

FIGHTING ACES OF WAR SKIES

# WINGS

20c  
SUMMER



**THE FORTRESS  
FIGHTS ALONE**

A NOVELET OF  
ZERO SKIES by

**PAUL KRAEMER**

**TRAITOR IN  
THE COCKPIT**

SAOA OF THE  
FERRY PILOTS by

**JAY D. BLAUFox**

**THE LOST  
LUFTWAFFE**

SPY ACES OVER  
GERMANY by

**STEUART ÉMERY**

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# WINGS

**DEDICATED TO AMERICAN FLYING MEN WHO HAVE  
CARRIED THE STARS AND STRIPES TO THE SKY**

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LINTON DAVIES, Editor

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Cover painted for WINGS by Jerome Rozen



# TRAITOR IN THE COCKPIT

By JAY D. BLAUFOX

ILLUSTRATED BY C. A. MURPHY

*A Novel of the Ferry to the Second Front*



*The device was gone, Morgan rose from his search as a motorcycle roared up, and turned to face Chase.*





*Instead he faced a machine gun and a Luger held by Sorgus. "Looking for something?" asked Sorgus ironically.*

# TRAITOR IN THE COCKPIT

By JAY D. BLAUFox

**Berlin had paid high, and would pay more, for the priceless world-shaking secret that Dent Morgan was ferrying to fated Cairo.**

**T**WO bronzed men were huddled over maps in the Operations Office of the Air Transport Command on the outskirts of Miami. They spoke in muffled whispers. The doors and windows were closed and thoroughly locked in spite of the warm weather outside, and the warmer atmosphere within.

Major Ronald Collins, commandant of the station, leaned close to Captain Dent Morgan and whispered: "This is the first of the new type twin-engined, long-range bomber-fighters, Morgan, to be turned over to the R.A.F. in the Middle East. It's a hazardous assignment for you, for the Jerries would like to get their hands on a copy of it."

"I don't doubt that," smiled Morgan.

"You'll doubt it less when you know that information about it has leaked out to them. Not much, you understand," Collins hastened to assure Dent, "but enough to make them stop at nothing to examine one at close range."

"You mean they know about the new aiming device?" asked the ferry pilot.

"I don't know how much they know about it," replied the Commandant, "but they know it exists." He shook his head soberly. "One man was caught with a copy of the plans showing the device attached to a Browning machine gun on the cowl of a fighter. Another was caught with metal parts of the device." He added thoughtfully: "Both men were shot for their foolishness."

**D**ENT whistled.

"The ship I'm to take over is fully loaded for attack, isn't it?"

"It has been fully prepared for combat if combat comes," assured the Commandant. "Every gun has its full complement of ammunition."

An eager glint flowed into Dent Morgan's deep brown eyes. "I wouldn't mind

at least one attack to prove that I can still fight in spite of what the Army Medics say about air fighting being a young man's job."

"Are you still carrying a peeve because they turned you down for combat service?" asked Major Collins.

"Well, why not?" asked Morgan, letting a little of the resentment he felt come to the surface in spite of himself. "I knocked fourteen Heinies down in the last War. I could knock my quota down in this one."

"Not at the present combat speeds you couldn't," discouraged Collins. "You couldn't take the gut-lifting dives; the spine-snapping turns; the tonsil-dropping climbs. You'd black out . . ."

"Oh, I know I'm twenty-five years older than I was then," interrupted Morgan.

". . . And your reflexes and equilibrium responses are slower," Collins continued. "You're all right piloting a bomber in straight and level flight at two hundred and fifty to three hundred miles an hour. But," he wagged a finger significantly, "try diving an Airacobra at six hundred and you'll go out like the shore lights on Miami Beach."

"All the same," insisted Morgan, "I think I can kick an Airacobra all over the sky and get away with it."

"Think so?" asked Collins. "Well, if we had an Airacobra we could afford to lose, I'd let you try a ninety-degree vertical bank and turn. I don't have to remind you that in that manuever a pilot weighs six times more than he does in normal flight. You know that. It's tough enough on a kid; but what do you think it would do to you?"

"Oh, I suppose I'd feel it for a minute or two," agreed Morgan. Then he added persistently: "But I'd come right out of it."

"You weigh just one hundred and seventy right now. In a vertical bank and turn at four hundred miles an hour your



weight, considering the effect of centrifugal force and gravity on your body, would jump from one hundred and seventy pounds to approximately one thousand and twenty pounds. Now you picture what would happen to your slower-moving bloodstream—forgetting the reflex action of the rest of your body for a moment. You'd think somebody blew the sun out."

Collins slapped Dent Morgan on the back. "Come on, Dent," he smiled understandingly. "I know how you feel. And too, I know what I'm talking about. I tried it," he confided, "and if it hadn't been for my copilot who saw what happened to me and kept me from being killed, someone else would be C.O. of this base and not me." Then he added by way of clinching his argument: "You and I are about the same age, you know."

But Dent Morgan, in spite of his almost unlimited knowledge of flying, muttered that combat was more in his line than playing old Mother Hubbard in the Ferry Command.

"We can get plenty of good kids to handle our fighters," continued the Major, by way of encouraging Morgan, "but we can't get many good ferry men like you. And we need a lot more right now to get these new ships over the sea to the big desert."

"Well, I don't want to act like a stubborn kid, Major," grinned Morgan. "But just the same, I hope I get into the spot on the hop over where I have to try out that new gun-aiming device."

Collins laughed.

"Okay, have it your own way," he said. Quickly serious, he added thoughtfully: "You're taking a navigator and gunner along with you. Does the gunner know how to use the device?"

"He does not," replied the ferry pilot.

"Good!" said the Major. "When you arrive at the base in Cairo, you will report only to General Alexander himself." He deliberated a moment, then continued: "These men who are flying with you . . . I let you have them because you said you have had them on a number of trips and that they are absolutely trustworthy . . ."

"I'd swear by either one of them," Morgan assured the commandant. "Chevvy Chase—his real name is Charles—rode with me as copilot on the airlines up North,

Bill Sorgus is a little eccentric maybe, but in the five months he's ferried with me as gunner, he's behaved like a real honest-to-goodness all-out Nazi hater."

"If you're satisfied," said the Major, "I'm satisfied." He pulled a large map toward him that had more of the Atlantic Ocean painted on its blue surface than brown land. "You know what your instructions are."

"Yes, sir. I'm to fly to the base in the Sudan; refuel and take off for the airdrome at Lake Chad; refuel again there and proceed to my destination which is Cairo, Egypt, where I turn the ship and gun-aiming device over to General Alexander himself."

"Right!" confirmed the commandant. "He will call in armorers he can trust, and in his presence you will explain the operation and installation of the new gun-aiming devices." As an afterthought he added: "You have no written plans or descriptions of the device in your possession, I hope."

"None," Morgan assured him.

"Good," smiled Collins. "One thing more. Should there be any danger of the plane's falling into enemy hands—destroy it. You understand."

Morgan nodded thoughtfully.

"I do, Major Collins."

"For your own information several hundred units of the device are on board a convoy slipping up the Red Sea right now," the Major added. "Yours is the only one installed and you're the only man in the Ferry Command who knows how to install it. That is why you must get to Alexander himself at any cost."

"I understand," replied Morgan. And he did understand the gravity of his assignment.

ONCE Rommel had sent the British reeling back almost up to the gates of Alexandria and Cairo. The British had lost Libya and had had to fight desperately to hold Egypt.

General Sir Harold R. L. G. Alexander—"Alec"—had kept Rommel away from the Suez Canal, had kept him from joining Von Bock, who was driving into the rich Caucasus to smash his way through Iran and Iraq to Egypt. But Hitler still dreamed his dream. And the British and Americans in Africa needed the new twin-engined,

American bomber-fighters with the new gun-aiming device. Other of these bomber-fighters would follow on Morgan's tail—but his alone would carry the new device.

Picked up by the hands of an uninformed observer, it looked like a square steel box that held a mirror or two; a lens or two with one-inch apertures; a long snoutlike tube at one end of which a rubber eyecup was attached; a knurled, hard-rubber knob that manipulated the adjustments of the mirrors and lenses and deflectors under graduating scales; but the examiner would have to know what it was, and what its purpose was and how to use it, to understand what it was all about and where it belonged. It could be fitted to anything and mean nothing.

It was a seven-thousand-mile hop to deliver that plane from Miami to Cairo, and Morgan would have to take it all the way himself. Oh, he would occasionally turn the controls over to Chevy Chase, who would act as copilot, radio operator and navigator. The hop would be taken in short jumps—short for a long-range bomber—of fifteen hundred to two thousand miles. It wouldn't take long if all went well. And there was no reason to expect that it wouldn't. The ocean hop would be the most hazardous, in case of a forced landing.

As for Sorgus—the gunner-engineer—he would keep an eye out for German long-range bombers and raiders who might try to prevent the delivery of the ship. Sorgus had been on many a trip with Dent Morgan. He had proved his mettle.

Major Collins looked at his watch.

"Time we got outside and saw you off, Morgan," he suggested. "I'd like to see you get to Trinidad before dark."

"That'll be easy," Dent Morgan grinned. "It's only a little over sixteen hundred as the crow flies—if he could make it."

They went out. On the field they saw a camouflaged twin-engined ship, surrounded by guards armed with machine guns. The ship was a sleek beauty. It had a long, lean fuselage with a tri-blister and a battery of six machine guns, two protruding out of each side and two in a revolving turret in the top; all maneuverable and operative by one man. Two 37-millimeter cannon rode above the pilot's hothouse; while four fifty caliber machine guns stuck their

nasty snouts through the leading edges of each of the wings.

"I shouldn't like to be in front of that baby when all the fireworks go off," ventured Morgan.

"Neither should I," agreed Major Collins.

An officer in charge approached the pair. "Your gunner and copilot are aboard, sir," he said. "The engines are warm and the plane is ready for the take-off."

"Are all the guns served?" asked Morgan.

"Yes, sir," replied the junior officer. "All tanks filled and the plane all in order for any emergency."

Turning to Major Collins, Morgan held out his hand. "Don't you lose any sleep over anything," he said. "The Alec will get this plane intact; or—" he added significantly with an eager glint in his eyes—"he won't get it at all."

"The best of luck, Morgan," breathed the commandant, gripping the pilot's hand hard. "And a one-piece landing."

As Morgan entered the ship and glanced up the fuselage toward the blister, he was just a second—a split second—late to see Sorgus push a soft object down between the trusses behind his chair. Sorgus turned swiftly to meet Morgan's enquiring gaze. "Everything okay, Bill?" he asked.

"Everything's okay, Skipper!" Sorgus shouted. His hand behind his back gave the soft object an extra press down to get it quickly out of sight. His eyes narrowed as he wondered if Morgan had seen him. But he was reassured when the Skipper turned his attention to Chase already in the copilot's chair.

He trembled a bit with the excitement of the moment when he heard Morgan say: "Okay, Chevy. Roll 'em!"

The gunner touched the fire extinguisher in front of him to see that it was tightly fastened. He smiled a strange smile as his fingers caressed the pump handle. He bent down as he smiled and glanced along the inside of the fuselage at the two men now seated in their places.

There was a sudden cough—the raucous cough of a giant trying to clear its throat, and the Packard-built Rolls-Royce Merlins caught on and the tri-bladed electric feathering propellers cut the air. The new 1280 horsepower engines were soon ripping the



air about them as they were tested for a few seconds at full revs.

Morgan cut them down to idling, and they sounded as sweet as the gentle purr of a newborn kitten. He knew the twins would carry him well across the water—and set him down at his far-off destination without fuss or bother.

He pushed the bulletproof window back on its slide.

"Clear?" he called.

"All clear!" came back the response.

America's new aerial gift to the air over the Middle East thundered down the concrete runway and rose like a gull on an updraft and headed out over the Atlantic taking a southeasterly course for Trinidad—or for the Port of Spain.

"Well, we're off," Morgan grunted to Chase alongside him.

"Yup," replied Chase. "And it's a long truck for only three in the crew."

"We'll make it easily," assured Morgan. He switched on the intercommunicating phones. "Hey, there, Sorgus," he shouted, "how goes it back there?"

Sorgus caressed the fire extinguisher tenderly. He shouted back to Morgan in the mouthpiece. "Everything's hunky dory, Skipper." He smiled again, sourly.

**T**HEY took just time enough in Port of Spain to fill the tanks while another heavy guard surrounded it, and the ship was off on the second leg of its long journey to Natal in Brazil.

Off the runway again at Natal, the ship turned until the needle on the magnetic compass pointed due east. Morgan was headed across the southern Atlantic for Sierra Leone, Africa's reception point for aircraft ferried from the United States to the Middle East.

The skipper leaned over and set his knobs on the automatic pilot after running the ship to ten thousand. The robot held it dead on the course for the West Coast of Africa base. He sat back and relaxed as Chevvy Chase pressed his earphones closer to his ears.

Five hundred miles off Brazil, the new dive bomber rode over a huge convoy headed for the Cape of Good Hope and the Indian Ocean. If it got there safely, it would proceed up the Red Sea for its unloading in Alexandria. As Morgan

glanced down over the side, he wondered how many of the new gun-aiming devices that convoy carried to the British.

Chase, listening in the earphones, suddenly sat forward.

"The convoy operator calling us," he explained.

"Ask him what he wants," ordered Morgan.

Chase repeated the request into the microphone, and listened.

"He says our red, white and blue cocarde can be made out, but suggests we'd better identify ourselves, for the escort cruisers have their anti-aircraft guns trained on us," repeated Chase.

"Well, satisfy the guy," said Morgan. "Throw him the prearranged Very lights."

Two green Very lights shot out from the side of the fuselage on which the copilot was sitting. These were answered by the lead cruiser with two green lights from below. Through his binoculars, Dent Morgan saw the slim snouts of the anti-aircraft guns lowered from the vertical to horizontal.

The Merlin engines were humming rhythmically and the huge ship swung on through scattered cumulus clouds, maintaining its dead-on course, still under the control of the automatic pilot.

Three thousand nonstop miles later, the nose of the ship gently lowered over the sandy beach of Sierra Leone, and the wind whistled past the wide wings of the descending craft.

The landing on the wide concrete strip was an easy one and the roll up to the hangars brought a line of armed guards flying in a motor lorry. As the bomber rolled to a stop, the men dropped off the lorry and surrounded it as a tank car backed up to the nose and pipe lines were raised to the wing and fuselage gas tanks.

While Chase stayed with the ship and stood outside watching the men fill the tanks, Sorgus accompanied Morgan to the meteorological office for weather data over the desert. There was still a hop of seventeen hundred miles to the Lake Chad air-drome, and another seventeen hundred to Cairo and the Alec.

The weather news was good. The sand storms that had covered the Middle East the previous week had died down; the weather promised to be good throughout

the northern part of the continent of Africa.

Twenty minutes later the new fighter bomber rose off the runway before the engines had a chance to cool, and the steady, easy cadence of the explosions inside their cylinder heads, combined with the growing warmth inside the cabin, made the crew feel a trifle drowsy.

As Sorgus felt himself going slightly sleepy he grinned. It was going to be easy, he thought. He turned behind him to see if the soft object he had pushed into the aluminum framework was within easy reach when he would need it. It was.

The fire extinguisher he had caressed earlier shone before him on the panel under his guns. His revolving turret was located just behind the pilot's compartment. Through a small hole in the aluminum alloy plate which separated the turret from the pilot's hothouse, he could see the back of Morgan's head.

It was not time yet, he thought. After the landing at the Lake Chad airdrome.

"THIS ship rides like a honey," said Morgan, turning to Chevy Chase beside him.

"It's getting a little bumpy up here now," Chase reminded him. "I wonder if the weather report was right."

"What do you mean?" asked Morgan.

"Look ahead," said Chase, pointing to a mist on their ten-thousand-foot level. "Looks like sand dust."

"That's still too far ahead of us to worry about now," replied Morgan. "We run into that after we leave Chad."

They were right. After refueling at the Chad Airdrome, about ten miles out on their last leg of the run to Alexander, they ran into a sand fog that drove them to shut their windows. They were heading northeast for Cairo. It was getting hotter inside the cabin.

Even Sorgus was beginning to wipe the beads of perspiration from his forehead. But in spite of that, he seemed to be enjoying the situation. Everything was working right into his hands. He heard Morgan shout over the intercommunicating phone:

"How is it in there, Sorgus, warm?"

"It's not warm, Skipper," he grinned, "it's hot!"

"Well," encouraged Morgan, "it won't be long now. We're almost in."

Sorgus's eyes gleamed.

"Right, sir!" he cried into the mouth-piece. Then he added to himself. "And how right."

Morgan's voice came back over the phones: "Keep your eyes peeled for enemy aircraft, Sorgus. We're coming to the bad spots and they may be looking for us."

"I'll watch for them, sir," cried the gunner.

But instead of keeping his eye on the desert around him and the sky above him, he kept his eye to the hole in the alloy panel above the swivel of his turret. Fifteen minutes later he dug the soft mask out from its hiding place in the frame as he observed that Morgan's head swayed dozily. The ship was still riding through the fine dust which had reached the ten-thousand-foot altitude and well over.

Sorgus quickly attached a canister to the rubber pipe on the mask and snapped the whole over his face. The combination made up a gas mask. He unsnapped the fire extinguisher from the snaphoods and after taking a good look at Chevy Chase saw that the time was ripe.

Carefully he pushed the nozzle into the hole and started pumping. The noise of the engines covered the breathing sound of the pump. As the plunger moved in and out, instead of a fluid, a gas escaped. It was an odorless, colorless gas, and if Sorgus had not known that he was really filling the pilot's compartment with it, he could not have told that in effect it was actually taking place. That is, not until he observed that Chevy Chase's head had fallen on his chest, as had Morgan's. Their arms hung limp and helpless by their sides. The plane flew on under control of the robot pilot. Sorgus had succeeded.

He dropped the pump over the side and slipped from his swivel seat. Making sure that his gas mask was tight, he stepped into the pilot's compartment and shook Morgan. The skipper almost fell, lifeless, out of his seat. Sorgus unstrapped him and drew his unconscious body back into the fuselage and dropped it near the blister. He repeated the same process with Chase and laid him alongside of Morgan. They would lie there, he reflected with satisfaction, for hours; they would remain dead to the world until he carried out his orders.



He slipped into the place vacated by Morgan and changed the course of the ship. From the northeast course to Cairo, he swung the new fighter-bomber with its precious secret gun-aimer northwest—in the direction of the Nazi stronghold.

## II

**S**ORGUS flew the bomber north through French Equatorial Africa and as he emerged from the dust mist over the Tibesti Mountains, he pushed the window back to clear the cabin of the gas. The perspiration flowed under his gas mask which he dared not remove lest he meet the same fate of his unfortunate crew companions. The mask stuck to his skin, yet he dared not stir it. He was uncomfortable; but his treacherous job was not yet complete.

Morgan and Chase, four hours later, were still unconscious of what was going on. They lay cramped in that narrow companionway of the fuselage between the blister and the pilot's cabin.

From where he was sitting, Sorgus could not see back into the fuselage without removing his gas mask. But he felt he did not need to look to his patients—he smiled as he called them patients—for they would sleep soundly for many hours yet. The gas had a deterrent effect on the nervous system as well. Even if they awoke, they would not be able to move a muscle.

As the plane crossed the Oasis of Kufara on the edge of the Libyan desert, Sorgus ran into a squadron of British Beauforts out on reconnaissance. He waited until they rode up a thousand feet above him. They recognized the ringed cocarde of the R.A.F. painted on his fuselage and let him ride on unhampered. But not until they had seen his flares. It was a new type—one they had not seen before—and they demanded recognition. Two more green flares poured out of the Very attachment, and they answered with two above. Sorgus flew on into Libya.

Thirty minutes outside of Mersa Matruh, another squadron of bombers approached the plane and Sorgus' heart jumped into his throat. They were marked with the German Swastika. He wondered if they knew; if they would let him pass unhampered, or without waiting to parley send

him crashing to the desert below, defeating the very thing to which he had worked up for several months.

They were Heinkels and were escorted by a number of Messerschmitts which broke formation and were diving down on him. Instead of swerving the plane, he nosed right for the middle of the formation of Heinkels. He worked quickly. From his coveralls he dug up another Very pistol and two flares.

Hastily he pushed the window back to its limit, loaded the pistol and fired the first of the two Very lights over the side just as one of the Messerschmitts opened its guns on him. A red light burst beyond the bomber wing. The second followed close on its heels; a blue flare. The Messerschmitts that were diving down on him changed their course and swung away. He had saved himself in time. They had recognized the prearranged signal.

