that to the prisoner?" he asked.

Suds winced under the word "prisoner."

MacWilliams looked up into Harley eyes and without blinking a retina lied like a true louse. "I did not, sir! He hit me when my back was turned."

Suds had all he could do to keep from jumping down MacWilliams' throat.

The washing machine in which Suds was laundering the C.O.'s uniform along with the other's had stopped.

"Apparently you can't keep out of trouble, Malone," Harley continued. He was interrupted by a frightened cry from Sergeant Collins who had opened Suds' washing machine door and withdrew some of the laundry. Harley stopped and turned quickly about to face the red-faced Collins.

"What is it, Sergeant?" he asked.

Collins turned at Suds.

"What did you use in this machine to clean these uniforms," he almost shrieked at him.

"Soft soap, like you said," replied Suds puzzled.

"It ain't so," cried Collins in a piping voice. "You used pure chlorine!"

"I tell you I used only soft soap and water," insisted Suds.

Collins held up one of the uniforms for the others, and especially Suds, to see. "Look at this!" he cried. The uniform had gone into the washer chinokhaki and come out a dirty white.

Suds' eyes fairly popped. He gave MacWilliams a quick look of anger. The

man drew back quietly behind Colonel Harley.

"That settles it," cried the Colonel. "Put this man in the guardhouse, sergeant!"

"But I didn't use chlorine, Colonel," protested Suds.

"Then how come these uniforms are bleached white?" demanded the furious sergeant.

"Ask MacWilliams," roared back Suds. "Maybe he can answer that."

MacWilliams paled visibly at the accuracy of Suds' guess. To get even with Suds for clipping him on the jaw and dropping him among the washing machines, he had emptied a gallon container of the straight undiluted chlorine into the washing machine drum that contained the uniforms, knowing that Suds would get the blame for it.

"I wouldn't know nothin' about that," he lied again.

In his excitement at seeing his own uniform bleached white, Colonel Harley forgot he had no guardhouse on the island and when Sergeant Collins reminded him of it he cried: "Then build one! This man's dangerous." But he settled for confining Suds to his tent under armed guard.

**W**HEN Tim Malone saw what had happened to his only decent uniform, he hit the top of his tent and was for hanging his cousin from the strongest branch of the nearest teak tree.

Suds was sorry for Harley—but as far as Tim was concerned—this was the first good break he had had since he hit the island. He'd have kissed MacWilliams if the man had also put a pinch of two of chlorine in Tim's coffee.

The uniforms worn by Tim Malone and C.O., which were used as alternates, were unfit for further wearing and were due for a good going over themselves. They had to turn them over to Collins and were forced to wear the shirts and trousers of whitely bleached khaki. To make matters more embarrassing for them, they were chided by their fellow officers on transferring to the Navy. Even their denims were in the laundry and the next job on the Japs, due to take off in an hour would have to be done in their whites. And white makes a swell target in the black cockpit of a fighter—a veritable bulls-eye!

Suds stood in the opening of his tent

and watched the Cobras whine off the steel flight strips that covered the soft dust of the island and made up the runways. Bombers were already over the blue Pacific and waiting for them at the rendezvous. The giant fronds on the palm trees, waving under the gentle pressure of the warm trade winds, shook in sudden frenzy and rustled frantically under the hurricane blasts kicked up by the P-39 propeller slipstreams.

One by one the Cobras swung gracefully into the air, roared over the coastline, and out to sea, joining the Liberators above. A white shirted pilot was first to sweep his ship off the mesh runway into the sky.

"That's the C.O.," mused Suds.

There was talk of the C.O. taking Tim Malone's place on this hop. Paper work had kept him on the ground for several weeks and he was itching for a fling. Tim would remain on the ground to watch the base as acting C.O. for the time.

"Where are they off to?" asked Suds of the guard.

"Bombing mission on Kapingamangi," replied the man dully.

"Not many going off," observed Suds by way of starting a conversation.

"No," replied the guard walking away.

Suds looked after the monosyllabic soldier and discovered that even this man did not want to talk to him. He stood in the opening of his tent and watched the mechanics servicing the dozen or so Cobras remaining in the protective covering of the trees. There were about six others standing on the line on the apron at the edge of the flight strip. He shrugged his shoulders at the whole business and turned and threw himself down on his cot. He dozed off in the heat of the tent. He did not know just how long he slept when his cot suddenly rocked viciously as though an angry hand had taken hold of it and was attempting to throw him off.

As the hand succeeded, he was dumped to the sandy floor and the inverted cot fell over him. His tent collapsed and the pole clattered across his cot and pinned him down. Men's cries echoed all over the field to an obligato of deafening explosions dangerously close. Suds fought frantically to get out from under the cot and the fallen tent. He finally succeeded in crawling out from under the canvas into a bloody, burning mess that littered the field. His armed

guard was nowhere about.

High overhead Nakajima bombers escorted by sunswathed Zeros were having an unmolested picnic. American fighters had been caught by surprise on the ground. Tents were ablaze and frantic men tried to get the remaining Aircobras into protective covering while still others tried to get off the ground and into the air to smash at the Japanese above.

**G**REAT craters opened in the earth around the clearing as blast after blast from the Jap bombs dug deep into the soft earth.

A Cobra, its Allison engine wide open, roared out from concealment in the trees. It kicked up a stream of dust until it hit the flight strip and stuck its narrow nose haughtily up for air. Suds caught a white flash in the cockpit as it thundered by. He watched it fascinated as it drove off the runway.

"That's Tim," he thought. "I hope they shoot his damn head off."

As if they wished to comply with Suds hope, two Zeros dived on the rising Aircobra from the side and rear and before it had more than a twenty-five foot altitude, sent it crashing back onto the flight strip where its nose burst into flames. When he saw it, a half smile crept over his face.

"They must have heard me," he thought. He stood still in the open watching the burning plane to see if the door would open to spill its white-shirted occupant. But the door remained closed. "He must be out," Suds mused, "if the rat isn't dead."

A peculiar feeling suddenly crept through him. He started in the direction of the P-39 instinctively. Then he stopped as suddenly in his tracks. "No," he said to himself. "Why should I? I wouldn't be in this mess now if it weren't for him. Let the louse burn. Just as he made me burn all the years I've known him, with his cheap tricks."

Suds watched the flames reach back from the burning nose of the Aircobra, then turned and walked away. He didn't go more than a step when he stopped again and turned to look at the burning plane. He became fidgety and restless as he saw dense, black smoke creep into the cabin and blacken the interior of the plexiglas. He turned away and glanced at the other men on the field who were

preoccupied with getting the other planes out of range of the burning gunfire of the crazily strafing Japs.

Ships that had not been moved off the line quickly enough were flaming infernos, like the one on the strip that held his cousin. Another glance at that plane and he saw the flames now licking at the front window of the cabin. In a few minutes more the whole cabin would be enveloped and become a burning hell.

Here truly was the end of their feud, and he welcomed it. This was Suds Malone's vengeance. A thin small voice seemed to be saying inside of him, "To hell with him. When he goes, you'll be free of his ridicule, and bullying persecution."

Then he was surprised to hear himself saying out loud as if in reply, "But you can't let a man burn to death like that. You just can't! No matter who he is or what he's done! You just can't do it!"

Suds could hear the crackle of the flames as they licked back toward the stricken pilot, he was that close to the burning wreck. And the conflict within him continued to tear at his soul. Why should he help Tim Malone? The man who was responsible for his present disgrace. Whose deliberate meanness had been instrumental in getting him a dishonorable discharge from the Army Air Force.

The flames were now creeping to the top of the plexiglas over the white-uniformed man's head. Suds Malone tried to shake off the hate in his heart for his cousin with a sweep of his head. But he still could not get it out of his mind that one simply doesn't allow a fellow man burn to death no matter what. Old scores can be settled on another day.

He turned about and dashed down the steel runway and reached the cabin of the plane as the plexiglas canopy started to melt and run down the sides of the sides of the fuselage. He reached for the handle of the door and yanked it open. The black smoke that filled the cabin now blew out into his face and filled his eyes and throat. Suds coughed as he reached blindly in and released the safety belt about the man's lap.

With difficulty, Suds got him out just as the black interior turned a bright orange-red and the flames shot back at the pilot's seat. He kept his own eyes closed to protect them as he lifted the inert body off the wing onto his shoulder.

The man's face was black with carbon and unrecognizable. With the weight of the man bearing him down, Suds staggered away from the burning plane.

Seeing a medical orderly beyond the flight-line jump off a fire-fighting truck that was heading for the burning Cobra, Suds called to him, "Hey, you, orderly, I've got him out. You take care of him."

**A**S THE orderly came up, Suds transferred the death-still body on his shoulder to the shoulder of the orderly. "Lieutenant Malone needs medical attention and he needs it quick!"

Suds said. "I'll see you later." Suds darted off in the direction of the trees where another plane had just moved out in an effort to get into the air. Suds saw his own opportunity to get in his last licks. In the confusion it was easy. Suds Malone hopped into a P-39 that was hidden in a clump of trees and had not been hit. He pulled the starting button and the Allison whined hopefully. He watched the other plane that had now reached the runway and knew what would give him his opportunity.

The first Cobra rose into the air and at fifty feet this time took the full brunt of Japanese fire from the diving Zeros. The ship wavered a moment, then dived pointblank, burying its nose in the soft sand, tail pointing skyward like some lonely, futile gravestone.

The attacking Zeros zoomed for altitude as Suds poured the juice to the Allison. It snarled angrily and the Cobra flung after the climbing Zeros. The Nipponese airmen were at a disadvantage. Their altitude was too low for either of them to be able to turn about on him, and his own position behind and below was perfect for target practice. He caught one of the Japs in his ring sights and gave him everything the P-39 carried. Suds watched his 37 m/m cannon shells tear into the Mitsubishi and blow out through both sides of its fuselage.

The Jap side-slipped to the right of the strip, dug his right wing into the soft sand at its edge, and finished up in a cloud of dust that rose like a streaming geyser fifty feet into the air as the Zero blew apart. "That guy don't knock anybody else down," thought Suds.

He tore after the other man but the Jap had taken advantage of the few seconds Suds had given him when he attacked the other Zero and was climbing

for height. Suds roared after the fleeing plane, and joined a dogfight being fought between six Zeros and three base-returning P-39s.

The odds were still against the Yanks and the men on the ground continued their attempts to get into the air. A Zero peeled away from the fight as another Cobra tore out of the woods and skimmed along the flight strip in an effort to get off.

Joined by a second Jap strafing, the two Zeros poured down on the rising Cobra. Suds caught the attempt and dived on the Japs from the rear with all his wing and cowl guns blazing. Mitsubishi machine guns were flooding the atmosphere over the rising Yank with a rain of explosive shells. But their aim was thrown off and Suds roared down praying that his own Browning shells would not cut through the Jap into the P-39 below.

He saw the Airacobra thunder on and up unharmed and he grinned happily. The Jap was not so lucky. As Suds pulled up and over him to avoid a collision, the Mitsubishi swung and around as black smoke poured into the cockpit; hung on its tail a split second, then crashed into a patch of jungle below. Another Airacobra poured out of the woods and down the strip for a takeoff and Suds knew what his job was. It was to keep the runway clear so that the others caught on the ground could get into the air to finish off the Nips who had defiled the Yank air base with their bombs of death.

It was a vicious cycle for Suds—vicious and desperate—during the next five minutes, but he kept the runway clear of strafing Japs and got six more P-39s into the air. This job done, he nosed into the dogfight that was on in earnest now with the return of the main flight of Liberators and fighter escorts.

As Suds climbed his ship into the thick of the fight, he caught sight of a Cobra with a white-shirted pilot trying to fight off three Mitsubishes that had him boxed in their ring sights.