To make sure that he would get into Rommel's camp without further molestation, three of the Messerschmitts flanked and tailed him in.

He was so delighted with the success of his treachery that he failed to glance back into the fuselage. Although he had the window wide open, he still dared not trust the heavy gas he had poured into the cabin, so he kept his gas mask on.

Back in the fuselage, Morgan stirred. He was unable to move his legs; his arms felt paralyzed. He breathed, but he did not feel the passage of air. He took longer breaths. His face was turned in the direction of the swivel chair. He tried to move his arms. He could not. He tried his fingers, they moved. He guessed what must have happened though his brain was clouded, befogged.

Morgan's will was a strong will. He fought desperately to recover the use of his limbs. Gradually he began to win his fight. At first he moved his wrists. Then his hand. Slowly, laboriously he flexed his right hand to his waist. The effort was painful; horrible. The beads of perspiration fell from his fevered forehead and dropped to the fuselage floor in tiny pools.

His eyes rose to the blister and he saw clouds above him. He knew the bomber was in flight. He didn't know who was flying it, but he guessed. Sorgus was not in his place in the gun turret.

HE continued to struggle to get his arm above his head. He was finding relief through the use of his powerful will to succeed in the effort. He knew gas had done the job. He knew of the gas. He felt the body of Chevvy Chase lying beside him. He heard the rhythm of the Merlins; then noticed, mingled with it, the barks of the Messerschmitts. Then he realized more than ever what had happened; what he must do.

His eyes fell on the oxygen tube which hung from the tank attached to the fuselage. Desperately he struggled to get at it. Slowly, and with extreme effort, his hand rose, until it touched the loop of the tube as it hung from the tank. His fingers closed over it, and his arm dropped limply to the floor dragging the tube with it.

He stuck the tube in his mouth and reached again for the valve on the tank. It took him almost five whole minutes, but he soon felt the exhilarating rush of the oxygen past his throat. His head dropped to the floor again where he rested.

The oxygen was permeating his blood stream. Gradually his head cleared; his body began to function normally. When he could, he turned over, and removing the tube from his own mouth, stuck it between the inert lips of the prostrate co-pilot, who was beginning to move. It was now evident to Dent Morgan that whoever had gassed them had given them less than he thought.

Slowly Chevvy Chase opened his eyes. He was puzzled when he saw Morgan bending over him, his finger across his lips motioning Chase to remain silent.

Ten minutes later, Morgan and Chase fully revived, they heard the engines cut to idling. The nose of the bomber was lowered as it began its descent. Morgan surmised that they had reached their destination. But where were they? Certainly not in Cairo.

"Lie low, Chevvy, until we land," warned Morgan. "Whoever that guy is at the controls, he'll have to pass over us to get down. Let him think we're still under the influence of that gas."

Morgan tried to get a glimpse of the pilot's face, but the mask he still wore made that impossible. There was a hump as the ship struck solid earth. He quickly replaced the oxygen tube in the snaphook and

turned off the gas cock. He did not want the man to discover that the skipper and co-pilot might be conscious.

The fighter-bomber rolled to a full stop. Sorgus cut the switches of both engines; the props hung dead. Morgan and Chase quickly resumed their positions on the fuselage floor. To all appearances, they were still unconscious. Morgan heard Sorgus laugh as he approached the prostrate men. The laugh quickly changed to a sneer.

"I've taken all the orders I'm going to take from you, you dirty American dog!" Sorgus punctuated his epithet with a powerful kick to Morgan's thigh.

The skipper's effort to suppress a cry of pain was good enough. He clamped his jaws together with a tension that hurt enough to make it act as a counter-irritant.

Laughing again at his little Nazi thoughtfulness, Sorgus stepped over the men he betrayed, and out of the door of the bomber, slamming it behind him. When he was gone, Morgan let out a quiet groan of pain: "Oh, that dirty traitorous rat!" He rubbed his thigh and cursed under his breath. "I'll kill that renegade for this, I swear."

"So it was Sorgus who sold us out," mused Chase. "The guy's a spy." He turned to Morgan. "I didn't know the bird could fly."

"I didn't either," replied Morgan. "But we know now."

Outside Morgan and Chase heard some one shout in German: "*Sehr Gut!* Sorgus! The Führer will decorate you for this!"

"*Danke, Herr Oberst,*" Sorgus replied in perfect German.

"So this is the new fighter-bomber the American swine have sent over to drive our great Rommel back into the Mediterranean, hah?" The man was evidently inspecting the plane on the outside.

"*Yah, Herr Oberst,*" replied Sorgus "And it also has the new gun-aiming device aboard."

Morgan jumped to his feet. He had heard enough. "C'mon, Chevvy," he whispered. "This ship's got to go West—and quickly!" They hurriedly crawled on their hands and knees to the pilot's compartment where the gun-aiming device and gas control cocks were located. They both went to work on the copper gas line and pulled and strained at it in an effort to break it



above the joint. Outside they heard Sorgus still bragging.

"The gas worked marvelously," he was saying. "The pilot and co-pilot are still lying unconscious on the floor inside."

"That's what you think," breathed Morgan as the pipe line split and the gasoline poured out over the compartment floor like water from a kitchen faucet. Turning to Chase he added: "Okay! Now get over to that door and open it carefully. When I apply the lighter flame to the gas, get outside quick and hold the door open for me so I can make it too before the blast comes."

Dent Morgan waited for Chase to reach the door. He snapped a flame on his cigarette lighter, and applied it to the flowing gasoline. There was a low hiss as Morgan made a dive for the bomber door and he was outside before the flames hit the gas in the tanks.

Voices rose in shrill shouts as black smoke poured from the open cabin windows and enveloped the nose of the ill-fated craft. As Morgan dropped to the ground, he noticed that his plane had been rolled onto the line just in the middle of twelve new Messerschmitts. He laughed. It was just too too funny.

He and Chase started running for the edge of the airfield, but a shout of halt stopped them in their tracks. The command carried with it the threat of being mowed down by machine-gun fire.

They waited for the German officer and men to come up to them while they watched the blazing inferno that had been their new fighter-bomber. Fire apparatus pulled up to the scene and men sprayed the burning plane from all angles. They sprayed no more than a minute when there was a terrific explosion that blasted the front end and the wings of the ship right off the fuselage. One tank after another in the wings blew up and the flames rose high into the air, while the burning debris blown up with them fell back on the Messerschmitts.

In a few short minutes the entire line of German fighters exploded one after another and burned to the ground along with the American fighter-bomber. When it was all over, the concrete apron was a mass of black ruins. The treachery of Sorgus had failed.

III

THE German *oberst* spoke a fluent English. "You will pay with your lives for the destruction you have wreaked on this airdrome, my friends," he said sarcastically. "You will receive the same treatment we accord to spies."

"Excuse me, Colonel," replied Dent Morgan, "on two counts. One: we're not your friends. Two: if any spy is to be shot, it will be a delight to see that rat who calls himself an American get it first." He nodded his head to Sorgus, who was still wearing his Army coveralls.

"You wilfully destroyed German property when you destroyed that new fighter-bomber," went on the colonel. "That is punishable by death."

"I suppose it was German property according to Nazi lights of taking what doesn't belong to them," replied Morgan. "But the American and British Governments won't agree with you."

Morgan expected an explosion. But it did not come. He told himself then that when a Nazi didn't want to take offense for reasons suitable to himself, he just didn't, that was all. He wondered what the man was sparring toward.

"We might," went on the colonel, ignoring the insults, "forget the death penalty if you will give us the plans of your new aiming device. I can't ask you for the plans of the new fighter-bomber—but we will be satisfied if you will describe it for us."

"I'm sure you would," replied Morgan. "But didn't your stooge have a copy of the plans with him?"

"He did not," replied the Nazi colonel quietly. "We did not think it expedient for him to attempt to get them, since we were so sure he would bring the plane—and you—to us without fail."

"Well," replied Morgan thoughtfully. "It's most unfortunate that he did not. It might have been a help to you."

"Hardly unfortunate, Captain," still suavely replied the Nazi. "We still have you to rely upon." He smiled quietly and significantly at Morgan. The American would have preferred to have the man rage and storm at him. It would have been easy to laugh in his face then.

But this man was obviously dangerous.

He knew he meant what he said when he added: "You will have until midnight to think it over. If you decide in the negative, I am sorry to tell you, we shall decide in the positive—and utter elimination of both of you as useless and superfluous to our needs. If, on the other hand, you tell us what you know about the new aiming device, you will be treated as ordinary prisoners of war, with the opportunity of going free after the hostilities have been won by the Führer."

The colonel waved a hand. Morgan and Chase were taken to a small hut under heavy guard. As they passed the line where the blackened ruins of the Messerschmitts lay beside the new American fighter-bomber that they had piloted to Africa—both he and Chase smiled.

But the smile was suddenly sheared clean from Morgan's face at what he beheld in the plane's ruins. He turned his head quickly away lest he attract someone else's attention to what he saw.

It was all that the fire had left of the gun-aiming device.

ONCE in the hut, he did not say a word to Chase about it. As both men heard the locks and bolts made fast, they looked about them at the little room that held nothing they could sit on. There was not even a bed in it—nor a plank they could use for a bed, unless it was in the floor.

"Nice hotel they have here," joked Morgan.

"Nice hotel manager, too, don't you think?" retorted Chase.

They sat down on the floor and rested their backs against the wall.

"Do you think they'll shoot us?" asked Chase.

"I know they will," replied Morgan, "unless I tell them how the aiming device works." He turned and looked at Chase's young, handsome face. "I'm sorry you're in this, kid."

"Oh, don't worry about me," hastily returned Chase. "I've got to die sometime."

"Well, we're not dead yet," encouraged Morgan. "And we can do a lot of thinking about how we're going to get out of this before midnight comes."

"The thing that amazed me back in Miami," wondered Chase, "was why, with Sorgus the gunner, they didn't attach one

of the aiming devices to his guns in the blister."

"That was to have been done in Cairo," replied Morgan. "They wanted no one to know anything about it but me; not even you."

"They figure to make you talk, Dent," reminded Chase.

"You can't stop a Heinie from figuring," said Morgan. He lay down on the bare floor, stretched himself at full length on his back and yawned. "Leave a call at the desk for midnight, will you, Chevvy?"

"I did," replied Chevvy Chase as he sprawled out on the other side of the hut. "We might as well get some rest before we get shot."

"Do you think they'll bring us our supper to our room?" asked Morgan.

"I hope so," replied Chase. "I'm getting kind of hungry." He suddenly remembered something. "That reminds me, we've still got some chocolate bars we brought along with us from Miami."

Morgan sat bolt upright. "Don't eat those!" he said hastily. Then quietly he added: "We may need them."

Chase eyed him a moment. "You must have an idea."

"I have."

"Is it a good one?"

"I think it's a corker. But it's dangerous."

"I'm game for anything if it will get us out of here," agreed Chase.

"Good boy," smiled Morgan.

Morgan went over the idea with Chase and the younger man's eyes popped. "Whew!" he whistled under his breath. "I'll say that's dangerous. In fact, it's hot!"

"I know Tunis," added Morgan. "I've been here before. The R.A.F. hasn't left much standing since they bombed hell out of the place, but there's enough left for me to find my way around in it."

Chevvy Chase was removing his Mae West and gas bottle the Nazis had not taken from them.

"I wouldn't do that either," warned Morgan. "We may need these Mae Wests when we make a dash for the sea."

"That's right, too," replied Chase. "I didn't think of that." He restraped his life preserver and gas bottle to inflate it.

Chase had no sooner finished the job of replacing his preserver vest when both men

heard the bolts of the hut slipped back and the door was unlocked and thrown open. A sentry entered, two men with machine guns behind him. The tray held some Italian bread and what might have passed for highly diluted red wine.

Morgan rose to his feet. Chase followed him. Morgan looked into the tin cup and cried: "Ah, *vino!*"

The man smiled up at him sympathetically, understandingly, as he lay down the tray upon the floor.

"*Si, Signor. Vino.*" he said. He was Italian as were the men with him. They didn't seem to like their jobs.

"*S'cusa,*" said the tray bearer. He bent his body into what might have been the suggestion of a head waiter bowing at the Ritz, and backed out. The guards followed.

"Nice guys, these Italians," ventured Morgan. "But they do get mixed up with the lousiest company."

Chase laughed.

The African desert which stretched away from the window in the hut had grown dark. With the passing of the sun, the heat had diminished and the hut was growing cold. Both men were hungry and they broke their share off the long stretch of bread. As Morgan dipped a piece of his into his tin cup of bad *Vino*, he laughed.

"Italian bread and dago red," he said.

"To be perfectly honest with you, Dent," ventured Chase, "this is more than I bargained for. I think the colonel still wants to be in your good graces."

"I hope so," replied Morgan. "That will give us more time—if possible." He turned to Chase, who was taking a bite on the bread and spreading his jaws hungrily over it. "You know what you've got to do when we get started," he said. "When the excitement is greatest, you make a beeline for that motorcycle and sidecar over there; I'll dive for the ruins of the plane to pick up what's left of the device. You run the car for me, I'll hop in and you go like hell in the direction I'll tell you. In the dark, they won't know who we are."

"It's swell, this hut being attached to the big hangar alongside of us. I wonder if that's where they keep their Heinkels."

"You'll find out," Morgan informed him. "Don't drink all your *vino*. Bad as it is, it may burn."

WHEN they had satisfied their hunger on the Italian bread, they put what was left of the watered wine in a cup and placed the cup in the corner which they knew was closest to the wooden hangar.

They waited until the airdrome was substantially darkened. Then Morgan turned to Chase. "Are you ready?"

"Wait till I see if that motorcycle is still there." Chase looked out the window. The sidecar was still where the Italian dispatch rider had parked it. "Okay," he whispered.

"It may get hot in here before we can break through," Morgan whispered back, "but bullets make dirty holes in your skin." He poured the wine down one plank in the wall, at the bottom corner of which he had crumpled some old Italian and German newspapers he had found lying on the floor. He hoped the water in the wine would not interfere. But there was enough alcohol in it to create a feeble blue flame as his cigarette lighter went to work for the second time that day.

The flame labored to take on; it sputtered discouragingly for a second or two; threatened to go out; then ran like a flash to the paper below. The paper caught on. As the flames broke into a real, biting fire, both Morgan and Chase ran to the opposite corner of the hut and waited. They huddled together and saw the blue flames turn to red and orange. The sun had burned down for months on the hut and the wood in it was dry.

The flames rose toward the low roof. They ate through to the hangar wall and the fire was not discovered until it appeared inside the hangar. Both the hut and the hangar were now on fire.

Morgan and Chase were getting hot inside the burning shack, but they laughed when they heard the hysterical shouts of the men in the hangars. They could not see out the window, for the flames were creeping back toward their corner on the side wall. The room started to fill with smoke. The two inside the hut began to choke up. They knew they dared not get too full of smoke if they were to make their getaway. It was time to break out.

The planks in the wall near the window were ablaze and the flames were licking at that part of the roof above the window.



They had not touched the bottom. With the tin cup Morgan crashed the glass out of the frame and between them both Morgan and Chase kicked out enough of the side wall to let them through and make a run for it.

There was so much confusion on the field in every airman's effort to save one Heinkels in the hangar, that their escape was not observed. Nor could they be recognized in the dark, for there were hundreds of men in flying suits almost similar to theirs—men who were ready and waiting for almost any emergency.

Italian and German grease-monkeys were trying confusedly to comply with conflicting orders to get the planes clear of the burning hangar, up whose side the flames were raging with a bright red glow that made Morgan's heart fill with delight.

Someone yelled to release the prisoners and Morgan heard another yell in German: "Let the *teufels* burn! They started this fire!"

Morgan started for the place where he had last seen the blackened ruins of his plane. In the light cast by the flames which now reached the roof of the hangar, he dug into the debris with a piece of aluminum rib. He scattered the molten and misshapen metal all over the place in a desperate effort to locate the remains of the gun-aiming device he was sure he had seen on his way to the prison hut. But he could not locate it.

The device was gone.

He rose from his search as a motorcycle roared up to him, and was about to turn to Chase whom he expected. His glance fell full upon the muzzles of a machine gun in the hands of a Nazi guard, and a Luger pointing directly at his heart.

The Luger pistol was held by Sorgus. "Looking for something, Morgan?" he asked ironically.

"Captain Morgan to you, louse," snarled Morgan when he realized that his escape had been frustrated by his own hand.

"Fires make much light," suggested Sorgus. "Incidentally," he laughed, "Chase's motorcycle had no gas. That's why he couldn't pick you up. He sends his regrets."

"What have you done with that gun-aiming device?" asked Morgan. His eyes flashed angrily at Sorgus. If the man had not been so thoroughly heeled, the pilot would have gone for his throat.

Sorgus continued to grin at his advantage.

"If you ever had a chance to get out of this with your neck intact, Morgan," he said, "you've destroyed it now by setting fire to those Heinkels in the hangar."

"It would be a pleasure to see you burn along with them," gritted the pilot.

Sorgus's eyes narrowed.

"You haven't a chance, Morgan," he said. "You and your kind. I took your orders, I had a job to do. And I've done only part of it, because you burned the plane. But unless you talk, we'll burn you as you burned this hangar; the planes inside of it; and the planes in front of it."

"I can stand the heat," sneered Morgan.

"We'll see about that," replied Sorgus. "Now get going and no funny business."

Morgan had seen Sorgus shoot back in the States. The man knew how to handle any kind of a gun. The American decided it would be wiser not to tempt the renegade.

"Set the course, rat, and I'll follow it," scowled Morgan.

"When this war is over you and all the United Nations' scum like you will follow the course, all right," retorted Sorgus. "The course that will be set by the Führer."

"Never mind that, degenerate," replied Morgan. "You just set the course now for me alone. What will come later, we'll see about."

Sorgus ordered Morgan in the direction of another hut, which stood off to the side of the field and well away from the main apron. The skipper moved off, with Sorgus and the guard falling in behind. Another German guard carrying a lantern joined them to light the way, although in the light of the still burning hangar that was not necessary.

#### IV

MORGAN cursed under his breath. Chase must have been caught, then, trying to get away with the gasless motorcycle. If the tank had had any gas in it, he might have made it. But one doesn't weep over empty gas tanks, or what might have been, when there was as much to do as Morgan looked forward to accomplishing.

"When this war ends," said Morgan, "if you live that long, you'll learn that you chipped in with the wrong side. You'll

learn too that the Nazi philosophy is not philosophy at all, but inane tripe to enslave the minds of fools."

"We are pure Aryans," argued Sorgus. "And the Aryans are destined to rule the world. It is we who will win this war. It is we who are the natural masters of the peoples of the earth! We will drive Alexander out of the Middle East with our nightly convoys supplying Rommel with tanks and guns and planes and men! We'll blast your Flying Fortresses out of the air with our Focke-Wulfs."

"How long do you think that will take the Heinies, Sorgus?" asked Morgan. "The Focke-Wulf 190s are divers and climbers; they're not fighters." Morgan was beginning to learn something about Sorgus. In the feeling of superiority to which he had been needled by Nazi pedagogy and propaganda, the sly agent felt safe enough to boast. If Morgan could get him to boast sufficiently. . . .

They neared the hut. Morgan observed in the reflected light from the still burning hangar that the small building was made of concrete. Well, he thought, here is one shack that won't burn.

Sorgus rose to Morgan's bait.

"So the Focke-Wulf 190s are not good fighters," he sneered. "I always doubted your knowing much about modern airplanes. Now I'm sure you're not so well informed. But in two days you'll know the value of the Focke-Wulfs and many other of the Luftwaffe's superior fighters and bombers. And soon Rommel will meet our Caucasus army after knocking Alexander out of Egypt; both will meet the Japanese in India after driving the Bolsheviks into oblivion. Soon our convoys from Italy will be unloading our supplies in Alexandria and Cairo, and the Suez Canal will be in our hands."

Morgan was elated. The rat had talked, and completely out of turn. Here was information that was worth remembering. He had fed the lad and he responded beyond Morgan's fondest hopes. Sorgus was no fool. But he could be drawn out just as any braggart who felt safe and immune from dire consequences for anything he said, could be made to say anything that would seem to give him an exaggerated sense of extreme importance.

Morgan turned around and in the light

of the lantern now, he saw that Sorgus's face was aflame with a fanatic fire he didn't think the man capable of displaying. He turned away again and said quietly, and to Sorgus, convincingly:

"You know, Sorgus, you've almost got me believing I'm wrong."

Sorgus was puffed with his apparent psychological victory. "Our success is already in our hands. We of the German Reich are virtually infallible. It is you who will learn that!"

"I'm beginning to think you've got something, Sorgus," said Morgan. He was laying the foundation for the carrying out of an idea. The idea was beyond the hut—long lines of dark objects—shadows in the distance.

One of the guards unlocked the door to the concrete shack. Before Morgan stepped inside, he turned to Sorgus and said: "Drop back in an hour. I may have some good news for you."

Then he added significantly: "And bring the gun-aiming device with you."

THE door slammed shut on Morgan as he entered the concrete hut. He struck a light with his lighter and laughed when he looked about the cold, bare room. Chase was sitting on the floor, as forlorn and dejected as any man could be.

"What do you say, Chevy? You look as if you had just lost your last friend."

"Sorry I couldn't come after you, Dent," apologized Chase. "But the motorcycle had no gas."

"So they told me when they picked me up," replied Morgan. "Sorgus get you, too?"

"Yah," replied the disgusted co-pilot. "You?"

"Yup."

Morgan noticed another occupant in the room, a young red-head.

"Who's your friend?" he asked.

"This is Harry Howard," introduced Chase. "He's a Limey sailor off a cruiser that was sunk in the Mediterranean by one of the Luftwaffe's torpedo planes. They picked him up and brought him here to make him talk; but up to now they haven't been very successful."

"They sank my bloody cruiser with all on board and syved me on'y to give 'em what I knaow," stormed the young British

sailor. "But I'll be 'anged if I don't give 'em what for and see 'em all burnin' in 'ell fust 'fore they gets anythink aout o' me." As the light in Morgan's hand went out, he added: "And speakin of 'ell, that was a jolly good fire you fellers started."

"Did you find the gun-aiming device?" asked Chase in the dark.

"No," replied Morgan. "The rats beat us to the cheese."

There were four windows in their new jail. Each was wide open, but steel-barred. Burlap strips kept the sun out by day, and some of the cold out by night.

"There couldn't have been much left of it," added Morgan. "That is, nothing but the metal parts and the steel container."

"Would that give them any information?" asked Chase.

"Some. But they'd have to know what to do with it and how to replace what parts are burned away—if they knew which of them perished in the fire."

"That means they are as much in the dark as ever about the device," said Chase, obviously satisfied, by the tone of his voice.

"They could still make demands on me," said Morgan, flipping the wheel on his cigarette lighter to give him light enough to join the men on the floor.

"I don't know what you blokes are talkin' abaout," he said, "but whatever it is I 'opes you don't give them Jerrys no hin-formaytion."

"Don't worry," Chase assured him.

Morgan remained silent.

"What's our next move?" asked Chase.

"The next move is not ours," Morgan informed his co-pilot. "That, I think, will come from our Heinie acquaintances."

"In the meantime we sit here and twiddle our thumbs," grumbled Chase.

"That's better than nursing some machine-gun pills in our chests," suggested Morgan. "If nothing else, that little stunt has given us more time to think about how we can eventually cheat a Nazi firing squad."

"Sorry, Dent," apologized Chase. "I didn't mean to grumble. I should have put my thinking cap on instead of complaining about my predicament."

For the sake of keeping up the conversation, Morgan turned to the Limey sailor in the dark. "What did you do aboard the cruiser on which you were stationed?"

"D'yer mean what was my job?" asked the Limey.

"Yes," replied Morgan. "What were you? Gunner, or just plain able-bodied seaman?"

"H'I was chief of a gun crew," replied the man.

"What kind of a gun?" asked the Skipper.

"Bofors ack-ack," replied the sailor.

"What do you know about other guns?" asked Morgan.

"Plenty," replied the Limey. "That goes for Jerry shell chuckers too. I made a study o' them guns. 'Didn't know when I moight be usin' of 'em."

Morgan smiled in the dark. The Limey had foresight. He admired him.

"We bunged a couple o' fish," went on the lad, "afore we got bunged ourselves. That was some satisfaction."

"Fish?" asked Chase, puzzled. Then he remembered. "Oh! Subs!"

"Righto!" replied the Limey. "An' I seen plenty, I did. Convoys out of Taranto and Brindisi and other Eyetalian ports unloadin' at the Tunis ports. S'elp me, something's gotta be done to stop that bloke Rommel or we'll be gittin' shoved into the bloomin' Suez Canal."

Morgan, listening carefully now to the sailor's chatter, realized that Sorgus had not bragged merely for the sake of hearing himself speak. He had dropped a few pearls, but not before unheeding swine. All there was left to do now was to cheat the Nazi gunmen and get that information to Alexander. But how?

HE could think better on his feet. He rose up in the dark and went to one of the small windows in the concrete hut. As he reached the window, something clattered to the floor near him. He touched it with his foot.

"What's that?" he asked of Chase.

"My Mae West. Guess we won't need it any longer," replied the co-pilot. "Bless the lady anyway."

"Me too, mytes! Bless 'er fer me too. There's an h'American cinema star wot's got a lot of a bit of orlroight!"

"I was referring to the life preserver," explained Chase.

"Oh," hastily apologized the Limey. "Sorry."



Morgan's laugh was cut short as his eyes fell on several hundred Mark III Nazi tanks arranged in four lines that fell away down the desert in long, black silhouettes until they diminished in perspective and size. Behind them in three other lines, the huge outlines of Messerschmitt 110 medium bombers and Heinkel 111-Ks, the new and effective Nazi heavy bomber, stretched in long threatening rows.

Like ants on a tiny sand mound gasoline tank cars drove back and forth, servicing the planes and the tanks and readying them for some impending drive.

"Come here, you two," he whispered hoarsely. "Take a look at what I see."

Both the sailor and Chase scuffled to their feet. They stopped in their tracks as Morgan quickly drew back from the window and sharply muttered: "Wait!"

A guard's bayonet passed. When it had gone, he called to them again and pointing out toward the distant lines of planes and tanks said: "Get a load of that!"

Chase looked out and emitted a low whistle.

The Limey cried in a low whisper: "That's what h'I've been talkin' about! Them's on'y part o' the supplies these 'Uns 'ave been gettin' from their bloomin' convoys!"

"If that isn't an indication of an imminent and immediate drive, nothing is," ventured Morgan.

"And here we are," added the co-pilot. "With all we know, and we can't do anything about it."

There was a slight pause before Morgan replied. He listened a moment as tractors and gas trucks servicing the planes and tanks continued to roar back and forth across the desert. Then, almost to himself he muttered: "I wouldn't say that. Perhaps we can."

V

THE scraping sound of rusty bolts, their sharp contacts as they struck the bolt stops, was heard inside the hut. The plank door was thrown open into the room and a light was thrust inside. The sudden glare made the Americans and the Britisher blink as their eye muscles strained to adjust themselves.

Two guards armed with sub-machine-guns stepped into the room, one of them carrying the lantern. Behind them, in all his cockiness, came Sorgus in the uniform of a Nazi lieutenant. To make sure that he would not be attacked by the Americans he had betrayed, he held his Luger pistol in his right hand before him. In the other, he held a small, square package.

"Well," cried Morgan, "if it isn't the loyal swastika swinger himself. Welcome to our humble abode. Sorry we haven't a concrete chair for you to sit on—or a concrete box for you to lie in."

Sorgus ignored the thrusts. But he did not refrain from issuing a warning. "You were the master on the fighter-bomber, Morgan," he reminded. "But I'm master here. I'd advise you to remember that."

"I've got a swell memory, Sorgus," Morgan retorted. "And a hell of a lot to remember." He glowered at the traitor in the light of the lantern. Both guards were Italian.

"I came here on a friendly mission," said the Nazified rat.

"No kiddin'," interrupted Morgan.

"I've come to give you and Chase a chance for your lives," Sorgus continued. He seemed to notice the sailor for the first time. "I don't know how he got into this, but he's going to be sent back to the Navy where he belongs." He turned back to Morgan: "But you and Chase can save yourselves if you want to."

"What do we have to do?" asked Morgan cynically. "Imitate you and sell out our people we swore to protect?"

"We want that gun-aiming device and a description of the construction of the new fighter-bomber. You are the only one who can give it to us; help us duplicate it and prevent Alexander from using it against us. For that we will give you both your lives; treat you as prisoners of war, and you can take it easy for the rest of the hostilities."

"What guarantee have we that you will spare us?" asked Morgan.

"My word," replied the traitor.

Chase let out a howl of laughter.

Morgan turned to him and mockingly reprimanded him. "Don't laugh, Chase. That's rude!"

Chase looked at Morgan, surprised.

"He may not keep it," went on Morgan.

"But what of that? He gave his word to a recruiting officer in the United States Army when he swore to protect the Constitution and the Flag against all enemies from within and without. That he fore-swore his sacred word doesn't enter into it. I repeat. You're very rude."

Morgan turned back to Sorgus, who was burning under the sarcastic thrusts. "How do I know you will keep your word this time?" he asked.

"You'll have to trust me," replied the traitor.

"That's fair enough," mocked Morgan. "But I trusted you once, and you double-crossed me. How do I know you won't again?"

"This is war," Sorgus reminded the ferry pilot. "And everything in it is supposed to be fair. We want that gun-aiming device and you're the only one who can give it to us."

"I can't any more," replied Morgan. "It was destroyed in the fire."

Sorgus grinned. He drew the package he held out from under his arm.

"Sorry to disappoint you," he said.

He ripped the cover from the object and disclosed the steel case of the gun-aiming device.

Chase gasped when he saw it.

Morgan looked at the blackened mass in Sorgus's hands. He smiled a little when he saw the knurled rubber adjusting knob was burned away; the rubber eyecup and hollow shaft were gone; the deflecting mirrors inside he knew were ruined; only the steel case, the steel worms and gears and screws and plates, to the atmosphere-controlled diaphragms inside the case, might be intact.

The smile cleared from his face. A serious expression crept over it. He turned to Chase and said blandly:

"Well, Chevy," he began, "it looks as though Sorgus has outguessed us." He turned back to Sorgus and added quietly:

"We might as well give up if we want to live."

CHASE could hardly believe his ears. "Will you repeat that, Skipper?" he asked, slightly dazed.

"I said we might as well co-operate," he replied. "You can see Sorgus has the gun-aiming device in his hand."

If Chase was stupefied, Sorgus was in ecstasy.

"Now you are really smart, Morgan!" he cried. "Now you do know what you are doing!"

Chevy Chase could hardly contain himself. He was furious at Morgan's sudden willingness to sell his country down the river to save his own suddenly valuable neck. He made a dash for his skipper and tried to batter him with the gas bottle on the Mae West he snatched up from the floor.

"You dirty yellow-livered skunk!" he screamed.

One of the Italian guards stepped between them and, sticking the muzzle of his machine gun into Chase's ribs, cried: "No!"

The young copilot halted in his tracks; the gas bottle still poised above his head. Slowly he backed away, his face a blotch of red; his eyes burning with a fury Morgan had never seen there before. He lowered the gas bottle and threw it from him, still eying Morgan as though he would like to destroy him. The Italian kept backing him away.

"Don't be a fool, Chevy," insisted Morgan. "Sorgus is right. What have we got to lose? We have everything to gain instead. Perhaps he is right about the German people. Perhaps they are a superior race. Isn't Sorgus an American citizen? And hasn't he seen the error of his ways? We can gain more by co-operating . . ."

He stopped as he realized that only the Italian's sub-machine gun kept Chase from tearing at his throat. Even the puzzled Limey, who knew nothing of the new gun-aiming device or what it meant to the Allied side, sensed Morgan's treachery and he too, was beginning to see vermilion. He spat at Morgan.

"I 'opes the bloody worms wot bites your rotten carcass when you dies, dies of the bloomin' poison you are, you stinkin' blackhearted scum of a filthy scum!"

If it had not been for the two Italians with their machine guns, Morgan might have been badly manhandled. He paid no attention to the epithets but turned to Sorgus.

"It's true you've got what's left of the gun-aiming device, Sorgus," he said, "but all the external parts have been burned

away and will have to be replaced before it will operate effectively."

"I know that," replied Sorgus. "I saw what it was like fully assembled and I think I know what's missing"—

"Where did you see it?" asked Morgan hastily.

Sorgus grinned knowingly. "In the cabin of the ship," he replied. "I took a few minutes off to examine it when it was on the ship's cowling. The external parts will be easy to replace if you describe them for us."

"I'll describe them when I get your release for myself and both of these men in writing," replied Morgan.

"I don't want my release," snarled Chevy Chase.

"I don't want your lousy release, either," snapped the sailor.

"Just one, then," drawled Morgan.

"I have an office not far from this shed," Sorgus said. "I have tools and drafting instruments there. After you sketch the missing parts for me, I'll write the release and have it countersigned by the Commandant. You and these men will then be transferred to a prison camp."

Morgan hesitated as though he were thinking it over. Decided, he shrugged his shoulders and said: "Okay. They don't seem to want their release. Just give me mine and I'll be satisfied."

Chase was deeply troubled and he showed it. "Skipper! What's happened to you!" he cried.

Morgan frowned at him. "I've got sense," he replied sarcastically. "Which is more than I can say for either of you."

"I'm sorry I lost my temper a moment ago," apologized the co-pilot. "But don't do this thing," he pleaded. "Don't do it!"

"Sorry, Chase," replied Morgan. "But I know which side my bread is going to be buttered."

He turned to Sorgus. "Let's go."

**U**NDER guard of the two Italians, Sorgus led Morgan to another concrete shed that stood about twenty feet from the first of the line of German tanks and bombers. The Yank took particular note of the position of the building and its relation to the armored battlewagons and planes.

Sorgus threw the door open. Although it

resembled the jail shack in construction, the place had chairs, a table, gun racks, a telephone, an electric light over the table, and the necessary equipment for a man who might be engaged in army clerical work or research.

"Sit down here," Sorgus directed and pulled a chair out for Morgan to sit on. He got him some paper and pencils, some drafting instruments, and a few handy tools with which to aid him to disassemble the case of the gun-aiming device. When Morgan had accomplished the job of stripping: "The next thing I'd better do," suggested the Skipper, "is make some sketches of the device to help me reassemble it more easily after I see what parts are missing or damaged."

"Fine, Morgan," replied Sorgus rubbing his hands together elatedly. "Go right ahead."

Morgan nodded amiably.

"But first, I'll take my release," he insisted, sitting back in his chair and folding his arms as if to indicate that he would not make another move until he had his papers in his pocket.

"You don't trust me," Sorgus complained.

"I don't," replied Morgan.

The Nazi wrote the release, already countersigned. Morgan pocketed it and went to work on the drawings. He fumbled with his papers as though he couldn't keep them in place for his work.

"Haven't you got something I can use for a paperweight?" he asked. "I've got to keep these sheets flat."

Sorgus, in his anxiety to get the plans, was eager to give Morgan anything he requested. He jumped up and went to a shelf. He returned to the table with two rectangular pieces of lead and set them on the edges of Morgan's paper. He seated himself directly opposite Morgan at the table and watched the sketches come to life. He thought he understood them, and said so.

"That's swell," said Morgan. "If you understand what these are all about, it will make everything easier for you." Morgan kept on sketching until Sorgus moved around beside him to get a better view. He pulled up his chair and leaned on the table near the American. Both guards let the muzzles of their guns drop below the table



line as they too became absorbed in the lines that were appearing on the blank sheets.

Morgan shifted the lead weights as he continued sketching. Shifted them two or three times until Sorgus no longer paid any attention to him when he moved them. Something was taking shape before him and the Nazi spy did not know what yet; but somehow it all seemed to be making sense. The parts that were on the table were being copied and some of them put where they seemed to belong.

As Sorgus dropped into his chair beside Morgan, he did not notice that his pistol, hanging by his right side, tapped Morgan's thigh. The Yank did not indicate by any sign that he had felt the slap of the side-arm.

Morgan shifted the weights again. Sorgus's head was bent well down over the drawings he was trying to figure out. The Italians had grown equally careless; they had almost completely lowered their guns. Once more Morgan moved his weights, replacing one. The other he seemed about to put down again; but he raised his hand a trifle higher—and brought the weight crashing down on the lowered head of the man who would have destroyed him the minute he had the authentic plans in his hand.

Sorgus collapsed across the table, blown out of his senses.

AS the weight landed, Morgan's hand reached for Sorgus's sidearm and it suddenly flashed over the table and pointed at the hearts of the two Italians who, confused by the lightning turn of events, tried to bring the muzzles of the machine guns up. One gun clattered to the floor; the other caught under the leg of the table.

"Don't move, you two, or I'll blast the both of you," shouted Morgan, forgetting they were Italians and might not understand his language. But they did understand. At least, one of them understood, for he cried:

"No shoot-a, please! We go wit-a you."

"Oh," said the surprised Morgan. "So you do understand English. Well, not you, but this rat is going with me."

"We can help-a you," insisted the Italian. "We don't like-a the Nazis too."

"Then what are you doing here?" asked

Morgan. And without waiting for a reply to his question added: "Where did you learn to speak English?"

"On T'oid Avenyer in New York," came the startling reply. "I fix-a shoes there."

"A cobbler," cried Morgan. "If you're an American why didn't you join an American outfit if you had to fight for someone? What are you doing in that lousy uniform?"

The explanation was simple.

The man replied: "My father and mother lived in Napoli. Mussolini he say, you come back and fight for Italy, or I put your father and mother in-a concentracionne camp. So I sell-a my business and go back to Italy—to fight-a for Germany."

"Yeah," nodded Morgan. "What's your name?"

"Giuseppe Baltomari."

"Giuseppe means Joe, doesn't it?"

"Si," nodded the cobbler. "'At's-a-right."

"Joe, the cobbler," mused Morgan. Then he asked thoughtfully. "It you're afraid that Mussolini will put your mother and father in a concentration camp, why do you want to desert now? Won't he take it out on them if he finds out?"

"My father and mother," replied the Italian quietly, sadly, "they both dead. They died in the prison anyway."

"Guess I talked out of turn," exclaimed Morgan. "Sorry, Joe." He smiled at the man sympathetically. "I guess you're all right. You're still a pretty good American, maybe, in spite of the rag you've got on your back."

Joe the cobbler was grateful for that. The gentle expression on his wan face browned by the African sun turned to an appreciative smile. "Tank-a you," he said simply.

"Wait a minute," said Morgan suddenly. "What about your friend?"

Joe the cobbler turned to his companion and a hurried conversation ensued. The talk was excited and brief. Joe turned back to Morgan and said: "My friend say he was-a wait-a for this-a chance for two years."

"Can you trust him?" asked Morgan suspiciously.

"Oh, yes," replied the cobbler. "We are very good friends—buddies, like we say in New York."

Morgan smiled. "Do you both know

what it means if we're caught?" he asked.

"We know," assured the Italian. "And we don't care. It is better to be dead than live—a like the Nazis want us to live."

"Good boy, Joe," encouraged Morgan. "Those are my exact sentiments." He lowered the Luger he was holding. "Now, listen," he said. "I happen to know tanks. We want to get this rat Sorgus into the first tank and take him with us. We're going back to where men are free. I'll sneak outside and get things inside the tank ready. You follow me with the other guy and Sorgus between you. Don't let anyone see you."

With extreme brevity he outlined his plan for escape to the Italian to familiarize him with the steps. The man's eyes glowed with an enthusiastic light that drove all doubt out of Morgan's mind. He added: "Bring those machine guns with you."

Then he stepped outside the hut.

The field was completely dark. The servicing of the tanks and planes had ceased; the job was evidently finished. Not far from the shed that was Sorgus's office stood the first of the huge, black hulks of the Mark IIIs. He smiled as he recalled his own tank experience before transferring to the Air Corps. He knew tanks as well as he knew planes. It would be a cinch.

He covered the less than fifty feet that separated the shed from the first of the tanks in much less than fifty split seconds. He climbed onto one of the wheels of the tractor and pulled himself up onto the tank, where he found the hatch cover open. He was inside before he could count three.

He dropped down into the driver's seat and looked through the bullet-proof glass window. He laughed quietly when he saw the two Italians crawling on the ground toward the tank. Their machine guns were slung over their shoulders; the body of Sorgus they dragged through the sand behind them. They evidently did not think he was worth carrying. This was added proof to Morgan that the men could be wholly trusted. After getting gears ready at the driver's seat, Morgan stepped back to a porthole and whispered hoarsely through it to the men: "Throw the rat down the hatch."

He heard the men clamber aboard. He turned and saw the inert form that was

Sorgus stuffed through the hatch. It fell to the floor of the tank with a dull thud. The machine guns were thrown in on top of him. Morgan, when he saw the position the unconscious form took on the floor of the tank, almost choked with suppressed laughter. The man had landed on his ear; his differential was raised like the peak of a mountain. When Joe the cobbler and his companion stepped down the hatch into the tank, they straightened Sorgus out and placed him none too carefully over the Diesel engine.