"Harley's in a jam," thought Suds. He guessed it was the C.O. by the white shirt that once was chino khaki. He could not see the man's face because his oxygen mask half-concealed it. Suds targeted on the center and rear Mitsubishi. He set a grim finger on the electric gun-button on his control column. The P-39

shivered to the vibrations of his gibbering guns, and the Zero folded like an accordion under the withering fire. The Airacobra pilot saw his opportunity and dived in under Suds' plane searching for time to recover.

**S**UDS kept his radio off purposely. He did not want to hear what Harley had to tell him when he recognized Suds in the P-39's cockpit. As he looked under him, pondering on the man below, his own plexiglas canopy splattered in his lap and fell all over the inside of his compartment. His left shoulder suddenly convulsed with the triphammering it was getting from behind. He kicked the ship into a sideslip and away from the stinging fire from above but there was nothing he could do to stop the horrible, burning pain in his shoulder.

He grew faint with the pain as a nauseating sensation crept across the region of his stomach. Now it was Harley's turn to come through for him. And the man did not fail him. Two other Cobras roared down from above to chip in with the man Suds had just saved. They ripped into the two Zeros which had caught Suds off his guard and two, great balls of fire blasted the atmosphere on both sides of his plane as the two Zeros disintegrated under the combined terrible onslaught of the three shattering P-39s.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was an hour after they had removed the Jap bullets from Suds' shoulder that he slipped slowly out of the ether. He opened his eyes and looked about him. He waited for the distorted images to come into defined focus. Far, far away he heard jumbled voices. Soon they became distinct. "He's coming out of it, Colonel," said one of the voices. It was familiar and unpleasant to his ears.

As the room cleared, Suds saw the canvas roof of the hospital tent above him rising and falling under the pressure of the warm winds outside. "How are you, Suds," asked Tim Malone.

"What are - you - doing - on - your feet?" dully asked the still hazy and puzzled Suds. "I - pulled - you out - of your - burning Cobra." Then he added as he turned away from Tim: "Though I - don't know why-I-did."

"That wasn't me, Suds," replied Tim quietly. "You did get me out of a tight spot upstairs but it was Colonel Harley

you pulled out of the fire."

"Yes, Lieutenant," came a voice at Suds' elbow. "I'm the man of the burning plane."

"But I thought," began Suds. He turned his head toward the cot beside him. Colonel Harley lay on it with his own head swathed in bandages.

"It was the white shirts that probably threw you off," explained Tim.

Then Suds almost sat bolt upright in his bed with a start. That is, he tried to, but the sharp pain in his bandaged shoulder prevented it. He turned back to the Colonel. "Did you say Lieutenant?" he stammered.

"We've been talking it over," the Colonel explained. "In view of what you've done; helping save the field; saving my life, and probably your cousin Tim's, along with the half dozen others you helped get off the field, well—it's a sort of petition from everybody on the Island." The Colonel hesitated a moment. He was in pain and talking through a face full of bandages was not easy. "The men, including your cousin who feels that your predicament was, in the main his fault, want you to stay with us. Since the men want you, and I feel as they do—well, if you want to stay on, we'll cross your court martial off the books. We'll burn the records and give you full reinstatement if you'll accept it."

"Gee," breathed the elated Suds as he lay on his pillow. "What do you know." His eyes beamed happily—even at Tim. "Gee," was all he could say.

"As for me," Tim Malone was saying, and his voice carried a touch of the remorse he sincerely felt for the first time in his life, "I guess I've been an A-Number One louse most of my life; but if you can find it in your heart to forgive me and forget some of the things I've done to you, Suds—" he hesitated as he looked down at the glowing fighter pilot on the bed—"I'll make up for it in any way you'd like."

Suds' eyes filled as he gazed up at the white tent roof. He watched the flapping of the tent top as it lazily, rhythmically rose and fell keeping time with the breathing of his own, tired body. His eyes closed. The happy smile on his face became transfixed. He dozed off muttering: "Sure. Sure. I can forgive and forget easy now." And half out of his sleep he mumbled: "Anyway blood's thicker'n cocoanut-milk."



Casey squeezed the trigger of the tommy-gun

# COPPER WINGS

By SCOTT MORGAN

CAPTAIN HODGES, of the State Air Police, parked his car in back of No. 3 hangar, left the key in the ignition lock and climbed out. As he started to walk toward his Operations office a lone plane in the air above the field began cutting up a few capers. Hodges stopped and shot startled eyes heavenward. The plane was now in a power dive and hurtling toward earth at full revs, its thundering engine causing

the ground beneath the captain's feet to tremble.

One swift look at the familiar all white fuselage with brilliant green monoplane wings and the startled look in Hodges' eyes changed to one of anger. Instinctively he reached for controls that were not there, as though to pull the diving craft out of its mad plunge toward earth. But the gesture was unnecessary. When there was just enough

*Things Go Haywire When Crazy Casey Joins the Air Police!*

air left to spare, the green and white craft came smoothly out of its dive and went corkscrewing back up toward the sky.

"Who the devil—?" Hodges roared, and started on the dead run for his office. The sergeant on duty inside jumped as the captain came bounding in through the door. And the man's heart skipped a beat when he saw the thunder in his superior's face.

"Who in Satan's name is in that Stinson Reliant?" Hodges bellowed. "Get him on the radio! Get him down here, fast! Of all the crazy, numbskulled idiots. By golly, I'll break him. Answer me! Who is it? Carter or Parsons?"

"Neither, sir!" the sergeant gasped. "They're out on patrol. It's the new man, sir. He reported an hour ago. Said he was taking the Reliant up to get the feel of her. His papers are on your desk, sir. I told him you were expected soon, but he went aloft just the same."

"Oh, he did, did he?" Hodges grated. "Well, move, Sergeant! Get on that radio. Get him down here. New man, huh? About time State Headquarters sent along some extra help. What do they expect from just three of us? Miracles?"

Grumbling the last, and more, to himself, Captain Hodges walked over to his desk, while the slightly pale sergeant quickly contacted the pilot of the green and white State Police plane in the air. Sinking down into his chair, Hodges glared at nothing at all for a moment, and then picked up the long white envelope on his desk blotter. Inside were the assignment to duty papers of the new pilot. Hodges glanced at the name, Robert Clarke Casey, and started to read on. But he checked himself and snapped his eyes back to the name.

"Robert Clarke Casey?" he murmured with an ever deepening frown. "Now, where have I heard that name before?"

His brows holding the frown he closed his eyes and went groping backward in memory. Suddenly his eyes flew open, and he sat up straight as a ramrod.

"Oh, good grief, no!" he gasped. "Not 'Crazy' Casey! Not him! They can't do this to me!"

"Beg pardon, sir?"

**B**LINKING wildly, Captain Hodges looked over at the sergeant, and suddenly pointed a stiff forefinger.

"The new man, Sergeant!" he snapped. "A redhead? Six feet? Built like an All-American? A confounded perpetual grin?"

The sergeant had to gulp and nod before he could speak. "Why, yes, sir. That's him! You—you know him, Captain?"

Hodges acted as though he hadn't heard. A hard glitter was coming into his eyes, and the corners of his mouth were stiffening.

"Yes, I used to know him," he suddenly muttered, as though talking to himself. "Almost seven years ago, when I was Commanding Officer at the El Paso Flight Training Center. Sergeant, go into the Com-Room and wait there. I'll see Sergeant Pilot Casey in private."

For an instant the sergeant looked as if he longed to stay and watch the fireworks. But he quickly took the look off his face, nodded, and went through the door to his right. When it closed Captain Hodges leaned back, rested his two clenched fists on the edge of his desk, and let out a long, slightly shuddering sigh.

"Crazy Casey!" he groaned. "There just isn't any justice. He didn't give me enough gray hairs at El Paso. Fate has to send him back to finish the job. Well, by golly, he won't. I just won't give him the chance!"

For emphasis the State Air Police head lifted one clenched fist and brought it down on his desk with a resounding thump. And, as though the action pressed some kind of a secret button, the outside door opened and Sergeant Pilot Casey stepped through. When the newcomer saw Hodges the little fixed grin on his lips broadened, and seemed to light up his whole face with genuine pleasure.

"Hello, Colonel!" he said. "It's been a long time, hasn't it? How are you, sir?"

"How do you think, Casey?" Hodges growled. "And, frankly, it hasn't been nearly long enough. What the devil got you into the State Air Police?"

The redhead's grin faded a little, and a rather intent, serious look came into his keen blue eyes.

"The desire to make something of the only thing I know, Colonel," he said quietly. "Flying. The air police idea appealed to me. So, I applied, took the course, graduated as a Sergeant Pilot, and here I am."

"Yes, here you are!" Hodges bit off,



his eyes snapping. "And I've a good mind to send you back with an underscored recommendation to throw you out!"

"Sir?" Casey murmured as his grin faded altogether. "What was that, Colonel?"

"It happens to be captain, now, not colonel!" Hodges barked. "You can start by remembering that. Why shouldn't I send you back? You can't guess?"

"No, sir—I can't guess."

Hodges took a deep breath, reached forward and picked up a letter opener off the desk. He fiddled with it a moment, and then suddenly pointed the tip at the redhead.

"Then I'll explain," he clipped out. "I'll refresh your memory, ex-Flight Instructor Crazy Casey! Seven years ago you used to come to me at least twice a day with a request for transfer to a theater of war. A request that was always turned down by the higher-ups. You, however, believed that I was responsible. That I was punishing you for your wild, crazy flying when you were just putting in time. And so you broke every rule in the book to force me to heave you out. Well, goodness knows I would have loved to, but I couldn't. Screwy as you were, you were the best instructor at the field. I had to keep you—keep you, and let you drive me plumb stark raving mad!"

"And I want to apologize, sir," the red-head spoke up as Hodges paused for breath. "Very humbly, too. Later when I did get overseas I found out that you really weren't responsible for keeping me at El Paso. I— Well, let's just say that I was a goofy kid then, but I've grown up since, sir."

"The devil you have!" Hodges snorted, and waved the letter opener toward the sky outside. "You're just as crazy in a plane as you ever were. Maybe more so. What in heaven's name were you trying to do just now—take the confounded thing apart?"

"Why, certainly not, sir," Casey said with wide eyed innocence. "I was just getting the feel of her. And—well, it was kind of good to be in a ship again."

Hodges compressed his lips tightly, as though he were blocking off words until he had mentally counted ten. And when he did speak it was with practically studied patience.

"Didn't they teach you at the Air Police School that one of the main func-

tions of your job was to prevent law-breaking flying in the area you patrol? Didn't they?"

"Of course, sir! But I didn't think—"

"Exactly!" Captain Hodges cut in sharply. "You didn't think—just like you didn't think at El Paso. Well, let me tell you something, Casey!"

"Yes, sir?"

"It so happens the situation is something like it was at El Paso," Hodges spoke evenly. "This State Air Police thing has just been started, and we need all the good pilots we can get. There is a big job to be done, and done in a hurry. However, there is one difference. I have complete authority to toss anybody out on his ear. So, take this as a first and last warning. You pull a single one of your crazy, goofy flying stunts and out you go. Out you go, even if you are the only one under my command. Do I make myself clear?"

**S**LOWLY Crazy Casey nodded, and the infectious grin came back to his lips.

"Perfectly, sir," he said. "And I guess it was kind of dumb to get the feel of her that way, just now. I'm sorry."

"It was more than dumb," Hodges bit off. "It was downright stupid. A fine thing if I'd had the Commissioner in my car. Get this, Casey! For your own sake, forget just about seventy-five percent of what war flying taught you. In our job we never get fancy. It's mostly run of the mill, routine work. Times when you get bored, just think twice. Remember that."