Morgan turned to the two Italians. "You know what to do now. Stay close to the hatch, Joe. I'm going to run this over-sized Mack truck right through the jail and pick up those other two men. When we get near the shack, open the breech of the gun and use it for a megaphone. Yell into it for the fellers to jump aboard and come down the hatch. Understand?"

Joe, the cobbler was grinning from ear to ear in the dark. "Sure, Boss," he replied.

"Swell!" exclaimed Morgan. "Now let's wake up all the little Nazis in Libya."

Carefully he felt his way back to the driver's compartment and dropped into the seat.

"Hold your hats," he called back to the Italians.

## VI

THE silence of the desert night was shattered when the huge Diesel engine inside the rear of the tank roared into life. The very stars overhead seemed to shiver with the deep-throated vibrations that thundered over the field.

The long heavy caterpillar tracks started moving as Morgan threw in the clutch and manipulated the steering levers so that the steel monster swung about almost on its own axis. It started for the concrete shed which held Chevy Chase and the Limey sailor.

"Will you look at those brave little Nazi supermen running all over the field like a lot of scared little jackrabbits!" shouted Morgan. But that was more to himself rather than to his companions, for they could not have heard him over the terrific din of the engine exhaust.

Men were running from all directions in

the dark to see what the noise was about. Others were obviously alarmed at what they thought was an air raid as they dived for the shelters.

With controlled speed Morgan headed for one end of the shack as the tank's drive sprocket fed the revolutions to the track and the tank kicked up sand and dust that would have fogged the field in the sun.

"Now, Joe!" he cried.

Joe the cobbler opened the breech of the 88-millimeter gun and as Morgan drove the huge, rumbling, thundering carrier of death ahead, shouted in shattered English into the breech: "Look out! Look out! Jump-a on when-a we come-a troo! Jump-a on when-a we come-a troo!"

A sudden and wild crash punctuated his cries as the tank pushed through one end of the concrete shed and it crumbled about their ears. Morgan hoped his friends had sense enough to keep to the other end of the shack when they saw and heard the tank coming for them. That end did not drop; the roof stayed over their heads at that point. He could pay no attention to them; his hands were full of the work in hand. He had to leave their joining him to their own good sense of timing and the help of the Italians.

He drove through the shed, leaving it a mass of shredded concrete, and swung the speeding tank toward the rear line of Messerschmitts and Heinkels. Was it his fault that the Nazi greasemonkeys left the line of bombers directly in the path of his crazy line of travel? Morgan didn't think so, nor did he take the trouble to turn out of their way. He merely set the steering levers for their tails and rode the tank over twenty-eight of them, leaving them flat on the African sand like so many stripped and shattered eggcrates.

**T**HE sound of splitting, crashing metal against metal rose on the night to mingle with the yells of consternation and dire epithets as men thought one of their own tanks was merely running amuck with a novice at the steering apparatus.

During the run through the line of planes, Morgan glanced back in the tank at two white disheveled figures sitting breathless near the inert body of Sorgus. They were covered from head to foot with the

dust of concrete that once had held them prisoners.

"Who are those two dirty-looking guys you've got back there with you, Joe?" shouted Morgan to the Italian.

Chase came forward and shouted at Morgan: "I'm sorry I doubted you, Dent."

"Never mind that," shouted Morgan. "We're coming to the end of the line of bombers. Get Sorgus out on the top of the tank; take the Italians with you. Just before we reach the end of the line drop off with the others and get into the end Heinkel and wait for me. I'm going to lock these levers and let the tank blast on across the desert with those Heinies after it. Now get going."

Chase explained to the Italians and the Limey what was planned. As Morgan rode over the twenty-eighth of the line of serviced bombers, he swung the tank out, missing the last two; by that time, the men were outside and dropping off and dashing in between the two end Heinkels, dragging Sorgus after them like a bag of beans.

Morgan slowed down for a brief second, locked the controls and then pushed the throttle all the way home. He dashed for the hatch the others had left open and fell rather than jumped to the soft sand and lay in the shadow of the end bomber just as a German gun-carrying truck drove by with its guns blazing at the runaway tank.

He raised his head and looked about him. There was no one near the big ship; the hatch door was wide open. He guessed the others were already inside. He rose and quickly entered the plane, closing the door quietly behind him.

"Everybody here?" he whispered.

"All here, Skipper," came Chase's reply from the pilot's cabin.

Two more trucks drove by in the dark and roared after the other, their guns chattering.

"They must know you chaps have escaped by now," Morgan said. "And they think you're in the tank. That's why they're firing on it."

He dropped into the reserve pilot's seat beside Chase.

The whole of the airfield was alive with men for a short while. When they realized that there was no air raid, many of them went back to their quarters as the



pursuing trucks drove blazing across the desert after the escaping tank.

"I think we'll wait a few minutes until they've cleared the field," said Morgan, "and all is quiet again. Once away from their ack-ack guns, it'll be easier to get off and away from here." He turned to the Italian: "Have you got that rat with you?"

"Sì, Signor," replied the Italian. "He is still sleeping. I am sitting on him."

"I must have given him a good rap with that lead weight he provided," said Morgan laughing.

Ten minutes later, the field almost fully serene again, the two Mercedes-Benz 1200 horsepower engines disrupted the peaceful sleep of the Nazi field mice and the rasping noise of the exhaust sent a ripping sound over the atmosphere.

The field all about them was clear. Morgan didn't know how long it would be clear as soon as the engines again woke the men up.

"We can't wait for these M.B.s to get hot," he said. "We'll have to take our chances and get off quick."

Without waiting for a reply from Chase, he turned to the Limey sailor and shouted: "Hey, Red, can you handle those machine guns in the rear?"

"I can bloody well 'andle any gun," the kid boasted.

"Okay," Morgan replied. "Handle the rear guns! We're taking off!"

The Skipper shot the juice to the two Mercedes-Benz engines on the huge Heinkel 111-K and the big bomber rolled ahead on the sand, kicking up a dust spray that hid the plane from behind. He lifted the tail into flying position and roared on, but it did not take off as readily as he expected.

Something was wrong.

"This ship is heavy," he shouted to Chase. "Even with every bit of adjustment on the stabilizer. She must be loaded with bombs. Take a look."

After an examination of the bomb bay Chase reported: "She's fully loaded. Eight five-fifty pounders."

They exchanged delighted glances.

"We don't have to take them along," said Morgan smilingly. "I think I'll leave them here."

"Sure," grinned Chase. "It's bad enough

to run off with their airplane, but it's dog-gone impolite and very bad manners to steal their bombs."

THE giant bomber lifted clear of the sands and with full gun on, the plane thundered for altitude. Chase watched over the side and saw men scurrying all over the field. He thought he heard the wail of a siren over the noise of the engines. He didn't call Morgan's attention to it for he did not want to distract him from his work of running the ship into the upper reaches.

Morgan swung the ship to gain altitude. At three thousand feet he turned back toward the airfield. His mind slipped back twenty years or more to a plane he flew over France and Germany. It, too, carried bombs and machine guns. It wasn't as good a ship as the one he had under him now. But he had been a good bomber and fighter in those days. And Collins back in Miami said he was too old to fight. He'd show them.

He swung over the lines of tanks and planes stretched out on the sands below just as a pair of highpower German searchlights picked him up in beams burning brilliantly with a white glow that almost blinded him as it poured into his open-face cockpit.

An antiaircraft gun barked and a black burst surrounded a flash of sudden flame high over his head.

"We won't waste much time here," he shouted and released the eight bombs. They went screaming for the sand crowded with the other readied planes and tanks. As they watched the bombs become almost invisible specks beneath them, they saw them end in eight great geysers of flame. The intense pressure the explosions below created tossed the heavy Heinkel several hundred feet in the air. Other explosions followed as bombs in the grounded planes blasted away. Morgan and Chase laughed as they watched the destruction their unqualified politeness caused.

Ack-ack continued to come up at them from below, but the surprise of the escape and bombing seemed to have affected the marksmanship of the gunners. Either that, or they hadn't rubbed the sleep out of their eyes.

"Never scare a Heinie out of his sleep,

Chevvy," shouted Morgan. "It does something to his aim."

Chase laughed.

The big plane leaned over on its right side in a steep bank and the nose swung eastward. Another push on the throttles and both Mercedes-Benz engines screamed a little louder and with the lifting of the right wing poured across the blazing desert and reached for a higher and safer altitude. Searchlights continued to plaster them with light, and Ack-Ack blasted away at them but always bursting wide.

The lights of the searchlights reflected sidebeams over the desert area around. Tanks and planes which were not burning were being manned by hundreds of Nazi ground forces and airmen to take them out of harm's reach. As Morgan drove his plane on, he looked below and behind him now. His engines had given him a thirty-mile edge and at fifteen thousand feet his view ranged far and wide.

As he glanced back, he saw three of the Messerschmitt 110s take off, evidently in hot pursuit after him. One had gained about a hundred feet when its nose suddenly dropped and the plane plunged headlong into the sand, ending in a burst of flames. But the other two kept on and sought altitude in an effort to shorten the distance between the escaping plane and themselves.

Morgan nosed down slightly to gain additional speed in an attempt to outstrip his pursuers. His gain increased for several miles until he rode into a bank of cumulus clouds that hid him completely from the view of the other ships.

He nosed again for altitude and kept the engines delivering their maximum revs while the triple-bladed propellers burned through the African atmosphere, dragging the big German bomber with its swastikaed tail closer to the British and American lines.

The Skipper wondered what sort of a reception awaited him on the other side of El Alamein. Would the British give him an opportunity to identify himself before they tried to knock him down? He turned to Chase.

"See if this tub has any green Very lights about it," he said. "We don't want our own men to knock us down now that we've got safely away from the Heinies."

Morgan slipped his hand into the pocket of the coveralls he hadn't removed in two days. He smiled as he felt the parts of the gun-aiming device he had swept up from the table before leaving Sorgus' shack. The sketches were also there. Now it was a matter of getting himself and the device safely past his own lines to Alexander.

## VII

CHASE returned to the pilot's compartment with a Very pistol and two cartridges marked *Grün*.

"I found two, Skipper," he said.

"Two will do," replied Morgan.

"We seem to have lost our pursuers," ventured Chase.

"If we've lost them," reminded Morgan, "we still have our own antiaircraft guns to worry about."

"That's right," said Chase. "I'd forgotten about them for a moment in spite of the flares in my hand."

The two Italians had kept close to Sorgus. A large lump had risen on the back of his head. He stirred, and tried to rise. But the Italian who spoke English was still sitting on the man's knees.

"Don't-a you get up," warned the cobbler.

"Where am I?" asked the still half-conscious traitor.

Chevvy Chase, seeing Sorgus stir, came over to him and ordered the Italian off the prostrate Nazi.

"What have you done with me?" screamed Sorgus, placing a handkerchief at the bump on his head to ease the pain.

"We're taking you back where you belong," answered Chase, "to do to you what you might have done to us."

The young spy paled. He became panicky and tried to rise to his feet, screaming: "No! No! You can't do that to me!" But he forgot that one could not stand upright in every part of a plane's fuselage, and he struck his already wounded head against a metal fuselage rib and collapsed unconscious again against Chevvy Chase.

The Limey pulled the oxygen nipple out of his mouth long enough to laugh and shout hilariously: "Blimey if the blighter ain't gone and knocked himself out this time!"

The moon had risen late and was well up

in the sky when Morgan brought the Nazi bomber he was riding out of the clouds. He looked about him for his pursuers but they were nowhere to be seen. The Mercedes-Benz engines were humming a soothing song of serene satisfaction as they roared on over the Mediterranean in the direction of Cairo.

Derna they passed without incident. To the south of the fleeing Nazi plane carrying its load of escaping Americans, Italians, and British and with them the captured renegade, lay the coast of Africa and its menace. But Morgan's green flares were ready. Given an opportunity to use them, he hoped to avert a possible attack.

As he was timing himself, the big ship shivered as if it had been rocked by a burst of shrapnel. Chase shot forward and shouted at Morgan: "We've been hit! Left wing! Where are those flares?"

Morgan handed the two flares back to Chase. The co-pilot, shoving the Very pistol through the gunner's sliding cowl, shot the two green flares over the side just as another burst of antiaircraft put another hole in the opposite wing with a direct hit.

Chase ran forward to Morgan again. "Do you think the signal has changed?" he asked. "They've smacked us in both our wings."

The port engine started to cough.

"Not only in our wings," said Morgan, "but they seem to have hammered the Benz right out of our hyphenated port Mercedes." The needle on that engine's tachometer fluctuated hysterically.

"That last crack came up just as I threw those two Very lights overboard," said Chase. "Let's hope they saw them and cease firing."

From out of the dark below, searchlights blazed from four points and caught the big German plane in the middle of their beams. It was blinding for the moment, but Morgan raised the nose of his ship before swinging into a wide right spiral. As he did so, the port engine cut out completely and the skipper cut the starboard engine down to keep the ship from vibrating itself into a shimmyshiwawwa.

THE firing was not continued as the ship descended. The green Very lights had obviously accomplished their purpose.

But the British below were taking no chances. Four Warhawks were sent aloft to examine the Heinkel at close range and to escort it in. Lights flashed on at the field toward which Morgan turned the nose of his ship. Several minutes later, with both sticks dead, the stolen bomber settled on the sand about five hundred feet from the concrete apron and was immediately surrounded by a dozen Bren gun carriers filled with British infantry.

Morgan stuck his head out of the window by his side and shouted at an officer jumping off the forward car. "We're Americans and a Royal Navy man, with two captured Italians and a German spy inside this Heinkel we stole in Tunis. Please tow us to your commanding officer. Our engines are knocked out and we can't roll in on our own power."

"Sorry we had to wrap you up," apologized the Ack-Ack officer, "but we had no way of knowing who you were until we saw your flares. By that time, I suppose, the damage was done."

"It was," grinned Morgan. "But if you'll have a towline tied to our undercarriage and tow us to your apron, we'll forgive you."

"Righto," laughed the officer.

His men tied the Nazi airplane undercarriage to one of the Bren gun carriers and towed it to the front of the Operations Office where dozens of R.A.F. and American pilots gathered around it with curious and interested eyes.

Morgan wasted no time in reporting his information of the impending Nazi drive and the great number of planes and tanks Rommel had recently received.

"The tanks and planes are all lined up and ready," he said. "They know I have the information and that I will convey it to you. I think, in view of that, they will attempt to press you sooner than they originally planned."

"We are ready for them," smiled the commandant confidently.

"I should like a plane to take me to Cairo and General Alexander, to whom I should have reported first," explained Morgan. "But the danger of the impending drive impelled me to prepare you for it."

"We have several hundred of those new gun-aiming devices here," said the commandant. "I have orders from General

Alexander that if you should land here first, you will instruct ten of my picked aircraftsmen in their installation and ten of my pilots in their use. They in turn will instruct the other pilots."

Morgan read the Headquarters Orders.

The installation of the devices was simple. With the whole of the combined British and American forces in that sector on the double alert and ready for any surprise attack, Morgan took the twenty men in hand at dawn the next morning. In two hours the first allotment of the new gun-aiming devices were being installed. As they were installed, pilots rode into the air to try them out on silhouette targets. They returned grinning from ear to ear with the results. The simplicity of use and installation amazed them.

Sorgus and the Italians were locked up, with Sorgus placed in solitary. His head was swathed in a bandage wrapped about his head like a turban. He swore at Morgan and Chase in unmistakable terms.

"I'll get out," he stormed. "I'll get out long enough to kill you both!"

Morgan and Chase laughed.

"He'll be held for trial and undoubtedly shot as soon as you two get back from Cairo to appear against him," explained the commandant at lunch the next day.

Every available greasemonkey was put to work installing the devices. While many of them were still working feverishly to get them installed in all the planes, an early patrol returned to the field. Their report created a stir of activity that brought every available pilot to his plane. Rommel's big drive was on the way.

Five hundred Mark IIIs with several hundred medium and light tanks were driving East. Hundreds of trucks with Italian and German infantry were pouring after them. Stuka dive bombers were headed out to begin the softening-up process on the British and American encampment.

But the commandant was right. The Allies were not only ready—but waiting.

**M**ORGAN'S ears were filled with the snarling, threatening cries of a thousand engines which filled the air over the desert. Idling powerplants suddenly rose in deafening crescendo. Squadron after squadron of Warhawks, Hurricanes, Bos-

tons, Martin Marylands, British Beauforts and Blenheims, Blackburn Skuas, American Airacobras, Yankee Kittyhawks, and giant Wellingtons poured off the desert sand and rose to meet the oncoming onslaught and to blast it back to hell where the dream of it was born.

Wright Cyclones, Rolls-Royce Merlins, Wasps, Bristol Pegasus, Bristol Mercurys, Allison—all harmonized and in solemn synchrony wailed the chilling dirge that would fill the quivering ears of the swastikaed locusts whose very presence was a plague that would be wiped from the face of the eternal desert sands.

"There's a sight to fill your heart with pride at being an American," said Morgan, turning to Chase, who was standing by and waiting for his skipper to hop off. "The Yanks are going to town."

"They make you feel that just ferrying planes isn't belonging," ventured Chase. "I should be in that mob busting out after Rommel."

"That's the way I feel about myself," replied Morgan.

Chase gave his skipper a significant look.

"I don't mean to be tactless, Skipper," said the co-pilot. "But aren't you a little over age to be a destroyer?"

"Oh," said Morgan, giving his friend a dirty look. "You too?"

"Well," qualified Chase. "You had your share of the fun in the last war. You don't want to hog the whole show, do you?"

"Is that a nice way of telling me I can't take it?"

Chase grinned broadly.

"Not particularly."

"Collins back in Miami pulled the same line on me," complained Morgan. "Too old for combat, he said." With a disgusted grunt he added: "The man's a dope!" Then for good measure, he turned to Chase and said: "And so are you."

Dent Morgan opened the door to his Airacobra and stepped inside. He squeezed into the tight little cockpit and strapped himself to his chair.

"Take good care of Joe the cobbler and his pal," Morgan instructed his partner. "See they get a break. I'll fly back from Cairo tonight unless the Alec keeps me there for any good reason."

"Okay, Skipper," replied Chase. "Don't get too close to the Nazis. And don't put



your fingers on the black button on the stick. The guns might go off and you'll get into trouble."

"Aw, go to blazes!" laughed Morgan, slamming the door to his cabin shut.

Chase waved and walked back to the operations office, where outside the door he turned and waited to see Morgan off.

Plane after plane was still pouring off the sandy strip into the air. As Morgan waited for take-off instruction from the Control Station, he watched the planes go off. He wet his dry lips, sucked in his breath, and wondered. Why not? Who would know? He had been given an Airacobra to take him to Alexander. They would not know if he went straight to Cairo, or hung behind for a little excitement.

Major Collins in Miami was crazy. Chase was just as insane. No man is ever too old to fly. He wasn't too old to fight. Besides, he had a wealth of combat experience held over from World War One. Yes, he knew; the modern planes were faster; had a hundred times the firing power of the old crates. He had kept up with the game through all the fleeting years. They hadn't left him behind as the science of Aviation had progressed.

He could slip into one of the large Airacobra formations. No one would know he was not a regular combat pilot of the Egyptian Command. He thrilled like a kid of nineteen at the thought of the adventure.

He knew Airacobras. He had flown and ferried them many times. He smiled at the thought of ferrying ships. Who wanted to ferry? He wanted to fight.

More Airacobras took off.

He looked down at the gunbutton.

"Chase is nuts!" he murmured to himself.

He pressed the engine starter button on the instrument panel. A whining, wailing cry reached him from behind. The flywheel on the inertia starter whirled frantically at twelve thousand revolutions a minute, making a sound that seemed to be remonstrating with him and urging him not to take the chance.

"You-u-u-u-u-r-r-r-r're o-o-o-o-o-o-O-O-O-Old! T-o-o-o o-o-o-O-O-Old to fight!" it screamed at him as it rose in intense crescendo.

"You're nuts too," he threw back over his shoulder.

The wailing noise was suddenly wiped out with a snarl and a sudden raucous bark that ground to a low roar. Morgan's eyes were alight with an eager intent. The sound of the Allison engine behind his chair was symphonic. He waited a few seconds for it to warm up. His guns were full and the ammunition boxes were fuller. His finger itched to press the gunbutton; but the moment was not yet propitious.

"I'll show you punks who's too old to fight," he muttered between his teeth.

### VIII

**A**FORMATION of Airacobras was waiting on the apron for clearance. He decided not to wait for his own orders but taxied up into position directly behind the last ship in the formation. Nobody noticed it. Not even the squadron leader, whose head was bowed over his radio as he listened for orders to take off.

Almost three hundred feet to the left of him, another Airacobra Squadron's engines were idling as it too waited for clearance orders from the Control Station. He snapped his radio on and pressed his headphones closer to his ears.

As the voices of the squadron leaders broke through, Morgan's grin widened. Out of the corner of his eye he could see a man waving at him. He glanced up at his rearview mirror and looked through it at the operations office. Chase was standing in front of it and waving him out of the formation. He seemed to be the only one who knew that Morgan didn't belong in that group. The ferry pilot ignored his friend's signals.

"Control Station from Ninth Squadron, takeoff clearance, Airacobras. Go ahead."

The voice thrilled the old war battler.

"Control Station from Eleventh Squadron, takeoff clearance. Go ahead."

A new voice passed through Morgan's headphones and it came from the Control Station in reply.

"Ninth and Eleventh Squadrons. Airacobras. Cleared for takeoff. Go ahead."

There was a jumble of voices as both Squadron Leaders cried; "*Wilco*"—will comply—and give their respective squadrons their orders. Thirty-six Allison's in

both squadrons roared out upon the desert; the thirty-seventh tailing after, broke in and joined them. Morgan pushed his throttle all the way home and the fleet, seal-like Airacobra thundered after the others and rode gracefully into the air.

As he took off, he took a hurried glance in the direction of his co-pilot and laughed out loud when he saw his friend with his hand to his cheek, waving his head from side to side mournfully as he watched Morgan's Airacobra fall into the rear of the battle formation.

The ferry pilot kept his radio on and listened to the harangue of the squadron leader's voice as he talked to his men. Then, without warning, came the command:

"The Airacobra in the rear of the formation. Identify yourself."

"Morgan. Air Ferry Command on the way to Alexander at Cairo," replied the ferry pilot through his throat mikes.

"What's the matter with you, Dent?" came back the S.L. "Cairo is in the other direction. Turn around and tail it."

"Who are you?" asked the puzzled Morgan.

"Little Willie Smith," replied the S.L. "The guy you taught to fly at Santa Anna. Remember?"

"Oh, so it's you, is it?" asked Morgan for the want of something better to say.

"Better turn back, Cap'," warned the Squadron Leader. "We're going to a fight."

"I know," replied Morgan. "So'm I."

"Do you think you can take it?" came the kidding query.

"Watch me, stinker!"

"This is a young man's war, mister."

So, even here! Morgan was getting mad. And at that moment he needed to get mad, for the sharp command shot through the headphones: "Heads up!!!"

The squadron ran into a formation of Messerschmitts. The air over the desert suddenly came alive with snarling, screaming, diving, chattering comets of death, and Dent Morgan heard the shrieking order to "*Peel Off!*"

The formations of Airacobra spilled over the atmosphere from two orderly and symmetrical divisions into a mess of airplanes that resembled the spilling of a plate of beans.

Morgan dropped twenty-three years of

his life off his broad shoulders with the order to peel, and the maneuver swept him back to the air over France in 1918. He forgot his age; forgot the taunts of his friends, and picked a Messerschmitt off from the crowd for his own.

He dived at a lone ship which had drawn off from the others. As he dived down on the other plane, he glanced through the plexiglass covering of his cabin over his five cannon and machineguns spitting a flaming stream of shells and tracers and saw a very young face look up at him. The boy could not be more than twenty, he thought. His mind drifted back to himself for the split second. He was almost twice that age. But this was no time to think of that. He was in this fight up to his tonsils and he had to get out of it; with a whole skin. The thing that made up for the difference in age was experience, thought the ferry pilot, and he'd prove that.

But the Nazi proved an able adversary. As Morgan's ship tore at the tail of his plane, the Heimie's nose suddenly reared and the Messerschmitt rose up in a dizzy chandelle which not only took him out of Morgan's fire, but Immelmann-fashion, reversed his line of flight. And Madsens chattered where a moment before Brownings coughed angrily.

Morgan swept his Airacobra skillfully out of the line of the German's guns, and gained altitude in spite of the man's effort to cut him off with Madsens vomiting a burning path in the direction of the Airacobra.

The man knew what it was all about. He drove his 'Schmitt straight at the American again as he made a startling left turn almost on his ear. A lightning loop saved Morgan from a blistering barrage that might have torn through the side of the ship and clipped his helmet from his headphones.

Then Morgan struck.

With full engine screaming, Morgan dived his plane with all his guns blazing and saw the fairing rip away from the waistline of the Messerschmitt.

First blood for the Yank of years.

He kept up his fire and the German swung right to meet the onslaught of Morgan's flying hell. His own guns crossed fire with the Brownings and his daring

head-on thrust forced the American to swerve clear of the withering shellfire.

The man was not only skilful; he was courageous.

Morgan swung into a swift right turn and bank that laid the bottom of his fuselage wide open to the other's blasting guns. This was the maneuver he was told he couldn't take. His Airacobra shivered with the contact of burning steel as it blew through the plane just behind Morgan's head.

It was youth against age, with gunnery skill also on the side of youth.

Still on his side in a full vertical bank, the ferry pilot suddenly saw a strange combination of colors. He thought he had been hit at first, but he felt no pain anywhere. Yet the atmosphere turned a faint blue; then a peculiar yellow; and with that change he recalled the series. The next color would be black—and possible oblivion. And age would have lost to youth.

THE Heinie followed after the dazed American with his snoutguns wide open and tracing a line of fire that might have put an end to a less capable flyer than the ferry pilot. He pulled out of the vertical bank as he experienced a deep, sinking sensation at the pit of the stomach and carried on in straight-and-level, with his throttle cut down and his nose up in an effort to stall the Nazi until he had time enough to regain control of his complete senses.

For a moment he was the other man's prey as the yellow seemed ages in turning to blue before his eyes, and the blue to fade completely, leaving his vision clear. Another minute longer in the vertical, and he might not have been able to clear his dazed brain.

As he dived, the other man drove on him from behind. Morgan looked back a moment and the younger man above him was diving with all guns blazing. The American thought he caught a grin on the Nazi's face as he, too, seemed to sense that he was battling a man old enough to be his father.

That grin made Morgan see red. Not the red of the other's guns; but the red of fury that rises in a man's heart and mind when the only desire tearing at his soul

and searing his brain is the one to kill!

The plexiglass over his instrument board splintered warningly in his face; the instrument board itself was blasted straight through to the reduction gears in the nose of the ship.

Morgan shoved the throttle all the way home again. Young man or old man, if he didn't act and act quickly he'd be a dead man. The Nazi could not only shoot; he could fly like an angel of hell.

As both planes dived for the sand with the Heinie on top and all guns blazing, Morgan swung his 'Cobra from side to side to avert the man's fire; swung up a moment to force the other man to level off suddenly, then dived again with throttle wide open. A quick yank at the control stick right back to his stomach, and he drove the ship up and over in a wide, searing loop that gave him both altitude and position up and behind the Nazi.

With the sudden unexpected maneuver, to prevent what seemed an imminent collision, the other man cut his throttle. It was like putting on the brakes. His ship hesitated a split second; but that second spelled his doom.

Everything Morgan had he piled into the back of that Nazi's head until he all but knocked it off the man's shoulders. The Messerschmitt dived for the sands below, where it blew up and fell apart, leaving a great geyser of sand and dust to fall back to earth and bury the man under the showering debris.

Youth had lost to experience.

Twenty minutes later, Morgan was standing by the radio operator in the Control Station.

"Will you take a radiogram for me for the Ferry Station in Miami, Florida?"

"I sure will," grinned the operator, winking at Chase, who was standing behind his skipper. "Anybody who can fight like you can have anything I've got!"

Morgan handed the man a message.

The man read it; looked up at Morgan wonderingly, and started pounding brass. The message was to Major Ronald Collins, U. S. Army Air Transport Command, Miami, Florida. It read:

*You are right. Shore lights almost blew out. Combat is for kids. I'll take mine in ferry doses. Keep 'em flying.*

# GIMME A ZERO!

By JACKSON V. SCHOLZ

ILLUSTRATED BY HARRY BURNE

*A Novelet of Hidden Horror in Australia*







**Marty Bolt had been tough with Brooklyn pavement under his feet.  
But jungle stuff was out of his line.**

**T**HE ten-mile trip from Port Darwin to the headquarters of Eighty-fifth Pursuit Squadron wasn't much of a help to Marty Bolt's morale. The road, to start with, was not much more than

an overgrown cowpath, hacked laboriously through the matted bush, which closed in like a hot green wall on either side, deadening the air, and making breathing difficult.

The driver of the jeep, a cigarette dangling from his lips, ignored the bumps, and Marty Bolt's rear end was taking such a pounding as it hadn't had since the boys of the Red Cat Club had made him a proud member back in Brooklyn.

Sweat was trickling down his face, but he didn't dare let go of the hand grips long enough to wipe it off. He didn't need a blue print either, to tell him that the corporal at the wheel was enjoying the business of giving a fighter pilot a small taste of dry-land flying. So Bolt said:

"Haven't had such a good ride since leaving the Brooklyn taxies."

The corporal grinned. "I drove a New York hack."

"The hell you did!" jerked Bolt, as a wave of nostalgia hit him hard. New York wasn't Brooklyn by a long shot, but it was still good to meet someone from that close to home.

"There's another Brooklyn flyer in the Eighty-fifth," the corporal volunteered.

"Don't kid me, soldier."

"I ain't kiddin', sir. I forget his name, but he's from Brooklyn."

Bolt felt a little better after that. Some of the weight of loneliness dropped off, and Brooklyn didn't seem so far away. He hadn't believed it would be like this. He'd figured himself as a hard guy, seasoned in a tough crowd. He'd rather fight than eat. Maybe it would be different when he had a chance to fight—his first chance in the air. Maybe that would cure the willies that this soggy, steaming jungle was building up in him. Maybe he could forget the hard, reassuring pavements of the city.

The jeep slowed for a narrow plank bridge across a sluggish bayou. The squat mangrove trees were solid along the bank, their tangled roots above the ground looking like nothing so much as a squirming mass of snakes. Bolt felt the skin crawl on his back.

"Lousy place, those mangrove swamps," said the corporal conversationally. "No place for a forced landing. Full of crocs. Hey! There's one now!"

He yanked the jeep to a stop, and Bolt followed the direction of his pointing finger. The thing looked like a log, at first. The corporal took his Garand from the rack, and gave the log a burst. The log exploded into threshing action. The

crocodile's head came up. Its great jaws clashed, and Bolt caught a glimpse of the savage rows of teeth. He felt fear, then, the stabbing sort that he had never known.

"Nothing like that in Brooklyn, sir!" the corporal yelled. Then cut loose with another burst.

It gave Bolt the chance to swallow hard and pull himself together.

"No," he said evenly enough. "Nothing like that there."

Gunning the jeep, the corporal tried to make up for lost time. That suited Bolt. He didn't feel like talking any more. He was jittery as a cat when the bush closed in around him once again. Nothing in his past had prepared him for this sudden isolation from everything he knew. He was city-bred from his heels to his wiry sandy hair, and he wanted nothing else. Least of all did he want this rank, green vegetation which grew around him like a living jail.

His spirits took another slump when they reached the Eighty-fifth's hideout, which was virtually what it was, no more than a rough camp hidden in the jungle. The landing strip, at first glance, looked suicidal. Its camouflage, which would fool a vulture, made it look smaller than it really was. He heard the warming clack of motors hidden somewhere.

That sound, at least, was comforting. He managed to get some lift, too, out of the prospect of meeting the other guy from Brooklyn. He knew only one other man who'd gone into aviation, a little rabbit of a guy named Willie Sneed. One of his own crowd, in fact—well, not quite. Hanger-on was more exact. Willie had never been hard enough to take it. He gave 'em all a laugh when he crashed the flying school. They hadn't heard from him since then, which was natural enough, because a timid little wart like that could never make the grade. He'd been washed out, probably, and had joined some less exacting branch.

A blond, hard-eyed man stepped over to the jeep as it pulled up with a flourish. His eyes still retained their hardness when he grinned, an impersonal hardness which seemed to be a part of him. Bolt judged him to be about his own age, twenty-two, yet there were subtle things about the man which made him appear infinitely older.

"I'm Randy Mead. I guess you're Marty Bolt."

"Yeah, I'm Bolt."

"We've been expecting you. Come along and meet the rest."

THEY started for the officers' mess, an open, screened rectangle with a tin roof. They passed the cook tent on the way, and as Bolt came opposite the opening, a small man, bare from the waist up, came hurrying out with a bucket of potato peelings. Bolt jolted to a stop, and stared. The little man stared, too.

Bolt gasped, "Willy Sneed! What're you doin' here?"

There was no welcome in Sneed's face. He said, "I work here."

Recovering from the first shock, Bolt said, "Good old Willie." His tone was patronizing, because that had been the accepted way to speak to Willie Sneed. He tried, however, to keep the amusement from his eyes, even though it was just what he might have expected—Willie Sneed ending up as an army cook's helper. "How do you like the army?"

"Fine," Sneed answered shortly, going on about his business.

Mead said in some surprise, "Where'd you two know each other?"

"Back in Brooklyn. We used to run around in the same crowd, or, rather, we lived in the same neighborhood. Willie didn't have much on the ball."

"He didn't, huh?"

"Naw," said Bolt. Then, "By the way, the corporal that flew that jeep out here said you had a flyer out here from Brooklyn."

Mead thought for a minute. "I guess he must have meant Sneed."

"I guess so. Well, too bad. It would have been swell to hunt Japs with one of the boys from Flatbush."

"Yeah," said Mead. "I guess it would. You'll—"

The sharp ring of a telephone cut him short. He froze to attention and said:

"Alert signal. A Flight's on duty now. You'll be in B Flight, and, incidentally, I'm your flight leader. B Flight will be on the alert now. Do you feel up to a hop so soon, in case something develops?"

"Hell, yes!"

"Okay. Come on."

Mead led the way to the alert hut, while A Flight sprinted toward their ships, which the ground crew was already rolling from the inserts. Mead fitted Bolt with flying gear, and introduced him to the three other members of the flight.

Ray Purdy was a tall gangling man with the high forehead and deep eyes of a poet. Jim McFay was built along the compact lines of Bolt himself. He had blue, lively eyes, and a broad grin, the sort of guy who could take few things seriously. Brick Fadden had a wide, engaging pan, and a mess of freckles.

Their greeting of Marty Bolt was impersonal to the point of being stiff. It started a quick flare of indignation, which did not reach the surface. Bolt had sense enough to realize that their attitude was fair enough. After all, they knew nothing about him. His flying and his guts were still unproved, an important point, when the lives of the other squadron members might depend upon these unknown factors.

Let 'em hold off, then, till they found out. That suited Marty Bolt okay. He was willing enough to fight for the things he wanted. He always had. So he tossed his hat in the ring now. He'd make the grade with these guys, make 'em admit that he was good enough to fly with the Eighty-fifth.

He felt a funny tightness in his throat, which made him realize the importance of the job ahead. Being a hard-boiled practical sort of guy, it had never dawned on him that he'd have to go out of his way to make men trust him. He'd figured that his part in the war would be the pleasant job of shooting down Japs, but the conviction hit him now, that there was more to it than that. It was an eye-opener to Marty Bolt.

Mead was talking to him: "You've trained on P-40s, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, take it easy, if we get in the air today. Don't be sap enough to underestimate these Zeros. They're poison. If you're lucky enough to get altitude you can take a crack at one. Otherwise, lay off, until you've had a little more experience with them. Oh-oh, here we go. There must be a show up there."

The telephone was blaring forth again with its long, insistent ring, and while it

was still ringing, the pilots were running toward the ships which were already being warmed. Bolt joined the others, his chute pack whanging at his hips.

Mead pointed out his plane to him, and called, "Take off in third place, and fly second on the right!"

Bolt nodded. He reached his ship. One of the ground crew was standing by. He said, "All set, sir. She's good and warm."

Bolt climbed to the wing and straddled himself into the cockpit. He gave a hasty check to his controls, set the brakes hard, and eased the throttle open. The Allison strained at the wheels and bellowed protest, sounding good. Bolt throttled down, and raised his hand. With the help of the mechanic's strength against the wing, he taxied gingerly from the cramped insert, and made his way to the strip. He maneuvered into position while the two leading ships took off. When his turn came, he eased the throttle wide and went howling down the strip.

He had a couple of bad seconds, when it looked as if the brush ahead was coming at him much too fast. He kept his head, however, let his wheels down on the strip, and lifted smoothly when the time came. He found that he had space to spare, but was glad, anyway, that this first take-off was over.

## II

HE followed the two leaders in a straight climb. Mead pulled into a slow bank at three thousand feet, allowing the rest of his flight time to get up there and form the V. Then he headed for the coast. His voice came back across the plane-to-plane.

"Operations says twelve bombers, fourteen fighters heading from Timor to Darwin. Looks like a quiet hop. A Flight's mixing with 'em."

In no time at all B Flight was above the intense blue waters of the Timor Sea. Still climbing for altitude, Mead reached the fifteen-thousand mark. The sky was cloudless.

Marty Bolt, hugging the formation tightly, felt excitement hammering through his veins. It was the sort of excitement he liked, the sort that came before a fight. He was grinning broadly now, and he noted

that his hands were steady. Well, why not? There was nothing to be scared of, certainly not a stinking little Jap.

He strained his eyes through his glare-proof goggles, but, nevertheless, it was the more experienced men who saw the Jap flight first. Mead said quietly: "There they are." Then, a moment later Bolt saw them, too.

He first saw a wedge of tiny specks. Those would be the bombers, several thousand feet below. Then he saw the fighters up above them, flashing dots, gnat-size, that swarmed about in a pattern meaningless to him.

But the pattern wasn't meaningless to Mead. He said with a savage exultation, "A Flight's giving 'em a pasting. Looks like the odds are almost even now. I figured we might be a little late." Then, "Fadden, Purdy and Bolt, drop out and attack the bombers. McFay and I will join A Flight."

The order gave Bolt a sudden jolt for which he was unprepared. He had looked forward for many weeks to just this moment, had nursed his longing fiercely, jealously. He wanted to meet Jap fighters plane to plane. He wanted to throw lead at the famous Zeros. That was the way to fight. That's where skill and guts would count. Any cluck could dive at a clumsy bomber. Bolt wanted Zeros.

And now, with that great moment just within his grasp, he'd been ordered to lay off. Indignation bounced up in him like an uncoiled spring, shattering his common sense and abandoning discipline.

His voice hit the microphone involuntarily. He was scarcely aware that he had shot his mouth off:

"No soap!" he yelled. "I'm going with you, Mead. I want a Zero!"

Bolt felt the shock of the brief silence, even across the air waves. Mead's voice was quiet, when it came, but it was quite as if someone had plugged Bolt's ears with snow.

"I don't repeat orders more than once," said Mead, and Bolt could almost feel his head snap back.

It brought him to his senses, though. He remembered he was still a bawling, newborn calf so far as these guys were concerned. It whittled him down, sure, but it didn't quell his disappointment. He was



mad as blazes, still, when he peeled off and followed Purdy and Fadden toward the bombers.

He was too sore, in fact, to use what brains he had. All he could think of, now, was to work off some of his peeve on the lumbering crates below. He lined up on the last one in the trailing V, let the big Allison howl like a dozen banshees, and jockeyed his rudder until he had his sights in line.

He was coming in from above and behind. The bomber showed up clearly on the cross threads of his sight. His thumb closed on the trigger, and he felt the bucking of his ship as his six-guns sprayed their heavy slugs into the crate below.

His tracers showed he was wasting bullets in the bomber's tail. He eased back slightly on the stick, shallowing his dive to rake the whole length of his target. He saw his burst creep forward. Another instant now—then suddenly he awakened violently to the violent blast of tracers which were not his own.

**T**HEY were coming at him from a half dozen angles, smashing his greenhouse glass into a sieve, battering at his armament, and raising hell in general.

He felt his head jerk violently, as a slug plowed through the leather of his helmet. The force of that blow threw him off his target, and hammered a few brains into his thick skull.

He realized, for a sickening instant, that, in his bull-headed anger, he had violated the first rule of bomber attack. He had come in from behind and above, wide open to the fire of the plane he was attacking, as well as to the top guns of the other ships in the formation.

There was no good reason in the world why he shouldn't have been full of holes himself, just then, but, accepting the miracle that he was still intact, his action was instinctive.

He did not attempt the blunder of pulling out of the dive, thereby exposing his under side for more Jap target practice. Instead, he kicked right rudder hard, yanked the P-40 on its side, and whisked past the bomber with his motor still wide open.