"Yes, sir," the red-head assured him. "I sure will. Beginning with now, trick flying is out."

"It had better be!" Captain Hodges growled. "Now—!"

The air police head stopped short with a frown as the side door popped open and the sergeant came hurrying in. Oblivious to his superior's scowl the man hurried over and placed a length of teletype ribbon on the desk.

"Just took this off the machine, Captain," he said. "I knew you'd want to see it at once."

Hodges grunted, picked up the ribbon and read the printed words:

**WENTWORTH NATIONAL BANK  
ROBBED BY THREE MASKED ARMED  
MEN AT FOURTEEN HOURS. ESTI-  
MATED FIFTY THOUSAND TAKEN.**

DESCRIPTIONS OF TRIO NOT AVAILABLE BUT WERE SEEN TO ENTER TWO TONE BROWN CAR BELIEVED CHEVROLET AND TAKE ROUTE TOWARD COMSTOCK TURNPIKE. SHEARED OFF LEFT REAR FENDER IN MAKING GETAWAY. BELIEVE SAME TRIO OF RECENT BANK HOLDUPS. ALERT ALL UNITS YOUR AREA, AND REPORT CENTRAL HEADQUARTERS ALL PROGRESS.

The State Air Police captain read the message just once and then jumped to his feet kicking back his chair.

"Call Carter and Parsons, Sergeant!" he snapped. "Tell them to cover between Wentworth and Barstow, and report direct if they see anything."

"Yes, sir!" the sergeant snapped back, and leaped over to the radio table in the corner.

At the same time Captain Hodges spun around and went over to the huge pin-pointed state map that covered practically the entire left wall of the office. For a moment or two he stood in front of it, his right index finger held poised. Then suddenly he stabbed the finger at a spot on the map and began to trace a curving line.

"Can't be the Turnpike," he muttered aloud. "They wouldn't get five miles with a general alarm out. No, they must have— Got it!"

As Hodges chopped out the last he snapped his fingers, spun around again and started running toward the door. It was not until then he seemed to remember that Sergeant Pilot Crazy Casey was still in the office. As a matter of fact the new pilot was just dropping the length of teletype tape back on the desk.

"Let's go, Casey!" the Captain barked, hardly checking his stride. "Couldn't be a better time to see how we operate."

"With you, sir," Casey nodded, and the pair of them went outside on the dead run.

Exactly fifty-eight seconds later, Captain Hodges gunned the Wasp Junior in the nose of the green and white Stinson, and sent the craft rocketing forward on the take-off. Less than halfway along the runway, he lifted it clear and stuck it up and around toward the north. Seated in the righthand seat, Crazy Casey waited until Hodges had leveled off at five thousand and was holding the ship on a crow-flight course.

"What was that bit about, same trio of recent holdups?" he then asked.

"Just that," Hodges grunted and

peered ahead. "Four small town bank jobs in the last five months. Three guys who don't linger long enough for anybody to get a look at them—and live. They walk in just about closing time, and bingo! No clues, no fingerprints, no nothing. Three very smart cookies, so far."

"Nice work, if you can get away with it," Casey murmured.

"And they have been getting away with it!" Captain Hodges nodded. "Got us all up a tree. Because they have picked on National banks the Federal boys are on it, too. But, as far as I know, they haven't made any more headway than we have. That trio is but good. However, if that bit about a two tone brown car is correct, we've finally got something to work on."

"And the Comstock Turnpike?" Casey murmured and looked out the window on his side. "Isn't that about seventy-five miles east of where we are right now?"

"Check," Hodges nodded, and let just the shadow of a grin slide across his lips. "If they went that way, as reported, Carter and Parsons in our other Stinson will pick them up. But I'm playing a hunch they didn't. Not if they really are smart. There are half a dozen turnpike turn-offs outside Wentworth. I'm playing it they took a half hidden back dirt road that leads to those foothills and mountains up ahead."

**N**ODDING his head in approval, Casey answered, "I'll buy that! Here's hoping, anyway."

"You can say that again!" Captain Hodges clipped almost savagely. "If State Air could in any way effect the capture of that trio, it would be a god-send!"

"The reward's that big, sir?" Casey grinned.

"Its big enough, but I don't mean the reward," the other said with a grimace. "One thing they probably didn't mention at the Police School is that we have a very economy-minded Legislature when it comes to new ideas. Until the skeleton State Air now in existence demonstrates and proves its worth, we can't even hope for increased appropriations. So skin your eyes, Casey, and use those binoculars in that rack. If you see something you only think is a rising bit of dust on your side, sing out. I'll do the same on mine."

"Right, sir!" Casey echoed, and promptly started to carry out his first order as a State Air Police pilot.

For the next thirty-five minutes the two men in the Stinson Reliant didn't say more than a dozen words between them. At the end of that time Captain Hodges changed direction for the umpty-umph time, dropped his glasses back into the rack-box on his side, and dragged the thumbnail of his free hand along the angle of his jaw.

"Well, I've had hunches before that were wrong," he grunted heavily. "The holdup was over two hours ago. If they came up this way we'd have spotted their car dust by now."

"Yeah, should have," Crazy Casey murmured, and closed his slightly aching eyes to rest them a minute. "If there's a car down there on any road in that lonely terrain I'll eat it. They've either beat us to those mountains, or else they didn't come. Tough!"

Hodges nodded gloomily and took the hand mike off the hook.

"Funny, too, we haven't heard from ground stations," he said as though to himself. "They must know both ships are in the air. I'll call HQ and—"

"Hold everything!" Casey's sudden sharp, excited voice cut him off. "I think I see something. Yup, I do! Dust from a car making fast time. See it, Colonel?"

Hodges was too excited himself to take note of the wrong title. He leaned way over and tried to sight his glasses along Casey's pointing hand.

"No, blast it, where?" he fumed. "What distance? What o'clock, man?"

"Ten miles, and about two o'clock!" Casey snapped. "Just beyond those twin foothills. See where that strip of road breaks out of those woods? There! There's the car. And from here I'll call it a two tone brown. Right, sir?"

Hodges didn't answer for a couple of moments. He let go of the Stinson's Dep wheel to better brace himself and hold his binoculars steady to his eyes. Then suddenly he let cramped air out of his lungs with a rush.

"By gosh, yes, I spot it now!" he breathed. "And you're right, Casey! That's a two tone brown for my money, too. What's more, its rear fender's off. That's the baby we're looking for all right."

"So now, what?" Casey grunted without lowering his binoculars.

"Now we put in a plug for flying cops!" Hodges cried jubilantly. "That road forks at the base of the range. One goes over the mountains to Caldwell, and the other east to Waltham. I'll alert HQ and have both roads plugged from the other ends. Keep it in your glasses, Casey."

As the head of the State Air Police spoke the last he grabbed off the mike again.

"Sap to HQ!" he called. "Sap to HQ! Come in HQ!"

For perhaps ten seconds Hodges more or less held his breath, then he called again. And then again. And then once again! His face a grim mask of smoldering fury he fiddled with the set dials and called the other State plane. And for his pains he received silence, also. He fiddled some more, and tried HQ three more times before the mounting fury within him reached the top and spilled over in an explosion of hoarse words.

"It's dead! The blasted thing's gone dead. Doggone you, Casey! Your stupid stunting. It knocked the set haywire. Why you—"

"Like fun it did!" Casey blazed out. "It was working when I landed. I heard your boy call me down, and answered him. Besides, I didn't toss the crate around enough to—"

"All right, all right!" Hodges shouted. "Shut up and let me think. What a break! My one big moment and—"

THE captain let the rest drown itself in a groan. His face dark with a scowl, he held the Dep wheel tightly with his left hand, and impatiently drummed his right on his knee.

It was Crazy Casey who broke the two minute silence.

"How about hopping to those two places, Caldwell and Waltham, and give them the word?" he asked.

"That's out!" Hodges snapped, and kept on banging his right knee. "Too far apart. Be dark by the time we landed at the second one. Besides, I just happened to remember there are a couple of wood roads they could take, and double back. Just a fine sweet mess!"

Crazy Casey didn't make any comment, but a hard steely look crept into his eyes. Leaning forward a little, as though that would help, he strained his eyes through the glasses toward the

swiftly moving cloud of dust some ten miles distant. Then suddenly he turned and rapped Hodges on the arm.

"Let me take over the ship, sir," he said.

"Oh, no you don't!" the captain answered. "At least, not until you tell me what you've got in your mind."

"Well, it's this," Casey said after a moment's hesitation. "We think that's the car, but we don't know. If we slide down on them they'll spot us and maybe ditch the car and take it from there on foot through those woods. Check?"

"Check!" Hodges replied. "So?"

"So I'll take over and do some treetop flying, so they can't see us, and get up ahead of them," Casey spoke rapidly. "Then we can cut back and make sure."

"Then what?" Hodges growled. "What do we do then? Reach down and pick them out of the car? They've got to be nailed on the ground. Now if we could make radio contact with—"

"But we can't!" Casey insisted. "But I've got an idea. You keep working on the set. Maybe you can get the thing kicking over. Meantime I'll slip us up close to those mountains, and come back over that road they're taking. It's at least doing something, isn't it?"

Black indecision clouded up Hodges' face for a moment, and then he nodded curtly. "Okay, take over!" he snapped. "But be sure you keep us over the treetops, not in them!"

Crazy Casey let that one slide. His mind was too busy clicking over on something else. Able to follow the speeding car with the naked eye, he dropped his binoculars in the rack, and took over control of the plane. The instant he had charge he deliberately banked the aircraft around in a direction away from the racing car. Hodges quickly snapped open his mouth but Casey beat him to it.

"Just in case they saw us!" he said. "This way they'll think we didn't, I hope! You work on that set. I know what I'm doing!"

Hodges' eyes snapped but he didn't say anything. And Crazy Casey drilled the Stinson due westward for maybe five miles. Then he dropped the nose and went curving down and around. At almost treetop height he pulled out level, headed north. For the next fifteen minutes or so he hugged the Stinson's belly close to the treetops and sent them wind-

ing northward between the ever increasing foothills of the mountain range.

A dozen times Captain Hodges stifled a gasp, or sucked in his breath and held it, as Casey skirted a slope close enough to reach a hand out and touch it. Each time, though, nothing happened and the State Air Police head went on breathing again—almost normal like.

Eventually Casey lifted them up for a bit of altitude and swung around back toward the south in a slow banking turn. Flying with one hand, he held the glasses to his eyes and minutely studied the uninviting stretch of terrain directly ahead. But it was Captain Hodges' sharp eyes that first spotted the speeding getaway car.

"There!" he cried and rapped Casey with his free hand. "Five miles, and just a shade to the left. See it coming around that hill? I've got it! Pile down on them, Casey, and force them to double back on the same road. Wait, I'll get one of the tommy-guns, and pepper them when we get close. That'll turn them!"

"Like fun it will!" Casey barked. "If they get by under us, we'll be sunk. And they can still ditch their car and take to the woods. I've got a better idea. One that'll give those babies the surprise of their lives. Hang on!"

"Casey! What the devil are you doing?"

The last flew from Captain Hodges' lips because Casey had suddenly spun the Stinson around on wingtip and was streaking back toward the north and down.

"It's okay, sir!" Casey shot out of the side of his mouth. "Just what the doctor ordered. See that straight stretch of road just beyond that hill turn?"

**H**ODGES couldn't contain a snort of disapproval. "Of course, I do!" he said. "And I see miles of woods on both sides, too. What in the devil do you think you're doing?"