He cut it then, and began to ease the riddled crate from its dive, using his head,

now, taking it easy until he found whether the ship would hold together. It did, and Bolt began to breathe again. Brick Fadden's voice slapped at him through the mike: "You damn fool! What d'ye think you're huntin', pelicans? Don't you know a Nakajima Nineteen when you see one? It hasn't got a belly gun."

Bolt said, "Yeah, I know it now."

He couldn't spot Fadden, at the moment, but he could see the result of Fadden's recent work. One bomber was trailing a cloud of black smoke toward the water. Then Bolt saw another one, Purdy's contribution probably, also flaming toward the sea.

Feeling like a donkey, Bolt started up to grab more altitude. He wasn't scared, nor was he surprised that he wasn't scared. He hadn't expected to be. He had missed death by a whisker, sure. So what? Look what he'd learned. He set about at once to use this knowledge.

He was too late, though. A and B Flights had hashed up the Zeros to the point where the bombers were deprived of their umbrella. Their commander must have had a rush of oriental brains to the head, because he called off the attack, playing smart.

The remaining bombers turned for home, and dove down toward the sea. Once there, they stayed close enough to the water to protect their bellies, and remained in a protective huddle for the concentration of their gun fire. Mead let them go.

His crisp order came across the mike, "That's all. Reform at five thousand."

They were headed home. Bolt found his spot, and waited to be bawled out. He was reasonable enough to figure he deserved it. He was mildly surprised when it didn't come. Maybe it would come later.

He forgot about this temporarily, when faced with the ticklish job of landing. They were over the mainland soon, but there was no evidence of a landing field. Everything down below looked just alike to Marty Bolt, solid, green, unbroken.

He grunted with astonishment when Mead began to lead them in a descending circle. Mead said:

"You'll come in last, Bolt. Watch the rest of us carefully, until you spot the strip and see how it's done."

They were down to two thousand feet before Bolt saw it, and then he might have missed it if he hadn't been watching hard. He watched the others land, and caught the knack of it. Then he lowered his own wheels, let down his flaps, and had a try at it.

He turned in a neat, efficient job. No one could have done it better. He hoped that that first landing would be chalked up to his credit as a flyer.

Once on the ground he decided to beat Mead to the punch, because he hated to have things hanging over him. He went up to the flight leader, looked him in the eye, and said:

"I'm sorry for what I said across the mike. I must have lost my head. It won't happen agam."

Mead looked surprised, then grinned. "Oh, that," he said. "Forget it. We all go through that on our first hops. Don't worry, though, you'll have a chance at plenty of Zeros before you're through."

"Well, thanks," said Bolt. "I guess I can't ask for any more than that."

It was an overstatement. Bolt found this out before he had been on the ground ten minutes.

He began to feel a nervous twitching of his skin. He had the crazy urge to shoot sudden looks behind him, as if something were creeping up on him. He knew soon enough what was wrong with him.

It was that sweating wall of green which pinned him on every side, uncanny and terrifying in its silence, crawling with unknown things which didn't belong on earth—not on the sort of earth, at least, which Marty Bolt liked best. He wanted pavements, traffic sounds and towering buildings. He called himself a yellow-livered skunk, but it didn't help a lot.

**T**HE remaining solution was to make himself solid with these guys, to become such a definite part of their organization that he could keep his thoughts insulated with things of local interest while he was on the ground.

He knew he hadn't gotten away to much of a start, but it was encouraging to find that none of them held it against him. They'd probably made mistakes themselves, and were human enough to give a newcomer the reasonable benefit of a doubt.

They still regarded him, it is true, with a certain reserve. He could understand that, because the men of the Eighty-fifth were hard as granite. Kids on the surface, maybe, but not that way beneath the hide. In their various ways they were killers, all of them, and the effects of their bloody job was stamped upon them in its numerous phases. Death rode on their wingtips, and that was bound to leave its mark upon a man. Bolt wanted to be like them.

He kept his neck pulled in, however, for the remainder of the afternoon. He joined the squadron at the officers' mess for dinner, kept in the background, and spoke when he was spoken to. Despite his good behavior, though, he caught a subtle undercurrent.

A grapevine was in operation right under his very nose. A message of some sort was making the rounds. Bolt watched its progress, saw it go from man to man. It seemed to be a joke of some sort. It brought quick grins, and, more revealing still, swift glances in his direction.

So that was it? He was a clown, huh? These guys were getting a big boot out of what had happened in the air today. He felt the hairs on his neck go stiff. He'd slapped mugs down for less than this, and maybe these guys were just mugs after all. He shoved the thought aside, because he didn't want to believe it. Nevertheless, his grey-green eyes were watchful.

Dinner was ready now, and he took his place at the table with the rest. The undercurrent of amusement was still there. He could feel it through their poker faces. He was taut with the anticipation of something he couldn't quite nail down.

The mess attendants started bringing in the food. He saw Willie Sneed coming through the door, carrying a bowl of boiled potatoes. Poor Willie, just a waiter, after all.

Sneed stopped behind Bolt's chair, then leaned across Bolt's shoulder to put the potatoes on the table. Something happened, then, to Sneed's grip upon the bowl. It appeared that he wasn't strong enough to hold it. It wobbled dizzily, and before Bolt could grab the thing, he had a whole lap-full of scalding spuds.

He slammed back from the table, his mind involuntarily jumping to the past,

where Willie Sneed had been a well-meaning, blundering drip, getting in everybody's way, and bungling everything he touched.

"Damn you, Willie!" he howled helplessly. "You haven't changed a bit! No wonder you could never learn to fly a ship!"

The fliers at the table seemed to think this funny, a whole lot funnier than it seemed to Bolt. They roared with a laughter that rattled the tin upon the roof. Bolt gathered, in a muddled sort of way, that this was the gag which had been building up, but its real significance didn't smack him between the eyes until Willie Sneed, with a broad grin, pulled up a chair and joined the others at the table.

Even then, he couldn't believe what this implied. He stood staring, flap-jawed, until Randy Mead stopped laughing long enough to say:

"It's straight stuff, Marty. Bill's our ace, even if he doesn't look it. He's bagged eight Zeros and six bombers. If you don't believe it, it's right there on the chart. Sit down, Marty. It was too good a gag to waste."

Bolt missed his opening, then, like a punch-drunk fighter. A sense of outrage overpowered him. It was unthinkable that this puny little squirt of a Willie Sneed had made such a colossal sucker of him. He couldn't grasp it, and before he had given himself a chance, he roared at Sneed:

"Why, you double-crossing little weasel!"

Even while the words were coming out, Bolt heard the warning clang of his common sense. It was too late then. He'd opened his mouth wide and had jammed in both his number tens, jammed them in all the way to the knees.

The grin left Sneed's face as if it had been flicked off with a whip. His eyes took on a polished look, as they studied Bolt for one cool instant, then turned deliberately away. The laughter at the table ended with the crashing abruptness of an orchestra finale. The men began to eat with steady hands and frozen faces. Empty and sick inside, Marty Bolt eased back into his chair.

He forced himself to eat, and when the meal was over he headed for his tent. It was set back in the trees, dispersed, as were the others, for protection against a possible bomb attack. It was too close

to the jungle to suit Bolt, but its solitude, just now, was what he wanted. His tent-mate, Randy Mead, would probably not be there until time to go to bed. Bolt climbed beneath the mosquito netting of his cot, and stretched out upon his back, his hands behind his head.

### III

HE tried to dope things out, and he found the answer much too simply. He was nothing but a big-mouthed sore-head, just a guy who couldn't ride along with a gag. They'd given him his chance, pulled a hot-foot on him, just like the sort they probably pulled on one another. And what had happened? He'd squealed like a stuck pig. He broke out in a cold sweat as he recalled those frozen pans. They had him tabbed as a punk who couldn't take it.

Randy Mead came a little later, undressed in silence, and went to bed. Bolt waited until Mead started snoring, then got out on the board floor and sneaked his own clothes off. A couple of mosquitoes drilled him before he could regain the protection of the netting.

He didn't go to sleep at once. Aside from the turmoil of his thoughts, there was something heavy, almost choking, about the tropic night. The night life of the jungle came to life. He heard furtive noises in the bush, so close to his tent wall. He told himself that there was nothing to hurt him, but he lay rigid, just the same. Not that he minded being hurt. It wasn't that. It was the damnable strangeness of it all. He finally fell into an exhausted sleep.

It was still dark when Mead awakened him. "We're on the dawn alert," Mead told him shortly. "Get your breakfast and report to the alert hut."

Bolt felt like a wrung-out dishrag. Hot coffee and a husky breakfast helped him some. B Flight ate in silence. Bolt wondered if his presence were responsible for the lack of words, but he was so damn glum that he didn't care. He wanted to get out of this sticky, gummy place, to get up in the air above the earth where he could breathe.

Coming out of the officers' mess, he almost bumped into Willie Sneed, who was

coming in. Sneed started to step around Bolt as if he were some inanimate obstruction. Bolt hauled in his breath hard, and said:

"Look, Willie. Let's get this business straight. I went off half cocked last night. You caught me off first base."

Sneed said, "That's all right. Let's skip it." His voice was impersonal, remote.

"I don't want to skip it," Bolt insisted doggedly. "I was a heel, and I'm willing to admit it. You had me fooled, that's all. When I saw you in the afternoon with those potato peelings—well, I just figured—"

"Sure, naturally," Sneed interrupted. "We've got a young wallaby, a sort of mascot. He likes potato peelings."

"Okay, but look," Bolt barged ahead. "I just don't want you or any of the other guys to think I'm a mug."

Sneed's smile was tight and mirthless. The change in his face was startling. All the mild uncertainty was gone, replaced by that tempered, metallic look which Bolt had learned to recognize in these men who faced death every day. Bolt blurted out:

"You've changed."

"A little, yes—not much. You wanted to get things straight. Okay, Marty, here it is. I had my nose rubbed in it plenty back in Brooklyn. That's not a whine, and it's not a threat that I'm going to rub *your* nose in it. I just don't like you, and that's that. You had your chance last night to change it here, and you muffed it. To me, you're still a cheap big shot, who thinks he's tough, and since leaving home, I've found out what tough means. So I just don't like you, Marty. Call it vindictive if you want to. I don't give a damn. What the other men think is their own business."

He wheeled around Bolt and went in to breakfast. Bolt stood there for a minute, clenching and unclenching his big hands. Then he set sail for the alert hut, muttering to himself:

"Gimme a Zero! Just gimme one, that's all!"

He was still on his first cigarette, when it appeared that his prayer might be answered soon. The telephone rang loud and long. Mead slammed his cigarette into the dirt, ground his heel on it, and snapped:

"Let's go!"

The scramble started for the single-seaters. Bolt sprinted to his crate, clambered fast into the cockpit, and went through the swift, automatic job of checking. It was still dusk upon the ground, a situation which was not improved by the mist which clung along the strip. Bolt didn't let that worry him, however. If the others could get off, he could.

The others got off, and so did Bolt. They formed their wedge at three thousand feet, and Mead, getting the dope from Operations, headed northwest toward the coast.

They met the Japs just beyond the shore line. Mead called back the count: "Five bombers, eight Zeros! Take the Zeros!"

It was the news that Bolt had waited for. Take the Zeros! Hot meat! Fried Jap on toast!

Not quite as simple as it sounded. The Japs, this time, were holding the lid on the P-40s. They were up there with a couple of thousand feet to spare. Mead yelled "Break!" as the Japs peeled off. The P-40 scattered like a covey of quail, and started their dodging about the sky, making themselves hard targets for the Japs.

Keeping his eyes skinned, Bolt spotted the Jap who had picked him for the kill. He was almost sorry there weren't a pair of them, but he had to make out with what he had.

His first jolt came from the blinding speed with which the Zero dove on him, head on, from above. He saw flame spitting from the Zero's guns. He bashed his foot against the rudder, snapped his controls forward and went into a twisting dive.

HE ducked away in time to save his hide, but he felt the P-40 shiver to the impact of the Jap slugs, as they chewed a chunk out of the trailing edge of his right wing. He could see the hole from the elevation of his greenhouse, and he noted with relief that it had missed the aileron.

The Jap slammed above him like a bat out of hell, and Bolt came out of his dive in a tight half loop, flipping the ship upright at the top. He was heading toward the Jap, now, with a little altitude to spare. The Nip was just coming out of his dive, and Bolt went at him.



He had the advantage now, because the P-40 was at its best in a full power dive. He figured to nail the Jap as he was recovering from the brief black-out of the pull-out. The Zero looked like a fine chunk of cold meat.

Bolt lined him on the sights, and pressed the trigger. In his eagerness to bag the Nip, he fired too soon. He failed to reach the Zero with his slugs at their converging point. The pattern of the bullets was too widespread. Some of them hit the Zero, but reached no vital spot. The Jap whipped up into a panicky climbing turn. Bolt tried to stick on his tail, but his momentum was too great. He slapped a parting handful of slugs in the Jap's tail, then started the pull-out from his own dive.

He didn't spare either himself nor his ship in this, he just hauled back on the controls. He knew the ship would hold together, and he knew, too, that this was one of his own strongest flying assets.

His insides must have been constructed like a boiler, because he could take the terrific punishment of these pull-outs in his stride. He was unique in this, because he had never experienced a complete black-out. The blood was never drained entirely from his brain.

And so he came out now, clear-headed. He knew the Nip was somewhere on his tail, and Bolt was just sore enough, right now, to go back and look for him. He held his pull-out into a half loop, and rolled over on the top. No Jap. Maybe he'd scared the little monkey off. Then a swift warning crackled through his ear phones:

"Behind you, Bolt! Behind you! Watch it!"

Bolt's heart took a jump up toward his Adam's apple. A quick look in his rear-view mirror told him that whoever had warned him wasn't kidding. The Zero was just coming out of a vertical to bring its guns to bear.

He had no idea how the Jap had got there, but there he was. Bolt's brains did a swift mental loop when the conviction hit him that these Nips weren't the push-overs he had figured them, and that the Zeros were terrific little fighting kites.

Bolt yanked his own crate into a vertical. The situation suited him okay, because he believed that, with the strange

gift he had of keeping his head clear against an unnatural amount of centrifugal force, he could hold as tight a turn as any man alive.

This may have been quite true, but he didn't have an uninterrupted chance to try it out just then. When he got the P-40 on its ear, he made the mistake of glancing down. He didn't quite know what happened, then, but he felt his breath catch sharply at the thing he saw below.

The fight had worked its way above the land. There was no water beneath him now, nothing but the matted mass of jungle. He realized, with a start, what his imagination was about to do. He fought against it desperately, but his thoughts were pulled along as if dragged with a rope.

What if he *should* be shot down? Or, worst still, what if he might have to take to his chute? He felt a nasty quiver up his spine. Pictures began to form against his mind as if projected from a movie camera. He tried to blot them out, but they still danced there maliciously.

The picture of the crocodile was worst. The slimy, powerful beast with its rows of ugly teeth. How would he like to land near one of them? And what if he landed in the bush itself? How about the snakes? How about the solid walls of green which would hold him there until he starved to death?

He wasn't scared of Japs, nor the guns of Zeros. It might have been better if he had been. He could have kept his thoughts upon the death which rode his tail.

As it was, the clammy fear of the jungle reached up through the air and laid its finger on his heart. The impulse was transmitted to his hands and feet. They wouldn't obey his mind, with the delicacy so vital now.

He felt his turn go sloppy. The Jap was closing in, narrowing the arc slowly, his vicious, tilted little eyes against the sights. It wouldn't be long now. The slugs, Bolt knew, would soon be ripping into him. First the screaming tracers, which would give the Jap the range. Then the cannon, to deliver the final devastating blow. Bolt made up his mind fast, then.

To hell with this jitter-business of fighting over jungles. He'd take the water every time—even with its sharks. He

yanked out of his turn, and went diving back toward the Timor sea. It looked like he was running off with his tail between his legs, but he wouldn't run for long. The Jap was bound to follow, and when they got back above the water, he'd have a surprise for the yellow little ape.

In theory, it was sound. The catch was that the Zero never left its turn. A P-40 came slashing at it from above. Its bullets riddled the flimsy, under-armored crate, tearing it, and the Jap inside, to pieces.

Looking back, Bolt saw it spurt red flame, and start its final dive. He saw the P-40 pull away, and he recognized Brick Fadden's bus. Fadden had probably believed he was saving Bolt's life. A quick, unreasonable surge of anger hit Bolt without warning.

"Damn you, Fadden!" he burst out. "That Zero belonged to me!"

Fadden's voice came back an instant later, cold and brittle.

"Okay, sonny, you can *have* the next one—and to hell with you!"

That cooled Bolt's temper like a bowl of ice cubes. He'd shot off his big mouth again—and beautifully. Every P-40 in the air had probably recorded the exchange of words, and the men had drawn their own conclusions. Bolt squirmed with self-disgust, then did the only possible thing he could have done. He looked around for more Jap Zeros.

But, as on a previous occasion, there were no more. C Flight had joined the party, just to make the devastation more complete. The remaining bombers were high-tailing it for home again, and another threat against Port Darwin had been squashed. It should have been a matter to exult about, but Marty Bolt was not exulting as he joined his wedge, and started home.

#### IV

IT was just about as bad as he had feared, and the remainder of that day was just about the darkest he had ever known. It wasn't that the men of the Eighty-fifth deliberately ignored him, because they didn't. That was the trouble. They treated him politely enough, but the chill impersonality of their bearings was unstudied and sincere. He was merely a stranger in

their midst, and not a very welcome one at that.

They killed time in the limited ways at their command. They played cards and read for their mental stimulus. For exercise they stripped to their shorts and played volley ball. It was noticeable that Marty Bolt was not included in these pastimes.

It was noticeable, too, that Willie Sneed was in the thick of things—a person of importance. That was the hardest thing for Bolt to swallow, and his attempts at this pushed him into a morbid brooding.

How simple it would be for Sneed to write a letter back to Brooklyn, merely stating a few simple facts. Bolt had not been too reticent when he had left his friends. He had been an important man with them, and it was assumed that he would be an important man in the cockpit of a fighting plane. So when they learned that Willie Sneed, not Marty Bolt, was the man they should be proud of—

Bolt groaned, and felt the blood inside him curdle.

The misery of his day was relieved somewhat that night by a meeting of the squadron in the officer's mess. The importance of the meeting was made evident by the presence of a colonel from Port Darwin, and the grimness of the colonel added an extra touch of suspense. He addressed the squadron, speaking slowly to let his words sink in:

"We have reason to believe that this air field is in real and immediate danger, not only the field itself, but the personnel as well. The reason for this is logical enough, because you men have set up an incredible record. Time and again you have torn the Jap bombing attacks to ribbons, with miraculously small losses to yourselves. Maybe it has been just luck, but we prefer to believe that you are an unusual squadron, and as such, it is important that you be preserved as intact as possible."

He studied the expressionless faces of the men, and then continued:

"You have been responsible for terrific losses among the Japs, and that isn't the sort of thing they like. They will go to any extreme to eliminate you as a fighting unit. We don't believe they have been able to spot this strip from the air, but we do know that they've been landing men, and trying to spot it from the ground. With

the aid of one of our Abo trackers, we captured a pair near here. Whether there were more of them, we don't know. It's possible that there were, and it's possible that some of them might have located this place. They're as handy as monkeys in the bush."

There was a rustle of excitement among the listeners. The colonel concluded:

"I'm telling you this to put you on your toes, even more than you have been. The danger, we believe, is acute, and we believe you ought to know it. We're doubling the guard down here, but keep your eyes peeled just the same."

Bolt felt the pleasurable quiver of anticipation in the place, but he couldn't share it with the others. He could only hope that he'd have a big part in the party when it came.

It didn't come that night, or the following day. Late that afternoon B Flight got the scramble signal at the alert hut, and took to the air. C Flight, led by Sneed, followed them up a few minutes afterward.

The show started out as a repetition of the one of the day before. Approximately the same number of enemy planes were intercepted just off the northern coast, with the difference, this time, that the P-40s managed to reach the same upper level as the Zeros when the fight broke loose.

Assuring himself that he was over water, Bolt tangled confidently with a Jap opponent. Bolt got in the first burst, but the Jap flipped his Zero out of danger, and escaped with nothing more serious than a few slugs in his left wing.

He was a tough and slippery guy to handle, though. Bolt found that out as he yanked his crate around the sky, trying to line up his guns for a fatal burst. The Zero was too elusive. Lighter than the P-40 by many pounds, it did tricks like a hungry bat. It kept Bolt flying, using every stunt he'd learned in school, and a few he thought up himself.