"The only thing we can do, and grab those guys!" Casey said tightly. "I'm going to sit us down on that straight stretch beyond the blind turn. When they come around they'll have to stop or smack the ship and pile up. We'll—"

"We'll what?" Hodges howled as his breath finally came. "Land on that dirt road? No more than a couple of foot clearance either side? Are you mad? Turn back and I'll strafe them. It's the

only way!"

"Don't be a dope!" Casey shouted, all realization of rank gone in the tenseness of the occasion. "I've sat down on a hundred roads worse than that. Let me alone—I can do it. And we'll have them cold. Got two tommy-guns in this crate?"

"Yes!" Hodges gulped. "But listen, Casey—"

"Break them out, and get set!" the ex-flight instructor cut him off. "As soon as we've landed we'll pile out and each take up a position in the woods at the edge of the road. If they don't brake when they see the plane, let their front tires have it. We can't miss, and that'll brake them fast enough. Okay, hang on, and don't worry. This is apple pie for Casey!"

Captain Hodges' lips moved, and maybe in fervent prayer, but no sounds came out of his mouth. Face drawn, and more than a little white, he sat still as stone while Casey gently eased the Stinson lower and lower. When there was no more "lower" to go without tangling with the treetops, Casey flat-turned around at the far end of the narrow straight stretch, and then practically floated the aircraft toward the south.

Inch by inch he worked the ship over until it was squarely over the center of the road. Then working throttle and controls with all the skilled, deft touch of a world famous surgeon performing a highly delicate operation, he gently settled the Stinson down between the two solid walls of trees and touched dirt.

One faint bounce and then the craft rolled forward, while Casey played a minuet on the toe-pedal brakes. A few seconds that were ten years long for Captain Hodges, and the Stinson came to a full stop with exactly two feet clearance at each wingtip.

"Good grief, I can't believe it!" Hodges managed in a strained voice.

"It happened!" Casey snapped impatiently. "But the trick's not finished, yet. Give me one of those guns, and let's go. Now we wrap it up!"

Although Hodges still had the rank he jumped into action as ordered. Handing Casey one of the tommy-guns, and taking one himself, he kicked open the door on his side and jumped down onto the dirt road. He waited a moment until Casey had hit the road, too, and then the pair of them ran forward some fifty yards

or so, and ducked off into the woods fringe, one on either side.

For perhaps seven minutes there was no sound save that of the wind in the trees, and the faint clicking sound of the Stinson's Wasp Junior ticking over. Suddenly from beyond the foothill at the end of the straight stretch came the whining roar of a speeding car. It seemed that no sooner had the sound made itself heard than a two-tone brown Chevrolet came hurtling around the base of the foothill and along the straight stretch.

On it came, gathering even more speed, if anything. Crouched in the woods on his side of the road Crazy Casey saw the three white faces behind the windshield of the car. He counted five, and when the car did not so much as ease off its speed a hair, he squeezed the trigger of the tommy-gun he held to his shoulder. The gun yammered out jetting streams of flame, and out of the corner of his eye Casey saw more jetting streams of flame leap from the edge of the woods on the opposite side of the dirt road.

And then, as though an invisible giant had slammed down a clenched fist on the right front fender, the car suddenly dropped a little on that side, lurched drunkenly off the road and plowed head on into the woods.

It seemed almost to disappear from view before it came to a final halt upside down on its top. And no sooner had it stopped than one of the doors swung open and two figures tumbled out onto the ground. One got up and started running. He went flat on his face when Captain Hodges' gun spoke a second time. The other one didn't get up and try to do anything.

**W**HEN Casey and Hodges reached him, the man was dead. So was the third man who had not even left the car. He hadn't been able to because the broken steering wheel had pinned him to the back of the front seat, through the heart. The one Hodges had chopped was alive. But he had bullet plugged underpinnings, and had fainted out cold. A suitcase in the car contained guns, tools of the trade, and the loot from the Wentworth National Bank.

"Casey, I'm—" Captain Hodges began and stopped. "Casey, I don't know what to say."

"Maybe you'd better not say anything, yet, sir," Casey answered and grinned faintly. "I mean, the mission isn't quite completed. You want to take this one that's alive, and the suitcase, and fly back with me in the Stinson?"

"No, not twice in the same day!" Hodges broke in quickly. "A man's heart at my age can stand just so much. But, I'd be a fool to try and stop you. So, go ahead. I'll stand watch here. Take the Stinson back to the field and have police cars sent out. And maybe a doctor for that hoodlum there. But tell them to hop to it. I don't want to spend the night here."

"As you say, Colonel—I mean, Captain," Casey said and walked back to the Stinson.

Ten minutes later Captain Hodges watched while Crazy Casey revved the Wasp Junior up until the firmly braked craft quivered and strained like an eager race horse at the barrier. Then he saw the plane practically leap forward as

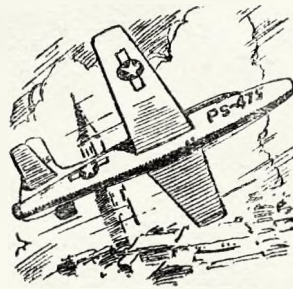
Casey let off the brakes quick. For a couple of horrible seconds the Stinson seemed to veer to the right as it picked up more and more speed. But it came back to the center of the straight dirt road, and almost like something operated by magic it nosed up between the two solid walls of trees and on up into free air.

When it reached that point and leveled off, Captain Hodges released a gigantic sigh that had started in the soles of his shoes.

And the happy smile on his face was a mile wide.

"Praise Allah!" he breathed. "And I guess all's well that ends well. It—"

He stopped short as a terrible thought came to him. Yes, this had ended, but Crazy Casey was on the Force! Was the ending of this one simply the beginning of another? The State Air Police captain was still pondering on that when two police radio cars arrived some five hours later.



## The A-B-C of Flying Terms!

**AERODYNAMICS**—The science of air in motion. This science enables a plane designer to know in advance approximately how a new design will perform in the air.

**AIRFOIL**—Any shape that, in motion, will exert an efficient force on air. Airplane wings and propellers, for example, are airfoils.

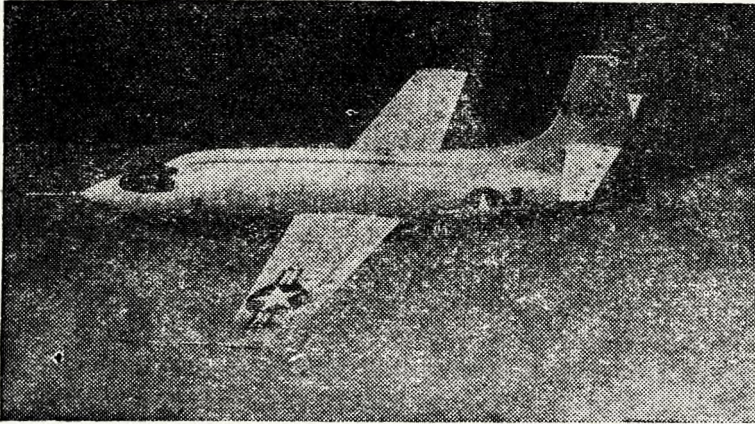
**BOOST**—An increase in manifold pressure as a result of supercharging. With increased altitudes, air and all other gases thin out because of reduced atmospheric pressure. In airplanes, to compensate for this reduced pressure, a high-speed blower is used to compress an engine's intake mixture.

**BLACKING OUT**—Total loss of vision sustained on high-speed turns, high-acceleration bursts and high-acceleration pull outs. The great increase in pressure keeps blood from the brain, robbing it of its essential supply of oxygen.

**CLIMB**—The climb of an airplane is the number of feet per minute it can lift itself through the air. The greater the horsepower in relation to its weight, the faster a plane can climb.

**CRUISING RADIUS**—The maximum number of air miles a plane can fly in still air on a full tank.

# The WEAPON that is SOUND



*Courtesy Bell Aircraft Corporation*

The X-1, World's First Supersonic Airplane

*As our new jets  
reach incredible  
speeds, they  
enter the  
realm of  
the "silence"  
that can kill!*

by **C. B. COLBY**

**R**OCKET aircraft number 538, a new experimental type being used for supersonic speed tests and research far above the sonic barrier, screams over the hot sands of a desert test base.

The sonic barrier, burst asunder long months past by the Bell XS-1, is now old stuff. It is passed almost daily now by other needle-nosed research craft, freighted with instruments and flown by a new breed of men, the "barrier busters." Higher and higher the speed marks are pushed—900 m.p.h.—1000 m.p.h.—1200 m.p.h.—1500 m.p.h. The 538 is now coming over the course marks for a new assault upon that latest mark—to push the needle to that frightening 2000 m.p.h. mark.

The crew in the stinger-sharp nose of the craft moisten dry lips as the pointer of the air speed indicator edges towards

that red mark on the dial that was "yesterday's" record. The pilot eases the throttle of the liquid fuel rocket engines open still further. This is going to be IT!

The indicator needle shudders upwards, blots out and then passes that red mark! They are record holders for the moment! A peculiar internal warmth seems to steal over them, at this same moment of triumph. A suffocating, smothering mounting heat from within. The co-pilot glances across the narrow cockpit at his pilot, bewilderment and fear draining the color of triumph from his face.

## Death Strikes Quickly

Before he can find words to express his fear of the frightening sensation of that growing heat from within his own

**THE POWER OF ULTRASONIC SOUND WAVES!**

body it is too late. As he helplessly fights back horror and dimming vision, he sees the pilot's body slump—or is it dissolve? Down into the seat he settles, shapelessness taking possession of what is now but an inert heap of clothing draped over a peculiarly "liquid" appearing contents. That is the co-pilot's last impression, forever.

This may happen if we are not careful with our research as we venture into the realm of supersonic flying and the realms of other "super" and "ultra" phenomena. The most frightening of the "ultras" we find as by a by-produce of supersonic flying is ultrasonic sound waves—the "silence" that can kill.

According to physics books: "sound arises from the motion of matter." Everything in motion produces noise, even though in many instances the sound waves are inaudible to the human ear. Some of them are inaudible for their lack of volume sufficient to reach the nearest human ear and others are "silent" for the reason that they are of one of the frequencies above that responded to by human hearing devices and hence undetected. Aircraft flying above the speed of sound produce these ultrasonic sounds in varying amounts. The ear can not detect them, but they are there, powerful, silent, and deadly.

Detected, these sound waves may become harmless with proper safeguards, and controlled. Out of control and undetected they will prove deadly. This is not theory, nor is it fiction.

Over at the Pennsylvania State College laboratory there is a small compressed air siren about the size of a tobacco humidior. This siren produces a sound of about 30,000 cycles or sound vibrations per second, twice as high in the "scale" of sounds or pitch than can be detected by the normal human ear. Constructed by C. H. Allen and Dr. Isadore Rudnick of the staff, under the direction of Dr. H. K. Schilling, this super siren is being used to explore a little further into the dangers and powers of this deadly "silence."

The power of the silent sound from the mouth of this siren will literally support as many as twenty glass marbles herded over its beam by a glass tube containing them. They remain suspended in the tube open at both ends, floating freely in the air, suspended in space by the power of the single note from be-

neath them. Five marbles without the confining tube will float in the air over the mouth of the siren as though suspended on strings. That is an impressive demonstration but a more deadly prediction is shown by the heat from this silent sound—heat that will light a pipe, pop corn, or kill mice in sixty seconds.

### Nazis Discovered Dread Ray

Prof. Robert W. Wood of John Hopkins University also found that these ultrasonic sound waves will kill small fish and frogs as easily as mice. Now to bring the frightening aspects of the research to a human scale it is reliably reported that at the close of the war the Nazis had developed an experimental death ray machine using the same waves capable of rendering a man unconscious at fifty feet, just a step further on from the mice frogs and fish.

These are the same type of waves of sound of the silent frequencies that have been used to homogenize milk. This breaking down of the fatty content of the milk through ultrasonic sound vibrations is all very well in its proper place, but as pointed out to the author by Dr. August Raspet, noted physicist, they are also capable of homogenizing flesh. They have already proven capable of the decomposition of gelatine, the very substance of animal ligaments, bones and skin. They will break down gum arabic and convert cane sugar into its component monosaccharides.

Frequencies of sound from 300,000 to 400,000 cycles per second set up vibration-produced heat in bodies and Dr. Leslie Chambers of the Johnson Foundation for Medical Physics of the University of Pennsylvania, found that some of the ultra high frequency sound waves can either stimulate cell growth or retard and destroy it. Such phenomena may be used in the future, when its control has been established, to kill germs, repel insects, and other pests. The waves kill the germs by literally shaking them to pieces or burning them up. They can do more.

C. E. Weaver, of the California Institute of Technology, reports that certain of the waves can produce a nervous breakdown almost instantly, a deadly event to the pilot of a supersonic aircraft. For these reasons we are approaching supersonic flying with all the



caution and research we can muster.

As proven by the old vaudeville act of playing a high note on a violin held close to a thin goblet to shatter it by its sympathetic vibrations, we know that all materials have a certain natural vibration of their own. Should an outside source produce that exact tone or vibration frequency, that material will begin to vibrate in sympathy with that outside tone stimulation, much as your own body will tremble with the deep notes of an organ or bull fiddle. It's the same thing, only those tones are too low and volumeless to be dangerous, unless carried to extremes.

One pilot told the author of an experience he had with sound waves of this type transmitted from the jet blast of an experimental fighter. He was standing close to the exhaust blast when he noticed that he was trembling for no apparent reason. He became alarmed when the trembling increased in violence and he promptly left the area in a hurry. A physicist explained to him that he was within the range of low frequency sonic vibrations set up by the jet blast that had almost literally shaken him off his feet. Had he remained in that area he might have received serious injury from the sonic shock wave battering, whose frequency set his own flesh and bones to vibrate in unison.

### Death That Can't Be Heard

Now supposing that those sound waves are of such high frequencies that they are inaudible and so undetectible. They might be of the frequency that is dangerous to such material as brain tissue, skull structure or flesh and blood. There is where the danger lies as far as the supersonic traveler is concerned and it is there where research is now concentrated, in human engineering, to find out how these ultra sonic waves effect human beings, where they effect them and how this can be prevented.

We are not going at this "human engineering" by the cut and try method according to Lt. Comdr. George W. Hoover, of the Office of Naval Research's

Special Devices Center, at Sands Point, Long Island, but are advancing each step forward only when we know all the facts and have a pretty good idea and prediction as to what to expect. We are not risking human personnel in a "let's try it and see what happens" manner, for we just do not KNOW what WILL happen. We do know certain facts, and some of them are not pleasant.

For example: we know that a finger introduced into a narrow beam of ultra sonic sound will feel an instant sharp stabbing pain. We know that such a beam will kill small animals. We know that one research mathematician submitted to high frequency sound waves was unable to do the simplest sums and suffered prolonged headache. We know that those sound waves will coagulate human blood, and that the Nazis were too close to perfecting a machine to kill humans with focussed sound waves. These proven facts put the brakes on any reckless advance into their vicinity.

Supersonic aircraft must be checked and rechecked for any symptoms of development of these waves. Each part must be checked by vibration experts and tested to see that it does not: (1) produce a low frequency sound wave of possible destructive power to the airframe, and, (2) produce a high frequency ultra sonic wave of possible destructive power to the pilot or passenger.

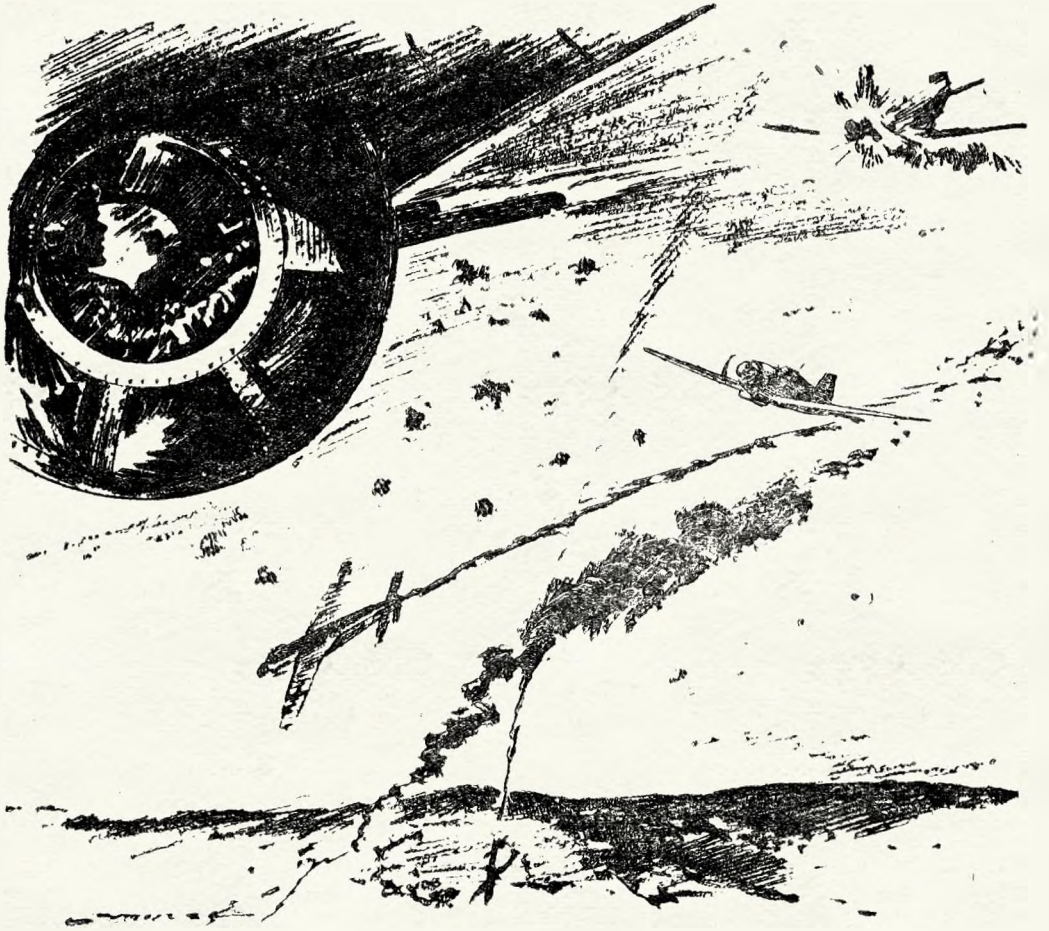
Sound proofing will have to be developed to stop all types of frequencies before reaching the human cargo.

The ultra sonic sounds produced by an aircraft ripping beyond the sonic barrier are far more deadly than those tiny pipings from a little "silent" dog whistle, whose sounds are heard by canine ears alone—yet even those harmless notes can kill if they be but amplified enough. The super sonic pilot, unless we have well paved the way with research, may be into an area of those silent sound waves before he knows it, mentally baffled, slowed in coordination, completely ill, or fatally injured from within. Silence can not only at times be "golden," it can be ghastly.

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE

## ACE OF DIAMONDS

An Action-Packed Novelet by O. B. MYERS



Decker framed the fighter in the sights and squeezed both triggers

# GUNNERS' GRIPE

By **PAT PATTERSON**

**T**HE sound was so faint at first that Sergeant Ray Decker raised himself to a sitting position on the cot and listened intently to make sure his ears were hearing correctly.

Yes, it was louder now, the signal he had been waiting for since dawn. The noise took on body, built up strength

as almost fifty Flying Fortresses roared toward the landing area scraped out of a North African wheat field. Decker grabbed his fatigue hat and raced from the tent toward the runway strips.

The Group was coming in from a raid. *His* Group since day before yesterday, when he arrived fresh from the

*Sergeant Decker feared only one thing — fear itself!*

States as a replacement gunner. This morning he had watched with awe and pride as the outfit had made up formation in the first light of false dawn. There hadn't been any teamwork like that to see back Stateside.

Now they were thundering home, still flying the same tight, precise positions that showed unit pride and individual pilot skill. All were in place, that is, except for the plane that suddenly had dropped below and headed on the straightest possible course for the end of the runway.

As the landing gear came down Decker could see that two of the props were dead still—feathered, and that just a jagged edge of plexiglass framed the nose where the "greenhouse" had been.

The huge ship settled down into the gravel and dust, with a GI ambulance clashing gears as it tore out to intercept the spot where the landing roll would be completed.

He watched from the field's edge as three stretchers were carefully but quickly placed in the waiting vehicle. As each came through the plane's door an attendant carefully spread a blanket over the still form.

The other bombers were hitting the runway at ten-second intervals now, staggering themselves first on the right and then the left side of the landing strip. In a matter of minutes all were down, and the air was filled with the blast of engines as they taxied to the dispersal hardstands surrounding the field.

Decker felt a slight shiver run over his body. The next time this outfit took to the air he would be with them. Heading out with a load of bombs from some target on Italy, Germany, or the islands in the Mediterranean. The question was: Would he be coming back from that raid and the raids to follow? As he walked back to the tent he tried to shake the sight of those stretchers out of his mind.

**H**IS new friends, tentmates—six enlisted men in each pyramidal—were dragging in one by one. Decker couldn't keep from being amazed at the change in them. At breakfast they had been like any bunch of healthy, active young men. A little tense, of course, and some too loud or making jokes that weren't very funny.

Ten hours later they were walking into the tent like old or middle-aged laborers. Lines of fatigue and strain made their faces look ten years older. They dumped their flying boots and other altitude gear as if they had been carrying a hundred-pound load.

Each one nodded or spoke to Decker as he entered. He found that his voice didn't sound exactly like he had planned for it to when he asked: "Well, how did it go today?"

Pete Dougherty, career gunner, answered him: "Wouldn't have been bad at all except for the pasting we caught from the ground. Whoever named *Messina Flak Alley* wasn't just beatin' his gums!"

"Our squadron came out lucky," George Casey added. "I could see the whole show from my place in the stinger. The bunch behind us lost two ships on the bombing run. Hit before they got rid of their loads!"

Decker's breath came in sharply as he pictured an ack-ack shell hitting a B-17 full of H.E.'s. It was hard to visualize even. Did you have long enough to realize you had been hit? Did you hear the bombs exploding? Did you feel yourself blown into space? Or did your body just become a thousand different pieces without your ever knowing what had happened?

Well, it wouldn't be long before he was learning some of the answers for himself. He thought how different the world of war looked over here than it did while he was in training. He thought of the bazzos who kept sounding off (in a nice quiet Texas or New Mexico barracks) about how they just couldn't wait to start cutting down those Jerries or Nips.

As he looked at the weary combat men in the tent with him he made a silent bet that not a one of them would turn down a job jerking sodas in Any City, U. S. A., if you offered him a chance to start tomorrow.

Tomorrow—or the next day when there was an "H Hour"—he would be with them all the way. He'd be checking his ammunition and belly turret. It was a nice new ball turret—used for the first time today by a fill-in gunner from a split-up crew.

The turret that had been on that Fort originally came back a few days ago ready for the junk pile, with a dead

gunner in it. It had been put out of commission with the door stuck under the plane, so that the crew inside had no chance to pull out a body full of machine-gun slugs.

Decker hit his cot that night telling himself that lightning never struck twice in the same place. Still, it took him a long, long time to get into the process of sleeping.