Furthermore, he had the certain feeling that some of those tricks should have brought him to pay dirt. When they didn't, Bolt had to accept the disturbing fact that his air work was not up to its real peak of efficiency. The conviction of this landed on him with both feet when he found himself sneaking quick glances toward the earth, trying to learn whether

or not he was still over the comparative safety of the water, and when one of these glances showed him nothing but a carpet of dark green, his hand went slippery on the stick.

Once more, his involuntary instinct double-crossed him. He jerked out of the fight and headed for the open water, where, as before, he intended to take up where he'd left off.

The Jap, however, didn't see things quite that way. He hopped upon Bolt's tail like a chicken hopping on a worm. Bolt tried to wiggle free. Before he had cleared the jungle threat below him, he uncorked some fancy stuff which saved his hide, but didn't entirely lose the Jap.

The Son of Heaven got in a healthy burst which caught Bolt's motor in a vital spot. The Allison conked out. The sudden silence hit Bolt like a blackjack. He sat for a frozen instant—stunned.

Then, instinctively, he nosed into a dive. It was a second or so later when he saw the flame, a tiny plume, at first, trying to find light and air. The tracer slugs had found his gas line.

He was cool, now, thinking fast. The Zero was coming around in a tight turn for another try at him. Suddenly a vast hiccup shook the plane. The motor cowl-ling seemed to lift, and a solid sheet of flame reached back toward the cockpit.

He moved fast then. He slapped the catch loose on his safety belt, and slid back the hatch above him. He brought the ship to even keel, then rolled it on its back. He held there for an instant, until the force of gravity pulled him free. Then he was tumbling crazily through space, tumbling toward—the jungle, far below.

Even at that moment, he thought calmly, "Why should I pull the rip cord?" Wouldn't he be better off dead than alive, down there in that stinking, snake-infested place?

**T**HE instinct for self-preservation, though, won the decision by a nod. He yanked the handle hard, waited a breathless second until he heard the snap of silk above, and was pulled up short with a violent jerk. A moment later he was dangling peacefully in the air.

Well—hardly peacefully. He heard the snarling of the Zero's motor. Promptly he stopped worrying about what he'd find

on the ground below, because the chances were, he'd never reach the ground. The Jap was diving at him. He couldn't see the Jap just yet because of the parachute's canopy, but before the Zero came in sight, Bolt heard the blending roar of another engine.

Bolt grabbed the shrouds, and started swinging his body back and forth. The Jap appeared then, came out of his shallow dive into a zoom, and lined his sights.

Bolt saw the muzzle flashes of the guns, but the first burst missed him by a miracle. The little yellow butcher didn't have a chance to fire another. He was full of slugs, big fifty-caliber chunks of steel. He never heard the battering of the guns above him. He was dead—for the glory of his emperor—if that gave him any satisfaction.

Bolt breathed again. He saw the P-40, which had nailed the Jap, come flashing into sight. And then he saw something else, a thing which made him scream a futile warning.

Another Zero came hurtling in an all-out, howling dive toward the ship whose pilot had given Bolt some extra time to live. The Zero was traveling like a thunderbolt. It was a suicide attempt—just that. The Jap was going to die, but he was going to take a Yank down with him.

Some sixth sense must have warned the man in the P-40. Maybe he got a brief glimpse of the Zero thunderbolt in his rear view mirror. At any rate, he swerved in time to spoil a Zero bull's-eye. There was a shattering crash as the Zero smashed through the P-40's tail, leaving nothing but a jagged stump of fuselage.

Bolt groaned, "Jump, guy! Jump!"

The pilot managed somehow to get out of the P-40. He plummeted downward, and his chute snapped open. He was hidden from Bolt by the silk.

Bolt gathered the shrouds again, slipped the air from the chute above him, and descended in a series of breathless drops. When he reached the other's level and got his first good look at the other pilot, he burst out:

"I'll be damned!"

Sneed said, across the space of a hundred yards or so, "Oh, it's you, huh?"

The mass of vegetation was getting closer to him now. Bolt watched it with a mounting dread, mighty glad, however,

that he wouldn't land down there alone. He shot a glance at Sneed. Sneed too was staring at the ground. His face was pale. He didn't like it either.

Sneed pulled at his shrouds a bit to bring him closer to Bolt's line of descent. Bolt found himself doing the same thing.

Sneed said, "So long as we're in this together, we might as well land as close alongside as we can."

"That's common sense," said Bolt.

The ground rushed at them now with an alarming speed. Bolt forced himself to look around, and he was glad he did. He saw that they would land near the right-hand bank of a wide, sluggish stream. Beyond the stream he saw a long gash in the bush, which he judged might be a road.

"Hey, Willie!" he called. "A road?"

Sneed said, "Gosh, I hope so!"

They landed then, and it wasn't pleasant. The trees reached up and grabbed them hungrily. They weren't as soft as they looked from up above. Bolt got some nasty bumps and scratches from the upper branches before they gripped his parachute and held, leaving him dangling five feet off the ground.

Even from there, the prospect was unnerving. The ground below him was wet and oozing, laced with the villainous, twisting roots of mangroves, which crowded solidly from all sides.

Bolt pulled himself together, worked free of his harness, and dropped to the ground. He suppressed a gasp as he sank ankle deep in muck. He stood there, shaking, for a moment. When he could control his voice, he called:

"Hey, Willie!"

He grunted with relief when he heard Sneed answer, "Over here."

"Are you all right, Willie?"

"Yeah. Banged up a little. Nothing busted."

His voice sounded close, but Bolt couldn't see him yet. He started splashing toward the sound, his heart battering against his ribs, his feet slipping and catching in the slimy roots. The stench of gas from rotting vegetation almost choked him. It was a welcome sight to see Sneed floundering toward him. Sneed's face was white and pasty in the dimming light.

"Hell, guy!" Bolt exclaimed. "You must be hurt. You're pale."



"You're not blushing," Sneed growled. "I'm pale because I'm scared. I always have been scared of landing in a place like this. It turns me inside out."

"You and me both," Bolt admitted gratefully. "I'd give ten years of my life, right now, to feel a Brooklyn pavement with my feet. This jungle stuff is out of our line."

By the time Sneed reached him, Bolt was feeling a little better. The common bond of fear made the past seem distant and remote. He fished out some cigarettes, gave one to Sneed. They lighted them with trembling fingers, hauling the smoke deep into their lungs. That helped, too.

Bolt said, exhaling smoke, "What are our chances of being found?"

"Not bad, maybe, if we stay close to this spot. Maybe they can see our chutes from the air. They'll send some trackers in."

"There's a stream over there to the right. Maybe we'd better park along the bank. That's probably the way they'll come in."

"Okay, let's go."

## V

THE tropic night was coming down like the lowering of a curtain. It took them half an hour of solid, nerve-racking work to cover a couple of hundred yards through the close-packed bush, and across the treacherous, slippery mangrove roots. Both men fell several times. They were soaked with slime, trembling and miserable when they finally reached the stream.

They found a mangrove larger than the rest, climbed its tortuous roots and found a sitting place against the trunk. Night covered them then like an inverted bowl. They both smoked hungrily, careless of the dwindling supply of cigarettes.

When Bolt, at one time, lighted a match, its glow spread out across the water. It picked up two green, glowing lights just off the surface of the stream, malignant, awful things, which stared at them, un-winking.

Bolt made a strangled sound.

"S-s-s-ay! What's that?" rasped Sneed.

"Crocodile," Bolt answered hoarsely.

They huddled a little closer after that. Their cigarettes ran out. The mosquito hum was constant, and their murderous attacks incessant. Moonlight began to filter

through the trees, pouring down an eerie light which intensified the threat of their surroundings.

Suddenly Sneed's fingers bit into his arm. Bolt froze to a paralyzed attention, then heard the sound which Sneed had heard, the subdued splashing of water, coming upstream toward them. They stared intently, expecting to see another croc, but the bulk, when it came in sight, was more defined than that.

In another moment Bolt distinguished the outlines of a rubber boat, manned by two figures, paddling cautiously. He heard their muffled words. Not English. Japanese! It had to be.

The paddlers nosed in at the opposite bank with the assurance of men who knew their way. The moon, now, was bright enough to show their movements. They were unloading bulky objects with a careful, swift efficiency. They slung these on their backs, and disappeared silently through the swamp. It seemed to Bolt like some fantastic dream.

"Did you see what I saw?" he breathed, at last, incredulously.

"Yeah," Sneed answered tersely. "Japs. I've heard 'em talk before."

"They're headin' for our field. They've spotted it beforehand."

"Looks like it," Sneed admitted tensely.

"Now, what would I do if I was a Jap?" Bolt pondered, as if talking to himself. Then, "I know damn well what I'd do. I'd send in a couple of suicide guys like that. I'd give one of 'em some dynamite to sneak in and blow up the strip so we couldn't get our planes off, then I'd give the other some sort of a smoke bomb to send up just when the bombers came, to show 'em the exact location of the field."

"I think you guessed it," said Sneed quietly. "Now what?"

"Hell! I'm followin' those little monkeys to the field!"

"You're nuts! Across that stream with that—"

"Shut up!" snarled Bolt. "Shut up, damn you! Don't talk about it! I gotta go, that's all!"

He started to peel his clothes. Sneed shrugged, and started to peel his, too. "I've heard, somewhere," said Sneed, "that a guy has a better chance against those crocs if he does a lot of splashin'. That's the

way I swim, anyway, so the pair of us ought to stir things up all right."

Bolt didn't argue. He was too scared. He worked fast, because he didn't dare to think. They stripped to their shorts, and tied their shoes around their necks.

Horror came up like a solid lump, as the tepid water closed about Bolt's legs. Then he threw himself forward with a splash. Sneed lunged in beside him. They started swimming, churning the water to a white froth.

Bolt died a thousand deaths, as he plowed along, but he kept thrashing forward, just the same, adjusting his pace to the slower Sneed. He tried to keep his mind a blank, in that eternity of time.

They reached the other side, and pulled themselves out by the slimy mangrove roots. Both men shook so violently they could hardly don their shoes. They took a short time to regain their breath, then set a floundering, stumbling course in the direction taken by the Japs.

Brush tore viciously at their half-naked bodies, but Bolt, for one, was scarcely aware of the punishment he was taking. The excitement of the moment was pushing other thoughts aside. A strange elation was pumping through his veins, because he felt as if he'd conquered something of tremendous import.

He whispered, "We're damn fools. Those Japs could ambush us like shooting ducks. They won't do their stuff until dawn anyway. We can take it easy, and still get there first."

Sneed nodded assent, and they slowed their pace. It was hard to do, hard to move with deliberate caution with such tremendous things at stake.

They finally were stopped by a guard. It was a welcome challenge. They identified themselves, then made their way through the darkened camp. They were stopped twice more by alert guards, but at last they reached Bolt's tent.

Mead was asleep, but he awakened at Bolt's touch. Mead jerked, "What the hell!" when he found out who Bolt was, then his brain clicked fast as Bolt told his story briefly.

"Nice goin', guys," he said. "Now pile into bed, and leave everything to me."

Bolt didn't expect to sleep, but he dropped off like a rock.

THE next thing he knew he was sitting rigidly in bed, with the chatter of machine guns still ringing in his ears. He bounced to the floor, and tore outside to join in the excitement.

He was too late. The show was over. The news spread swiftly that both Japs had been mowed down. Their equipment, as Bolt had guessed, was dynamite and aerial smoke bombs. Part of the Jap's job was successfully completed. They had managed to commit suicide.

There was no sleeping, after that. Dawn was on its way, as Mead gathered the tense fliers in the officers' mess. He told them what had happened, and what was about to happen, giving Bolt and Sneed full credit for what they'd done.

Sneed said quietly, "It was Marty's show. It was his idea to swim that stream. I doubt it I'd have had the guts to do it by myself."

Bolt felt the eyes turn toward him. He could feel their impact, and could almost read the thoughts behind them. These guys were also giving him full credit for what he'd done, but the catch was, that he'd done it on the ground. If he'd done it in the air—well, that would have been another thing.

Bolt kept his face stiff, because he knew his chance was not far off. He held his dead pan, because he was wondering, just as the others were, if his most effective place was actually upon the ground.

Mead was speaking. "They'll be over soon with every crate that they can spare. They figure they'll be guided to the spot, that we can't get in the air, and that they can wipe us out. I've reported to Operations, and the order is for all of us to be up there waiting for them. Well, let's go."

The four flights of the Eighty-fifth swarmed into the air like peevish hornets. Bolt, still wondering, sat easily at the controls of a strange plane. He couldn't tell exactly how he felt.

Even when the Japs came winging confidently past the shore line, he felt no serious change within him. A sharpening of his interest, sure, but not that taut excitement he had known before. Something, he knew, had to be decided first, something more important to him at the moment than the bagging of a Zero.

There was a mess of Japs. The sky was full of them. Bolt checked off thirty

Zeros, then quit counting. Checking was easy, this time, because the Japs were all below. The P-40s had the altitude, lots of it. They were in the upper berth.

The surprise of their first dive was complete and devastating. Bolt peeled off with the rest. His doubts came back as he started his thundering dive. He wasn't scared. Not yet, at any rate—just worried.

He picked his Nip. The Jap saw what was coming, and started his Zero on its nervous dance. Bolt corrected gently with his rudder bar, keeping the Jap in line.

No soap. The Zero swerved, circling on its ear, with the advantage of being on Bolt's tail. It was a matter, now, of flying skill.

But Bolt had another job to do.

He had put it off as long as possible. Now, with the cold sweat oozing from his face, he deliberately turned his eyes down toward the jungle far below him. He stared at it, stared hard, concentrating all his faculties. He waited for its ugly spell to come upon him, waited patiently.

Then suddenly he saw it wasn't ugly. It was just a lot of green. Even its mystery faded now, because he'd been right down there in it. He'd met it face to face, and had handed it a pasting.

He felt his lips relax. He felt a surge of something violent in his veins. The controls of his ship seemed suddenly filled with life and power. They acted now, almost of their own accord. His turn tightened like a vice, became a thing of beauty.

"Gimme a Zero!" he muttered to himself.

**T**HE Jap saw the threat too late. He tried desperately to tighten his own turn. He tried too hard. He began to slip—lose flying speed. Then Bolt was on him like a striking hawk.

He yanked the P-40 across the arc. He sent a tearing six-gun blast into the Zero cockpit. He saw the Jap's mouth open in a stream, then saw his face blot out in a smear of red.

Bolt snarled, "You asked for it, you rat!" Then, "Gimme another Zero!"

He didn't have to wait. The words jumped from his mike:

"On your tail, Marty! Watch it!"

He caught a quick glimpse of the diving

Jap. He saw the muzzle flashes of the guns. Tracers blazed beside his head. The cannon belched, but the P-40 was no longer there.

Bolt looped 'er. He pulled 'er over with a crazy violence which should have blacked him out—but didn't. His insides stood the strain. His brain stayed clear. The Zero was below him, now, so Bolt left his throttle wide and dived.

This time he made the dive pan out. Something had happened to him—something great and irresistible. His eyes were bright sharp points, his coordination sweet and true.

The Jap below tried every trick he knew, but he didn't know enough. Bolt's instinct was working for him now, and when his thumb closed on the trigger button there was one less Jap to contaminate the world. The slugs drove mercilessly true into the Zero cockpit.

"Gimme another Zero!" Then, "Oh, what the hell, I'll take a change of diet."

He saw a bomber just below him, a bomber already heading back toward home. So he held his dive a little longer, came out of it just right and raked the bomber's belly with a load of steel. He swerved clear, to come back wolf-like for another slash. It wasn't necessary, though. Smoke was already pouring from the bomber, and the Nips were taking to their chutes.

Bolt was feeling his oats now. "Gimme another Zero!"

He clawed for altitude, then cursed with whole-hearted disappointment. The fight was over, almost as fast as it had started. The Japs had already had enough. The blow of finding the Eighty-fifth warned and waiting for them was probably as severe as the savage unexpectedness of the attack. Anyway, they were high-tailing it for home—the ones that got away.

The P-40s went home then. Bolt was disappointed, still, but his disappointment didn't last long—not after Mead said through the mike:

"How many, Marty?"

"Two Zeros and a bomber," Bolt said, trying to sound casual.

"Not bad for a beginner. It looks like we can use you."

And that was all Bolt cared to know.

# HELL'S ACES

By H. P. S. GREENE

Illustrated by GRAHAM INCELS



"It will be put to good use?" inquired the bearded leader.

They gave Sam Sneed the chance of a lifetime—to die like a rat in the sewers of Paris. But what if he could rally the Hidden Ones, the horribly exiled Broken Faces burning to blast the shadows that lay over Paris?

*A Spy Novelet of the Underground Front*

SAM had the railroad train in his sights. The P38 Lightning bucked as the cannon and the heavy machine-guns in its nose burst into an angry roar. Then, all too quickly, the train was gone.

Sam knew, as he pulled up into a right-hand *chandelle*, that he hadn't had enough altitude when he began his dive, and that meeting the train head-on had somewhat reduced the time he had to fire on it.

He swept up the ramp of the sky to fifteen hundred feet, and around in a tight 180-degree turn. Already the train, with its feather of smoke, was several miles away. Again Sam went after it.

As he came nearer, he could see dwarfish figures leaving the cars on either side, and tumbling head over heels down the steep embankment on each side of the track. Nazi soldiers—it was a troop train, all right.

Again he nosed down, pulling up slightly to rake the train's full length. Then he concentrated a last long burst on the locomotive. That was the important thing to get—Intelligence said that *der Fuehrer* was

especially short of engines. With a burst of white steam, the boiler exploded, and Sam pulled up and away just in time to clear treetops along the tracks.

At five hundred feet, he looked around. He was alone in the sky. His earphones were dead. In his excitement at strafing the train, he hadn't missed the steady stream of sound from them until now. His squadron, and the whole formation of more than a hundred fighters who had been making a daylight sweep across France, had gone away and left him. He didn't know where he was, except that the territory was very hostile toward people like him—fliers of the U. S. Army Air Forces. At least, the Germans were.

Ahead was a town and a river. Perhaps he'd be able to recognize them from his map.

He didn't, but there were people there who recognized *him*. From the ground toward him swept a storm of "flak"—tracer and machine-gun bullets, shells of small caliber from rapid-fire guns, and some strings of the red-hot, blazing balls known





*"The King?" Sam cried. "No one else in the world," she whispered, "has the secret maps."*

as flaming onions. He resisted an inclination to climb, and nosed down until he was right on the carpet. So low that ground gunners had no time to aim at him as he roared by almost brushing their heads.

Not so, however, with the German air fighters. Tracers were coming at him from above and behind, too. Swiveling his neck around, he saw three square-winged little ships tearing down toward his rear, shooting as they came.

Kicking right rudder, he opened throttles

wide. There was no time for any fancy work, and the twin-fuselaged P38 Lightning was not built for it, anyway. Take what the Limeys call "evasive action"—that was all he could do. In plain words,—*"Run Like Hell!"*

As the initial advantage of speed gained in their diving attack from higher altitude died away from the three Nazi pilots, it was a nip and tuck race. The Germans rode their ships like men riding a steeplechase, so eager were they to kill the lone

Yank pilot before their guns. It wasn't often they caught a "loner" over France. A sitting duck, cold meat for their blazing guns.

Sam was riding her too—riding for his life, and cursing his own stupidity in getting caught all by himself. His very first trip over France, too. In fact, his first operational flight since he'd returned from his lone-hand commando raid into Normandy.

He flew with his head over his shoulder, first on one side, and then on the other, kicking out of the way of his pursuers' fire. The English Channel was nowhere in sight.

The three Nazis abandoned their rivalry as to who could shoot him down first. They ganged up, practiced teamwork. Sam could not avoid them all. Ripping tears appeared in his right wing. One of his motors, the lefthand one, was hit, and it was slowing down.

Zooming up over a little hill, the American dived slightly into the valley beyond it, and heaved back on his stick. He rose into a loop. On his back at the top of the circle, he rolled into an Immelmann, and around again in a split-S turn until he was heading west again. He caught one stumpy Messerschmitt flatfooted in his sights, and riddled it with a burst from the guns in the nose of his *nacelle*. But the other two had followed him and were right on his tail. His stomach felt as empty as a drum, and the roaring in his ears mounted to thunder. He saw the streaks of the tracers licking toward him, converging from each side, and knew that he was done.

Then, miraculously, the Messerschmitts were gone, and he found himself surrounded by Spitfires wearing the *cocardes* of the RAF, herding him back across the Channel to safety.

"NOT so hot, were you, Lieutenant Sneed," remarked his old adversary, Captain Harvey of the Intelligence. Sam wanted to fly and fight; the Intelligence officer wanted him to undertake spying jobs on the ground. The captain went on,—

"Getting lost like a four-year-old kid, and having to have the RAF lead you back out of the forest with all the big, bad Focke-Wulfs after you. Nice black eye you gave the Army Air Forces."