**U**NDERNEATH the 103-foot wing-spread of a B-17 Ray Decker looked even smaller than the five-foot seven-inch height of his slender but wiry frame. His size made him a natural for assignment to the cramped confines of the mechanized globe built into the underside of a bomber. He found himself feeling *too small* for the job he was supposed to do.

For reassurance he glanced down at the three stripes freshly sewed to the sleeves of his O.D. shirt. When he had reported in three days ago Major Thompson said:

"Corporal Decker, you're being assigned immediately to a regular combat crew. The T.O. allows a rating of Staff Sergeant for a combat gunner. I want every man in my outfit to have all the rank he can get if he deserves it. *Sergeant* Decker, go put buck stripes on your uniform for a start. If you do a good job, we'll put a rocker under them after you've earned it."

The officers swung off the truck that delivered them from Briefing. Enlisted members of the crew picked themselves off the ground, stepped on that last cigarette, and showed other signs of coming to life.

There was something about Captain Henry Ronson's personality that spread good humor and confidence all around him. Decker wished he felt some of that confidence himself. The skipper greeted the other members of his crew; then he faced Ray.

"How about it, Decker? Are you ready to start chopping some of the Krauts down?"

"Captain Ronson, I'm hoping I won't spoil the record that you and your crew have made, sir."

"Don't worry about that. Any of the gang will be glad to help you get started off right, so ask any questions you want to. And we don't go for that State-

side military etiquette here. Among other drawbacks, it can waste a lot of time on the interphone. I'm responsible for this gang of cutthroats, so I expect to get cooperation—but 'Hank' is my calling name."

They were flying element lead in the second squadron of the Group. After make-up, Hank's voice came over the interphone. "Well, here it is. Today we're going to take this load of thousand pounders up to Leghorn, Italy, and try to put them on top of some oil storage tanks and other refinery equipment they have up there. S-Two says it shouldn't be too rough. We haven't tried out their flak before, but not many fighters are based in that neck of the woods.

"We'll cut east of Sicily and lower Italy, then head in on a bombing approach from the northeast. Our run will be at nineteen thousand. Be ready to take combat stations in a few minutes. Check your ammo and have your gear handy. First oxygen check at ten thousand feet."

Starting with the bombardier, individual acknowledgements ran through the big plane. In the radio compartment's spare bucket-seat Ray Decker reached for mike and said: "Ball gunner, Roger." He removed his headset and went back to the turret. This was it now.

He checked the oxygen line running down from his individual yellow tank. He was not connected with the ship's main multi-tank system. Then came the turret's "prefight." It seemed to be turning free and easy in azimuth and elevation.

A few feet farther down the fuselage Pete Dougherty's lips were moving as he held the switch in his throat-mike line. He turned and made a downward signal to Decker. "Combat Stations."

Ray laid his chute pack carefully to one side, made sure the harness buckles about his body were fastened, and stepped down into the turret. According to the Tech Orders a ball gunner could wear a chest-pack chute while working, but that didn't prove out in practice—just not enough room. Pete came from the waist window to help him get set, and Ray heard him slapping down the outside latches.

A few taps on the door for the "all-clear" signal. He adjusted his headset, tested his throat-mike, made sure the links of .50 calibers for his twin guns were ready to feed clear, and plugged in the short tube of his oxygen mask.

There wasn't a lonelier spot this side of hades than a belly turret. Here you sat—with your back and your knees just a few inches under your chin—completely sealed up in a spherical ball of steel and glass. In only a few positions was it possible to see any part of the plane, and you felt suspended by some throbbing, invisible force half-way between heaven and hell.

Decker pressed down on the "dead-man" switches of his control handles and began swinging the turret around in a slow circle. He winced as he remembered what great fun this had seemed to be while he was in training, how he had whirled around at top speed of the electric motor and its drive gears. For some reason he now felt that he might come loose from the plane and plunge thousands of feet down to the quiet looking water beneath his round casket. . . .

Now they had swung in for the shoreline. He could pick out parts of the city, gashes made by railroads, the group of larger buildings, and off to the side were round, thick buttons marking the oil storage tanks of the refinery. Small, frequent movements of the plane indicated that Ronson was jockeying into exact position for the bombing run.

The slipstream noise changed tone, and Decker realized that the bomb-bay doors had been opened. Hah, it sure was cold. Suddenly he remembered that he had forgotten to plug in the cord to his "electrical underwear." Must be scared stupid. No use denying it, he was scared. He flipped off a glove and made the connection, then turned the rheostat control on. Warmth began to build up on the surface of his body, but his innards still felt as cold as a deep-freeze plant.

Puffs of grayish-black smoke appeared without warning ahead and below. Another bunch now, closer. Four little clouds blooming almost at the same instant. Flak! That's what it was. He stared as though hypnotized until a voice came over the interphone.

"Here they come! Eight of 'em, low, at ten o'clock." It was Pete, calling from his left waist window. Decker took several seconds to locate the black specks, which grew larger as an invisible string seemed to pull them toward the Fortresses.

THE bombardier's muffled voice came into his headset next. "More leaving the ground now. Looks like we might have a party! Our bombs will be going in about thirty seconds, Hank. Hold her steady!"

From that time until what seemed to be several hours later everything was just a blur in Decker's memory. Voices filled the interphone in a continual stream of orders, questions, and locations of the attacking Germans. He found himself shooting at empty air, forgetting to turn the range wheel of his computing sight, and flinching as far as his cramped space allowed every time the wing edges of the ME-109's turned red with gunfire.

Finally the fighters left them. A few bursts of inaccurate flak reached out for the Group as it crossed the shoreline heading southeast. Gradually the water came closer as the outfit slanted down to the comparative safety they had when flying just above the white-caps.

Decker's legs barely supported him when he stepped back onto African soil. He had been able to say only a few disconnected words to the rest of the crew during the flight back. He was thinking of his failure, the flak, the fighters, and most of all—his fear.

The next day was non-operational. That still meant work for the crew. Guns to be cleaned and checked. The plane had to be gone over thoroughly. Hank was a stickler about neatness all the way through, and the other crew members had come to agree with him that the cleaner a plane was, the safer it was.

Every hour was a constant fight of emotions in Ray Decker's mind. He could neither find the courage to throw in the towel, nor could he see any possibility of forcing himself to enter that turret on another combat mission. No one had criticized his lack of cooperation on the previous raid. There hadn't been a word said to him about

the almost full supply of shells remaining in his boxes when they returned.

As a matter of fact the very kindness and consideration the entire crew gave him made his position even harder. They deserved the protection those belly guns were supposed to give them. The day he had been assigned to the crew Hank had told him:

"We really depend on our two turrets, Decker. The other guns and their straight sights are no comparison to the electronic masterminds you and the top turret have."

Take-off was just two hours away, and Ray had still come to no decision. He couldn't face the shame of admitting his cowardice, of losing his new stripes, and making some other man fill the spot he was supposed to hold in this war.

Almost in a daze he forced himself into the airplane. In a few minutes the skipper would be telling them where their target was, and how much opposition to expect. As the bomber cleared ground, he began to tremble. There was nothing he could do now. The crazy notion of running to the main door and leaping out passed through his mind, but the idea of parachuting made him tremble even more.

George Casey was already heading back to his position in the tail. The cool young Irishman kept Hank constantly informed as to how the planes behind them were doing. It was Casey who called in on the interphone a minute or two later.

"Skipper from Casey."

"Go ahead, Casey."

"I've got bad news, Hank. My gun lock must have come loose during take-off. They're jammed on the mount, and I can't free them. Only shooting I'll be able to do is with fixed guns."

There was a moment of silence before the pilot answered. "If that's the way it is, we'll just have to count you out. Decker will have to cover as much of your area as he can with the belly guns."

Another wave of despair passed over Ray. Now he was doubly important to the crew, and he couldn't even pull his triggers at the right time, much less do any sighting. The last trip had proved that.

He forced himself to leave the radio

compartment, and walked to the place where his turret was mounted. Dougherty and the other waist gunner had crowded back into the tail entrance, trying to help Casey with his crippled equipment.

Decker looked quickly into the radio compartment. The operator was bent over the dials in front of his desk. As though the leg were not even a part of his body, Decker raised his right foot and kicked sharply at an aluminum pipe.

OXYGEN under four hundred pounds of pressure screamed from the jagged end of the broken line! It was done now. Too late to think about it. He sank down by the turret's top as the other gunners rushed to investigate.

Two minutes later the mighty bomber had wagged its wings in signal to the other planes, then pulled out of the formation with a hundred and eighty degree turn to head back to the base.

A quiet, gloomy crew emerged from the nose and waist doors soon after the fans had stopped. Captain Henry Ronson looked at the sad faces around him.

"It's too bad, all right," Hank said. "This group needed every plane today. After Decker stumbled and broke his oxygen line, we were minus four important guns. That's too much of a handicap to start into enemy territory with."

The other men nodded in agreement, but Ray could only stand in wordless grief. If he could just find his voice now to admit it hadn't been an accident. If he could tell them he was yellow all the way through, that would be the end of it.

Hank was speaking again. "Come out of it, Ray. Nobody's blaming you. The bad breaks can happen to anyone, and we just got a double dose of them today." He turned to include the rest of the crew. "Let's check in with S-Two, then come back here and get this old war-horse worked over so it's the best Fort in the outfit. I've got a hunch the Group will be going out again tomorrow."

Ronson was right in his hunch. The outfit spread on the green edge of the African desert came to life before the sun had made any advertisements of morning.

Once again Decker found himself crawling into the plane. Once again he went through the agonies forced on him by a mind that would give him no help in making a decision to call it quits.

Like an automaton he went through the procedure necessary to settle himself in the turret. Today it was Messina again. That hell-hole of hornets and flak that made even the veteran combat men serious and quiet when it was given as a target.

There was a slight change in the Fort's altitude and reduced vibration meant that the power had been eased back some. So they had now reached their bombing altitude—28,000 feet. The B-17s seldom went that high to do their work. It showed a lot of respect for the deadly accuracy peculiar to the Messina ack-ack batteries.

Decker squinted his eyes and watched some black dots moving rapidly across the patchwork of Sicilian field over five miles below. He was surprised to hear his own voice in the headset he wore: "I believe the bandits are on their way up!"

Confirmation came from the waist gunners, immediately followed by the bombardier's clipped words: "Bomb-bay doors coming open!"

Then the ground gunners began showing what they could do. Decker didn't see the first bursts of flak, but he saw the small ragged holes suddenly appear in the bottom of the Fort's fuselage! Hit on the first shot.

Miraculously Decker's mind began functioning clear and sharp. The Jerries were doing their best to blast them out of the air, and there was no point in freezing up with your heart in your throat. It didn't cost a thing to fight back when you could. And here came his chance to fight back!

A swarm of black 109s and yellow-nosed FW-190s were now sitting just at the edge of the flak zone, ready to pounce upon any cripple that was forced to leave formation. Also ready to jump the whole outfit as soon as the ground fire let up.

Immediately following an upward bounce the plane bent to the right in a steep turn. Their bombs were released now. The only job left to do was to get Uncle Sam's fighting equipment back home.

Decker set a wingspan measurement into the computing mechanism of the sight, and waited with his thumbs on the wheel between the two gun handles he gripped firmly.

He didn't have long to wait! A wave of four Messerschmitts bored in from three o'clock level. Decker framed one of the fighters on the cross bar of the "H" superimposed on the ground glass plate of his sight. Everything drilled into him during the months of training and practice was now at his command.

**W**HEN the pursuit filled in the space between the two vertical bars he squeezed both triggers and began turning off the distance on the range wheel with his thumbs.

The glass plate blurred for a fraction of a second, then was blank. In amazement Decker heard another gunner shouting into the intercom:

"Decker just blew one out of the sky—and I winged another one!"

The fighter pilots seemed to go crazy after that. But they did some amazing flying in the process. They came in high most of the time, rolling over on their backs a thousand yards away from the Fort they were working on—their wing guns blazing until they did a Split S under the formation.

Decker was now making most of his shots as the pursuits started their dives to safety. It took them only a split second to get out of range, so he was making instinctive settings for quick bursts from his two guns. The acrid smell of burned powder was mixed with the oxygen his mask delivered, and a couple of new holes had appeared in the Fort's belly not far from his turret.

He found himself laughing between blasts from his fifties. Yeah, this was a lot better than sitting and wondering when something was going to hit you.

A Yellow-Nose came boring in from two o'clock low. Ray framed it quickly and waited for the wings to fill his sight—then he began squeezing again. The FW-190 wobbled and veered, but he kept pumping lead at it until it fell off on one wing and spun down out of control.

Decker laughed noiselessly into his mask and started swinging in a circle, searching for another victim. Off to his left a field of little white puffs which

looked like holls of cotton appeared. He remembered one of the bull sessions in the tent, and knew what they were. The Jerries were now sitting back just out of range of the Fort's guns, trying to lob in shells from their cannon.

**B**LACK fluid came gushing out on the underside of Number Two engine.

"Hank from Decker!" he yelled, then, "Skipper, we just started losing a lot of oil from Number Two."

"Thanks, Decker. Pressure needle shows it now.

The prop slowed to a standstill, and Ray could see the lower end of one blade turned straight into the wind. Then he resumed his search for any bandits who might renew the fight.

Eight of the ME-109s got together and made one more pass, flying wing to wing and coming in high from the rear. Decker got in a couple of short bursts as they dived underneath him, and his right-hand gun jammed. He pulled the charging cable furiously, and the stuck shell case came free, but it didn't matter. The shooting was over for the day. . . .

The enlisted men had all walked over to the edge of the hardstand to light up their cigarettes when Hank dropped out of the nose hatch. He inspected the bottom of the damaged wing before he joined the rest of his crew. There was a grin on his face.

"We're lucky not to wind up with any holes in us personally. Right good show, wasn't it? And you graybeards let the newest man in the outfit outshoot you!"

Casey chimed in: "Aw, we were just holding off so's he could have some fun."

There was a lot of other good-natured ribbing and joking as tense nerves relaxed and the crew let off steam. They had a total of five positive kills for the raid, three in addition to Decker's pair. But he couldn't join in the small talk and laughter now. Something had come back on his mind to worry him.

That night he walked over rapidly to intercept Hank as the pilot was leaving the mess tent.

"Captain Ronson, there's something serious I've got to tell you about!"

Ronson shook some of the hot water off the messkit he had just washed. Then he offered Decker a cigarette.

"Maybe something about sabotaging an oxygen line, Ray?"

The gunner's mouth fell open.

He stammered, "How did you know?"

"Well, the boys told me they were afraid that maybe you had a case of gunners' gripe. That's more or less natural for a new man.

"I took another look before repairs were made, and I figured you would have to do some mighty high and fancy stumbling to break that line where you did. But I also figured that if you had nerve enough to start another mission after that, you'd have spunk enough to be a combat man. You made another mission, and I believe we've got ourselves a steady ball-turret man now. Don't you?"

A warm glow diffused itself all over Ray Decker.

"Yes, sir. I mean— Thanks, Hank. You're right!"



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**T**HE United States takes credit for having the world's first commercial airline. On January 1, 1914, Tony Jannus, piloting a Benoit flying boat, inaugurated service between St. Petersburg and Tampa, Florida. The 23-mile trip took twenty minutes, and Mayor Pfeil of St. Petersburg paid four hundred dollars for the honor of being the first passenger.

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## TARMAC TALK

(Continued from page 7)

ten years or so from now. Personally—I just plain don't want to believe that—for your skipper would probably hit the junk pile with them. The military services consider men between 21 and 23 years old as at the perfect age to begin jet training.

There should be a good break for all of you folks—which ever class you fall in—whether you want a jet roaring behind you, or a prop spinning in front of you. But I'll bet money that in 1980 the Mustang will look older to the young generation than the Kitty Hawk does to us now!

## LETTERS FROM READERS

**N**OW we throw another log on the fire—to take that slight chill of spring out of the Operations Office—and take care of some correspondence. Believe me, we really enjoy hearing from all you SKY FIGHTERS fans, whether you be near or far. It's true that we can't publish every letter, but we can print those of general interest. Even if some miss the column—you can be sure that your message is carefully read—and it helps us to put together just the kind of magazine you want.

First off we have a well-worded complaint from an airborne reader. In spite of the saying: "It never pays to argue with a woman"—I'm going to defend one of our capable writers!

Dear Skipper: In the Fall Issue of SKY FIGHTERS you published a story titled TIGHT SQUEEZE in which the author makes the astounding statement: "Johnnie flew with the nose of the ship low to lose altitude and speed simultaneously". In view of the usual and remarkable accuracy of the air facts in the stories, I am surprised at the editorial department allowing such an absurd and gross error slide by—for it is a known fact that speed is exchanged for altitude, or altitude for speed. You cannot lose speed and altitude simultaneously except by holding the nose high. Even in the so-called normal glide, the nose must be held up to prevent excessive gain in speed—and this at idle power or dead engine. This is not an aviation-fiction addict's beef, but one from a pilot having a hundred hours and hoping to live to log many hundreds more.—Margaret A. Ebanks 16 South Broadway, Baltimore 31, Md.

Very nicely put, Maggie, but I believe you  
[Turn page]

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overlooked something that is very important. You are basing your argument on *control* pressure rather than airplane *attitude*. Next time you are flying just try cutting your power and actually holding the nose of the plane at the same attitude it was in normal level flight. Everything will be fine for a while, then you stall out. True enough that at steady power, altitude can be lost only by increasing air speed—or altitude gained only at loss of airspeed which that same power would give you in level flight. Yet with power reduced well below that setting which gives you normal cruise it is a simple matter to blend together an altitude loss and airspeed loss from normal cruising airspeed. And this is not a desk pilot's theory, but an opinion from one having several thousand hours—also hoping to log more!

Dear Skipper: I've just read your Fall issue of SKY FIGHTERS (I'm lagging behind times), and I should like to read many more, so I thought maybe you could fix me up with a pen-pal. I could exchange English aircraft magazines for American books. I'm almost 17 years old, and am very interested in all types of aircraft; both full-size and models. Also I thought I'd like to let you know how I have enjoyed this old number of SKY FIGHTERS and how I'd like to enjoy some more issues.—*Colin Westwood, 6 Egerton Street, Middlesbrough, Yorkshire, England.*

That sounds like a good offer to me, Colin. Maybe some of our old-timers will manage to tear themselves loose from their stack of old SKY FIGHTERS in exchange for your publications.

Dear Skipper: I am a steady reader of your SKY FIGHTERS, and I like the stories you have. But I am like one of your other readers whose letter I read—how about some stories of World War I and those JENNIES and SPADS. I am a soldier and also a civilian pilot; taking training for Private Pilot Examiner's license, so I can issue permits to men like myself who would rather fly than eat. I would also like to join AIRMEN OF AMERICA. Thank you very much, and I'll be looking forward to the next issue.—*Richard J. Cole, RA-16012608, Hqs. Det., 728th Military Police Battalion, Ft. Sheridan, Ill.*

And here are a whole flight of letters that speak for themselves:

Dear Skipper: The recent copy of SKY FIGHTERS with its variety of good stories forces me to write this—my first fan letter. I think it one of the best copies since its birth and I have read them all. I now consider SKY FIGHTERS the best reading magazine on the newsstand racks.—*C. J. Link, 259 Harding Road, Rochester 12, N. Y.*

Dear Skipper: I have just finished my second copy of SKY FIGHTERS. I can say it really is some book! I am 14 years old. I'd like to have some pen pals from 14 to 16 years old, also some pilots. I want boys and girls both for pen pals, so don't let a future pilot down.—*Kenneth Powers, Rt. 1, Box 75, Whitetop, Va.*

Dear Skipper: For some time I have been reading SKY FIGHTERS. Yes, I mean before it became as modern as it is, when the mag was full of World War I stories, such as: THE TOUGH DON'T PRAY, ACE KILLER, TRAITOR PATROL, BLOOD ON THE SUN and others. Will you please reprint some of these or have some of your authors write new WW I stories? I can remember when, once in a while THE LONE EAGLE stories appeared in SKY FIGHTERS. What ever happened to him? He was a good story. Let's have some more stories about him. Here is how I have rated the stories for the Spring, 1949, issue:

1. SHROUD LINES, by Norman A. Daniels
2. DUEL IN THE SKY, by Rick McClun
3. MASCOT FOR DISASTER, by Richard Core
4. WINNER TAKE HALF, by Norman N. Tolkan
5. HIGH SPEED PILOT, by J. L. Bouma
6. NO RIBBONS FOR CARGO PILOTS, by Joe Archibald
7. MURDER IN MID AIR, by O. B. Myers
8. WINGS OF AMAZONAS, by Arthur J. Burks
9. TWO ON A TURBO JET, by Arch Whitehouse

My vote for the Plane Personality is the Fokker D-7 and also the Spad 13. Both were topnotch planes. May I make a suggestion which would probably be liked by all airplane picture collectors. Put a Warplanes of All Nations section in your mag like it used to be with WW I planes. A picture of the plane could be shown as well as some information about it. You could take this to a vote. How about it? Do away with THRILLS IN THE AIR and put in its stead a biography of a WW I or WW II hero—flyer or ground man. I'm an avid aviation fan and also chess player and would like to hear from any who like the same things—boys or girls, ages 18 to 24. My gasoline supply is running low, so I'll have to sign off for now.—*Jerry Taylor, 109 South Main, Stillwater, Okla.*

Dear Skipper: Having read your mag since last fall, and liking same, I thought I should write as others do and say my bit. Keep up the good stories such as NO RIBBONS FOR CARGO PILOTS and SHROUD LINES. How about a few 1914-18 yarns. I believe Joe Archibald does a good job on them. Is it possible for me to join up as a member of the AIRMEN OF AMERICA? If so, count me in. I am 21 and a vet of World War II and re-enlisted in 1946. "Per Ardua Ad Astra."—*Phil Thormin, 25847 L.A.C.P., R.C.A.F. St'n., Greenwood, Nova Scotia.*

Dear Skipper: I've a lot of time on my hands  
[Turn page]

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and you probably haven't, so you're about to become the victim of a female with a broken arm. (It's not my writing arm.) I'm crazy (maybe I ought to put a period there) about your mag and I think it should come out much more often. My dream come true is a Lightning P-38. Every time I see one I want to go over and pet it. So I accordingly cast my vote for the P-38. Well, I've leaned on your shoulder long enough and I better get down to what I'm writing you for—a membership card for AIRMEN OF AMERICA. Keep the props spinning!—Kay Grace, 517 West 64th St., Chicago, Ill.

Dear Skipper: I have been getting new members for you among all those interested in aviation. I am studying to be an army cadet, later to be a permanent commercial flier.—Jerry Johnson, 3539 LaSalle Ave., Youngstown, Ohio.

Dear Skipper: It's over two years since I first came across your mag, SKY FIGHTERS. Those two years have changed me an awful lot and at last I have plucked up courage to write to you. To me your mag is tops, just the way it stands. Could you please advise me? How do I start to become an air pilot? Have I to have any special exams, certificates, degrees or the like? I don't think there are any training schools here or in England. At least I haven't heard of any. Maybe you could help me there. Please write and tell me all you know about the possibilities of my becoming a pilot. I'd like to have an American girl or boy (boy preferred) with the same ideas as myself to write to me. I'm 16, not very tall, fair haired and blue eyed. Please, all you girls that should have been boys, and all those that are boys, won't you write to me?—Olive Mac Conochie, 16 Fountain Place, Londonderry City, North Ireland.

Can any of you flying fans give Olive the information she wants? And while you're writing, here's another chap who should make an interesting pen-pal for some of you.

Dear Skipper: I would like to join AIRMEN OF AMERICA. Last time I did any joining it was with the Royal Air Force in Scotland—where I lived previous to coming back over to the States. I had the good fortune to do my training in Canada and the States. I have been in this country about a year now, and work for Alaska Airlines as I would not be happy except in aviation. I hope soon to get my citizenship papers filed. I picked out SKY FIGHTERS in a drug store and have read it regularly since. I would like to hear from just anyone who lives, talks, and breathes aviation. Let's have a couple of stories of the RAF for old times' sake.—Alexander (Scotty) Macdonald, 725 North 92nd Street, Seattle 3, Washington.

Before me now, on some of that purty paper, is another letter from one of our most faithful and regular writers.

Dear Skipper: Here I am again! I enjoyed the latest SKY FIGHTERS very much. All stories were good—especially FRONT PAGE PILOT by R. S. Bowen. I am 19, and I would like to have some pilot pen-pals and some in California. I guess I'll switch off and let you have the controls.—Eve Bernall, 2968 East 2nd St., Los Angeles 33, California.

Eve, honey, be sure to keep on writing to us!

Our "Tail-end Charlie" on this flight writes in from the home of the National Air Races.

Dear Skipper: Please enroll me as a member of AIRMEN OF AMERICA and send me my free membership card. I read your magazine as soon as it comes out—which isn't half often enough, and I really get a kick out of your stories. I'm an ex-airplane driver of the Army Air Corps, and have flown everything from Cubs to A-20s. Although temporarily grounded by the medicos, I still have that old longing for the Wild Blue Yonder. Here's for bigger and better stories in a great magazine.—Harry J. Thompson, 4746 State Road, Cleveland, Ohio.

[Turn page]

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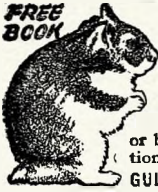
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Many thanks for them thar kind words, Harry—we'll try to fill your order. Why don't the rest of you readers sit down right now and drop a note to the Skipper? Whether it is bouquets or brickbats—every letter is really appreciated. Be sure you address me at—SKY FIGHTERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

## OUR NEXT ISSUE

TORREY SUDDEN had been flying for commercial airlines ever since he had left EATS in early 1947, but the mission that took him now to Brazil and the Amazon was purely a personal affair—and it was to prove the most dangerous adventure of his life!

Torrey was looking for a missing war-buddy. The only clue he had to his friend's whereabouts was a shrunken, human head—the kind made by the savage and wily natives of this fevered, trackless jungle. But with an old surplus C-47 that had yet to gasp out its last mile, Torrey boldly undertook his task.

Torrey thought he was getting some help when he enlisted the aid of Bella, a beautiful and infinitely desirable Latin girl who was searching for her own missing lover. But it took him only deeper into trouble. This is the kind of action that followed. . .

If there had ever been a record for that journey, Torrey broke it. The field, when he reached it, with Bella beside him in the jeep, was open blackness. He found the C-47 with his headlights, roared up to it and slammed his hand on the horn-button.

Karl, the plane's crew-chief, threw open the cargo door, gun in hand.

"We're taking off, Karl," Torrey shouted. "Right now! Get her ready!"

The crew chief never asked a single question about why or what for. He moved about, turning on cabin lights, unchocking wheels, and removing control locks with swift, unerring efficiency. Only after he had

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started one engine did Torrey think of fuel. "We loaded up with gas to make Belem?" he asked.

"No, sir! I put in all that was left in our barrels. There is more expected from the river, tomorrow. We've enough to make Manaos but not half enough for Belem!"

Torrey swore under his breath. Manaos, he thought—no! He might be safe there, but Bella wouldn't be. He pressed the right starter button.

"Cochabamba!" he shouted. "Get me that map from the—"

"It's six hundred and eighty miles!" shouted Karl promptly in reply. "Course, one-eighty-six. Altitude of field—"

"Tell me the rest later," cried Torrey, and warmed his engines.

Using his landing lights, he taxied to the end of the runway and turned. All about lay the fastness of the jungle, black, silent, ominous. Suddenly his eye caught a splash of light through the foliage back where the road entered the open. Two trucks swung up. Rifles sprouted from them.

"Hang on!" Torrey cried. "We're goin', right now!"

He poured coal to the engines. The big plane lumbered forward. He kept his eye glued on the open stretch of runway, calculating the moment to use right rudder on the dog-leg.

Something snapped just above his head. A bullet had entered one side of the cabin and left the other. More bullets pierced the ship. He heard Karl's curse.

Had someone shot Torrey down in cold blood, the crew chief would never have turned a hair. But someone was shooting holes in the airplane—*his airplane!*

Jerking out the rubber hand plug in a window, he thrust his own rifle through and started answering fire . . . !

As you can see, ACE OF DIAMONDS by O. B. Myers, zooms along like a ram-jet—and there's never a moment's lull right up to its smashing, spectacular climax! Torrey doesn't get his own head shrunken and tanned to pocket-size, but more than once  
[Turn page]

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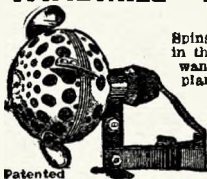
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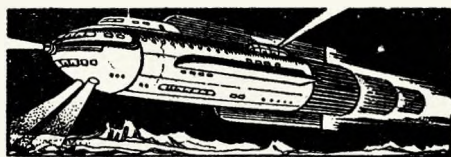
he just misses it by a hair. ACE OF DIAMONDS is a novelet rich with fast-action and flying thrills in strange skies!

Two other man-size, air-action novelets will be on tap in the next issue. THUNDER OVER THE ROCKIES, by Pat Patterson, is a wild and woolly story of two harum-scarum free-lance pilots, who hire out for a bit of unusual flying out west—and nose-dive into more than they'd bargained for! And UNDERGROUND SKYWAY, by F. E. Rechnitzer, is the bang-up tale of what happens when a group of Florida-based smugglers try to get a popular war-hero to front for them!

Besides all this, there'll be a top assortment of short stories, articles and features—including a new instalment of THRILLS IN THE AIR, by Jack Kofoed. So watch for the next issue of SKY FIGHTERS, bringing you the greatest stories of America's new great age of flying! See you then!

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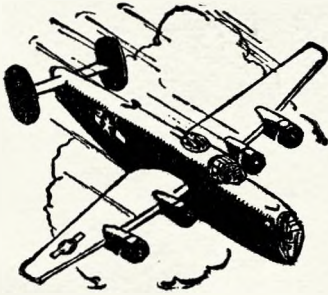
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# PILOT'S QUIZ

(Answers to questions on page 92)



1. A kite. In 1893, Lawrence Hargrave went aloft over England in the largest of a string of box-kites.
2. Gremlins are mythical little creatures that sometimes help, but more often raise merry hob around an airplane in flight, jamming controls and landing gears, and causing mysterious flutters and vibrations. But good gremlins are said to guide pilots through the worst storms to safety.
3. A "landing run" is the distance a plane requires for landing in still air, measured from the point its wheels touch ground until they stop rolling.
4. a. Spirit of St. Louis—Charles A Lindbergh.  
b. Question Mark—General Carl Spaatz.  
c. Winnie Mae—Wiley Post.
5. All were invented before 1920.
6. The throat microphone is sensitive only to vibrations of the vocal chords and transmits no noise of engines or guns. It also permits the unhampered wearing of an oxygen mask.
7. a. Berlin, Germany; b. New York, N. Y.; c. St. Louis, Mo.
8. The pitot-static tube is the intake that operates a plane's airspeed indicator. It is usually mounted on the wing or some other place where the air flow isn't disturbed by the propeller blast.
9. None is air-cooled. They are all liquid-cooled.
10. Igor Sikorsky.

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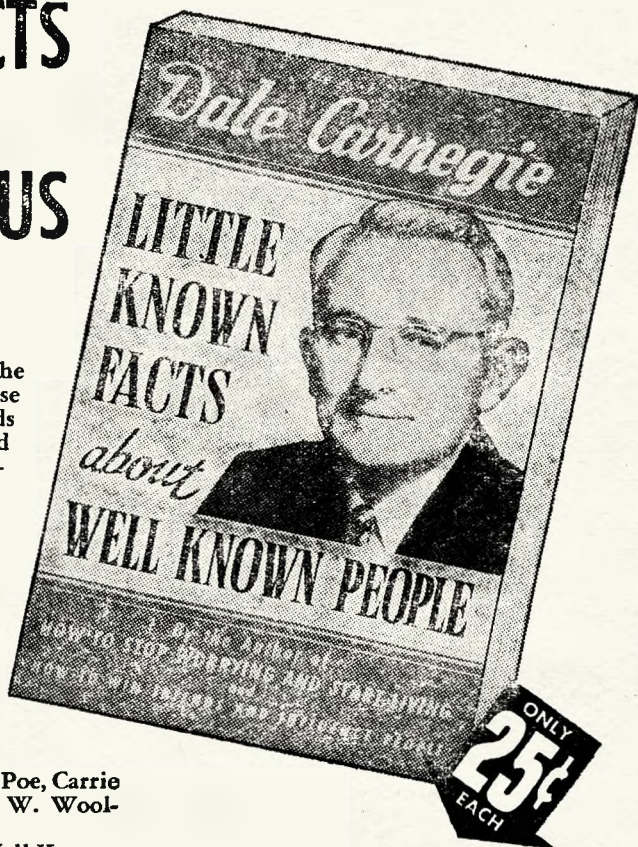
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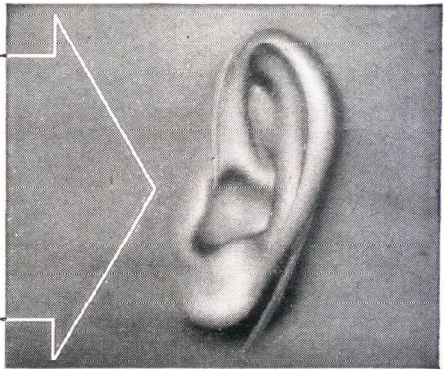
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1450 WEST 19<sup>TH</sup> STREET  
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BELTONE HEARING AID CO., DEPT. TFG-9  
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Please tell me more about the new invisible Beltone PHANTOMOLD

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*"We were caught in a wind  
that screamed our doom!"*

A TRUE EXPERIENCE OF JAMES F. BRADSHER  
IN AN ARKANSAS TORNADO



**1** "Near midnight, we heard it! A sighing whisper... a whining gust of wind... a shrieking blast! The full fury of the tornado struck! My wife screamed! My child whimpered. I grabbed my flashlight. Suddenly... the whole house churned... spun in air.



**2** "I had been flung from the house into a ditch. But my flashlight still burned. Frantically, I followed its steady beam along the ditch until I saw the white faces of my injured wife and child!"



**3** "With the help of our flashlight, we reached shelter. I thank those flashlight batteries for saving three lives that night. Now I know why 'Eveready' batteries are The Batteries With 'Nine Lives!'"

Just as an active cat takes a nap... and dozes... with new pep... so "Eveready" flashlight batteries re-cover power\* between uses and bounce back for extra life!



\* Technical explanation: due to the electrochemical regeneration of the depolarizer.

THE FLASHLIGHT BATTERY WITH **"NINE LIVES!"**

"Eveready," "Nine Lives" and the Cat Symbol are trade-marks of

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