"They weren't Focke-Wulf, — they were Messerschmitt 109Gs," Sam returned angrily. "And I shot down one of them. To say nothing of shooting up a train, and blowing up a locomotive. Was it my fault if a stray bullet from some sniper on the ground put my radio out of commission so that I lost contact?"

"You did all right, Sam," the captain said soothingly, as he emptied his tankard of ale, and motioned to the barmaid for another. "Yes, you did all right, but nothing more than a thousand American pilots, and a thousand Britishers, and a thousand Poles, and Norwegians, and Frenchmen, and other guys couldn't do as well, and hundreds better. But in your own line you're unique, you know. Best freak actor—I mean character actor—out of Hollywood. And we've got another job for you to do."

"Another job playing a stinking village idiot, I suppose," Sam snorted angrily. "Last time I got so filthy I couldn't get clean enough to stand living with myself for a week."

"An artist like you shouldn't mind a little thing like that in maintaining perfection in his art," returned the captain from G2. "Besides, this time, it isn't an idiot at all—at least to start with. You'll be an old woman, selling flowers in Paris, on the Place Pigalle, on Montmartre. Think of it. Paris! Montmartre! Just think how many birds would give their souls to be there!"

"Not nowadays, you fool," snarled Sam. "You must think that playing an idiot's part in Normandy really did make an idiot out of me."

"Not at all, my boy, I was just trying to be funny," Captain Harvey replied. "But now I'm serious. Have you ever read Victor Hugo? About the beggars of Paris? I want you to be one of them, and meet their king. It's the greatest chance for espionage and sabotage of a lifetime, if we can only make a satisfactory contact."

"Victor Hugo and his beggars are old stuff," Sam objected. "They went out of date a hundred years ago."

"Not such old stuff as you might think," returned Harvey, "and just before and after the German occupation of Paris, the organization became stronger and closer knit than ever. They hate the Germans,

these beggars, and they're eager to cooperate, if they could get the stuff to work with. All we have to do is to make contact with their king."

"It shouldn't be hard," Sam mused, "with all the Frenchmen who hate the Germans' guts, and all the British agents."

"But it is hard, and that's why we're calling on you again," the captain said. "The king has a big price on his head, and never leaves the sewers."

"Sewers!" squawked Sam. "You want me to go prowling around and living in sewers! I knew there'd be a stink connected with this job somewhere."

"It's the sewers that are the most important part of the whole business," replied the Intelligence captain. "Of course you know that the sewers of Paris are famous. They undermine all the older parts of the city, and they are big—big enough to walk through, and even to sail a small boat through. Many of them have been disused for so many years that there's no stink at all left, and these beggars live there. There is no known comprehensive map of the old, unused sewers, except the one that's been handed down for generation after generation among the beggars."

"Now you see the idea. The king of the beggars and his closest associates are the only persons in the world who know exactly where these abandoned sewers run, and just what part of the city, and what buildings, even, are over them. You see the possibilities."

"We furnish the king with plenty of TNT, and, if necessary, show him how to plant it. His gang lays mines under every important building occupied by the Nazis—the High Command, the Gestapo, and so on. Then we explode them all at the same time, or almost the same time, depending on how any of our birds will be in their nests at certain hours of the day."

"Imagine the panic among the Nazis! Hundreds of their higherups washed out in a single day! Explosions all over the city, each where it will do the most harm! If the word hadn't been overworked, I'd say it was colossal!"

"It sounds good, all right," Sam admitted, "but why pick on me? There must be hundreds of French and British agents who know Paris like a book"—

"And thousands in Paris who know *them*, too," Captain Harvey interrupted. "That's where your ability to assume different disguises—even personalities, comes in. Three men who have been sent to contact the King of the Beggars have disappeared—I won't conceal that from you. The job is tough. But you can speak French and German, and you're the man for that job, and that's what I've told the general. He's going to send for you in a few minutes, and you can't refuse him."

**T**HAT night two hundred and fifty big bombers of the RAF streaked across the Channel, and across France toward Germany. Searchlights and anti-aircraft guns and night fighters sought them out, and tried to shoot them down.

Five thousand feet above them, three Flying Fortresses of the USAAF went unnoticed, and, the Nazi defenses of the Channel once passed, they edged away to the southward, and Paris, and beyond. The Fortresses did not carry bombs; their bays were filled with square packages.

Their crews were tense. This was no ordinary bombing raid. The loads they were carrying were much more dangerous than usual, and they had an extra hazardous task. Pilot, co-pilot and navigator in the leading ship held frequent conferences studying maps, and the terrain below. They were following the broad, silver ribbon of the River Seine, clearly penciled in the moonlight.

At last the pilot pointed casually, and said, "There it is."

He flashed a brief signal with his lights to the following ships, cut his four motors, and started down in a long, spiraling glide. In the bombardier's office in the nose, Sam Sneed, late of Hollywood, watched more eagerly than any of the rest, if possible.

The slightest mistake would be fatal to their plans. At the least sign of enemy activity below—the flash of a searchlight, the streak of flak—they'd have to start their motors, and fly away. Everything depended on the absolute secrecy of their landing.

The pilot's job was one of the most difficult known to flying. Landing a heavy bomber at night in strange territory without lights. There was nothing to go by but the bright rivers and the white roads. All



the members of the crew found themselves holding their breath, and then gasping for air as the great planes came lower and lower, the wind whistling across their wide wings, and around their bulging fuselages. The pilot was muttering to himself, clutching the wheel with both hands.

Lower and lower they came. The leading pilot swept around in a horseshoe turn, slipped across a road and a row of trees, and rolled across a broad flat field. Miraculously the two other bombers followed, all three landing without mishap. The silence was unbroken for several moments after they braked to a halt.

"Wonder if they're here," whispered the leading pilot.

"You mean, you wonder *who* is here," corrected Sam, climbing up between the pilots, and into the compartment behind them. "It may all be a double-cross. I hope the gunners are all on the alert for a German rush. Oh-oh, here they come now!"

From the shelter of the trees around the field, dozens, scores of figures came running. The gunners in the three Fortresses fingered the triggers of their cocked pieces anxiously. Then they sighed with relief. The motley crew of men, women and boys who were coming toward them could not possibly be German soldiers.

Sam opened the door of the bomber, lowered the steps to the ground, and climbed down. The figures around him were silent except for whispering among themselves—they were anxiously waiting to be told what to do. A big, bearded man who seemed to be the leader crowded to the front. Sam told him,

"The explosive is here in the ships—enough to kill half the Nazis in Paris. We will unload it, and then it's up to you. The *avions* will then return to England. The rest is your affair, to hide the explosive, so widely and so well that it will be difficult to find, and then deliver it in Paris to the appointed places."

"It will be put to good use?" inquired the bearded leader. "It will be used to kill many of these foul Boches who are sitting on our necks, stealing the food we raise while we and our children starve?"

"You may depend on that," Sam promised. "It will be used to blow up many Boches and the biggest of all those in France, if nothing goes wrong."

Carts and wagons were being driven or dragged up to the waiting planes. Carts drawn by horses, smaller ones pushed by men and boys, and one which was pulled by a woman and a dog. The bombers' crews unloaded the cases of high explosive from their ships, and the French peasants took them and placed them on their carts. When the job was done, the French all faded away in different directions with their vehicles except their leader.

"You go now?" asked the bearded one.

"After your people have had plenty of time to get home or wherever they are going," Sam told him, "the planes will take off and return to England. They will leave about an hour before dawn, unless they are attacked in the meantime—in which case they will, of course, have to leave immediately. Only I will remain here in France. I must get to Paris to complete the arrangements about delivering the explosive there, and I'm depending on you to help me get there."

"*Entendu*," the Frenchman said. "Understood. Come along with me."

THE following morning, Sam approached the *octroi* at the edge of Paris. He was sitting on the seat of a two-wheeled cart which was loaded with potatoes. No one, least of all himself, could have denied that he was nervous. His whiskered companion appeared to be as calm as though war had never touched France, and as if the guards at the gate were merely French tax collectors about to levy a duty on the vegetables, instead of German soldiers and Gestapo agents ready and even eager to commit any atrocity.

The Yank's lean, keen face appeared puffy and blotched as a result of pads in his cheeks, and a little brushing with sandpaper. His long, sensitive hands had broken, dirty fingernails, and were covered with what one would have thought to be the grime of weeks. His appearance was not unlike that of the dead Frenchman whose papers he carried—a man who had been mortally wounded while trying to escape to England, but never identified by the Germans.

But at best his disguise was superficial. He knew that it would stand up under intensive investigation. Everything depended



on avoiding suspicion. He threw himself into acting his part—that of a stolid and rather sulky peasant, who felt no fear, but only boredom at being examined.

But no suspicion appeared to be aroused among the Germans. The soldiers were indifferent. The Gestapo men, while examining the papers of the two conspirators, eyed them keenly, and muttered among themselves, but that seemed to be rather the habit of suspicion, more than anything else. The cartload of potatoes passed on.

Once out of sight of the gate, Sam wrung his companion's hand, muttered a word of farewell, and left the cart, with a bundle in his hand which held his few articles of make-up and his next disguise. He knew where to go—a hotel so small and uncomfortable that it escaped the attention of the invaders. There he paid for a room, flopped onto a dingy bed that he found there, and almost immediately fell asleep. He had been awake and active for more than thirty hours, including two flights over Germany.

It was long after dark when he awoke, dressed himself, and then left the hotel and faded into the blackout.

## II

COLONEL SIEGENTHALER, Deputy Chief of the Gestapo in Paris, sat in his luxurious office in what had once been one of the finest and most famous hotels of the French capital. In that same room, members of President Wilson's staff had once discussed the peace terms that they would inflict upon Germany. They had all agreed that the French were much too severe in their demands for measures which would cripple the defeated enemy.

This was a never-ending source of satisfaction to the colonel, as he looked at the Third Empire decor of the long, high-studded room where he dealt out misery, imprisonment, torture and death to the unfortunate French people who fell into his hands. Occasionally he would rub his hands and mutter,

"Twenty-five years! It is only twenty-five years since *they* were the victors. Now it is *we Germans* who impose the terms."

One of the colonel's orderlies appeared at the door at the opposite end of the room from the officer's desk, and saluted.

"*Excellenz*," he said, "It is that *Apache* gangster from Montmartre, the renegade French ace of the last war, the one called Lazzarre, come back again.

"Bring him in at once," Siegenthaler ordered. "Stand close behind him in case he attempts violence. Search him, of course, before you allow him to enter."

"*Zu befehl, Excellenz!*"

The Frenchman who was ushered in a moment later was a truly pitiable wreck of a man. His olive cheeks were hollow, so was his chest, and he coughed with a hoarse, wracking sound before he tried to speak. His velvet coat, his flaring corduroy trousers, and his beret were torn, and stained with grease and mud. Hair and beard formed a scraggly halo around his bulbous nose and glaring eyes.

"I have news for you again," he said, with a childish attempt at a swagger. "How much is the reward?"

"One hundred francs," the Colonel of the Gestapo said shortly, a look of contempt on his thin, arrogant face.

"A hundred francs!" the Frenchman shrieked. "You ask that I betray my country for a measly hundred francs? Me, Lazzarre, an ace with seventeen victories! Whom they relieved from duty and confined in an asylum for lunatics just because after a few sniffs of coco I pinned my medals to the seat of my breeches, and turned them up to the general who was going to add another palm to my *croix de guerre!* It is an insult to me—and to France!"

"It strikes me that neither you nor France is in a position to be resentful about insults just at present," returned Colonel Siegenthaler, with a frightful grin. "Perhaps a few hours in a cell with a couple of my men would persuade you to tell what you know for nothing."

"Perhaps," Lazzarre agreed, with a sneer as bitter as the Nazi's own. "But that would be too late. This knowledge would be worthless to you in an hour. The contact with the American spy would have been made, and he would be far away, out of your clutches. Besides, I have been valuable to you in the past, and may well be again. A beating, even one blow, might kill me. The croakers say I have only a month or two to live. Five thousand francs."

"Two thousand," replied the colonel,

firmly. "After all, it costs the German Reich nothing. It is only a matter of printing more. What is your information?"

Lazarre weakened as he saw the Nazi counting out hundred-franc notes from a bundle that he took from a drawer in his desk. Licking his thin, blue lips, he said,

"At ten o'clock this very evening a beggar, an old woman, will be near the head of the *Rue Pigalle*, near the *Place Pigalle*. She is an American agent in disguise. After a sufficient watch is kept to see that this supposed old woman is alone, and not being followed or observed, contact will be made. The rest is up to you."

"Good," growled the colonel. "Here is your pay. If your information is correct, all will be well. If it should turn out to be false, we shall know where to find you." He barked orders as the renegade Frenchman eased quietly and quickly away.

**S**AM SNEED had been crouching on the damp sidewalk at the head of the *Rue Pigalle* for almost an hour, clutching a bunch of faded violets in his hand. Wisps of matted gray hair straggled around his face, and a wrinkled, greasy old black dress billowed about his feet and legs.

The blackout in Paris was not complete, as it is in London, and other cities which expect to be bombed. In the bluish gleam of dimmed lights, one could see German soldiers, and the women deprived enough to seek or accept their company. Sam sighed with revulsion, as all lovers of bright, pre-war Paris must have done at the state to which the gay capital was reduced.

A drunken Nazi reeled down the street and bumped into the American. With a coarse curse, he snatched the flowers from the supposed old woman's hand, and threw them into the gutter. Then he cuffed her, and kicked her in the ribs, and started to stagger away. Momentarily Sam lost his iron self-control. He leaped to his feet, and put all his strength into a well-directed kick into the middle of the seat of the German's pants. It literally lifted the man off his heels, leaving him balanced on his toes. Then he lost his balance, and pitched face forward to the pavement. That same kick had once sent footballs spiraling down the field for more than fifty yards with a regularity which discouraged opposing players on many a Saturday afternoon.

A shout came from down the dark, narrow street, and another echoed it from the square. Dark figures were converging upon the American agent. He was just in time. Another minute, and Colonel Siegenthaler's SS men would have been upon him.

Hiking up his skirts, Sam ran swiftly down a narrow lane into pitch blackness, where he paused long enough to tear off the dress, hat and wig. Underneath, he wore the clothes of a workman who might be supposed to be spending an evening in Montmartre. But where should he go? Already he could hear the voices and see the figures of the Gestapo men who were starting into the narrow passageway after him. A cool, slim hand found his, and a woman's voice whispered,

"*Viens! Vite.* Come. Quickly. This way."

Sam followed where the hand led. There was nothing else to do.

Soon his guide was leading him down a flight of slimy stone steps. She knocked on a door, whispered something, and guided him into pitch blackness when the portal opened. He could hear hoarse breathing all around him, but could see nothing. Then down more steps, and along a cold, damp passage. At last she flicked on a flashlight.

"You are safe now," she said. "The Boches will never find you here."

The light's rays dimly outlined her fine face and figure, and Sam cried,

"Therese!"

**S**HE turned the light squarely on him, and looked him over sharply.

"You know my name! How do you know it? I've never seen you before."

"Why, you helped me to escape once before—in Normandy," he laughed. "Don't you remember the stinking idiot of the village of Falaise?"

"The man from Hollywood!" she gasped. "It is really you again? I never thought I'd ever see you. They suspected me of helping you, and I had to go underground. I was lucky to escape them—to be able still to help France."

"But we in underground Paris are being betrayed. I feel it, I know it. You are the fourth agent who has come from England, and the first to get through to us here. All the others have been captured

before we could make a satisfactory contact. If you had been a moment later, the Gestapo would have had *you*. I think myself that the King is too cautious in making sure that the agents are not accompanied or followed before he brings them underground."

"The King of the Beggars?"

"Who else? The King, whoever he might be, has ruled the sewers and catacombs under Paris for hundreds of years. No one else in the world has the secret maps, or knows where all the passages go. But come on—I must take you to him. Afterward, we can talk, eh?"

Her hand, warm now, sought his, and she led him along winding passages for what seemed interminable miles. Twice they had to cross active sewers, whose stench gagged them, but for the most part the way was comparatively dry and clean. Once Sam started at the sight of dozens of skeletons on shelves along the walls.

"Catacombs!" Therese whispered. "Countless thousands are buried here. No one knows who most of them were."

They passed several doors guarded by armed sentries before they came at last into an enormous underground room, large and high as a cathedral.

"We are under the Opera now," the girl told Sam in low tones. "A long way from Montmartre, eh?"

At one end of the great cavern was a throne of rough stone, and on it sat a man—or what was left of one. The King of the Beggars had been so long underground that he seemed transparent, like one of those strange blind fish found in the rivers and lakes in enormous caves. His skin, his hair, his beard—even his clothes were white. Around him were gathered his chief advisers—a legless man sitting on a dolly, another with one arm and one leg, and a cadaverous fellow who coughed constantly. To this one the King said,

"Well, Lazarre, he got through to us all right. You seemed to be doubtful about it."

The renegade flyer seemed to be put out.

"The Gestapo are like flies tonight," he muttered. "They're stopping and searching everyone. It almost seems as if they *knew*." He cast a hypocritical glance full of low cunning at his companions.

"Well, *monsieur l'Americain*," said the King, "you have brought the explosive with you?"

"I have enough planted within thirty miles of Paris to blow up every Nazi in the city," Sam answered, "if it is used to best advantage. Have you anyone who knows how to handle it?"

The legless man said, turning his dark, bitter face toward them,

"I was a colonel of sappers in two wars and three expeditions."

Then for more than an hour they discussed plans for getting the explosive into the city and the sewers, and for blowing up German headquarters from underground.

At last, when things appeared to be settled for the time being, Therese said,

"Now I will lead *Monsieur le lieutenant Americain* wherever he must go."

"I have an errand that only you can do, Therese," the King of the Beggars objected.

"I will take the *Americien* wherever he must go," Lazarre offered.

Sam eyed his volunteer guide with suspicion and distrust. There was something wrong with the ace of the last war—something diseased morally and mentally as well as physically. But much as he would have preferred the company of Therese, there seemed to be nothing the American could do about it at the time. Bidding the girl "*Au revoir*," he followed the repulsive Apache down the endless, damp, twisting corridors.

At last the pair came out through a door into a cellar. Beyond another door the hum of many voices could be heard, mingled with an occasional shout, a crash, the tinkle of glass.

"This is not the way I came into the sewers," the American objected.

"There are dozens of ways in and out—hundreds," the Frenchman grinned. "Will you buy me drinks?"

"Sure," Sam assented, "as long as the place is safe."

"The safest in the world," Lazarre assured him, "as long as you behave properly. Come along, but do not show disgust, or even surprise, if you want to get out of here alive."

He pushed open a heavy door, and

stepped out into a crowded cellar. The stone ceiling was arched so that a tall man could stand upright only in the middle of the big room, which was lighted by a few oil lamps and candles. The acrid smoke of vile Algerian cigarettes hung heavy in the air. But the startling thing about the place was its company. It was fortunate that the Apache had warned Sam, or he might have betrayed his feelings. Master of frightful make-up that the American was, he had never imagined such an awesome and repulsive assembly, even in a nightmare.

Directly before him at a table sat a man with no nose, no eyes and no mouth—except a round, puckered hole in what had once been his face. Across from him was another with the perfect features of a Greek god, who seemed even more horrible, for those perfect features were as rigid as those of the statue they resembled. The fellow seemed to be in the grip of some powerful emotion. Harsh words and grunts issued from his expressionless face, awful in its immobility, while he gesticulated violently with both hands. Sam's gaze swept on.

He saw armless men, legless men, but, above all, faceless men. He repressed a shudder with difficulty, as Lazarre led the way to an empty table. A one-eyed waiter, one side of whose face appeared to have been added as an afterthought, came up to them.

"Absinthe," muttered the Apache. "*Le veritable Pernod*. And you?" he asked Sam.

"Brandy will do for me," the American replied. "A double cognac. I need it," he continued, after the waiter had gone. "What kind of a place is this?"

Lazarre grinned evilly.

"I thought it would get you," he answered. "This is the resort of *Les Guenules Cassees*—the 'Broken Faces' of the last war. They herd together, because here no one notices them and shrinks away. Some of them have had years of plastic surgery and in some cases it has made them uglier to look at than ever. But, do you know, almost every one of them tried to volunteer for this war?"

The drinks came, Lazarre's in a tall glass which must have held more than a pint. He drank half of it at a gulp, lit a cigarette, and went on talking. Under the jolt of the

liquor his pale cheeks and even his hollow chest seemed to fill out.

"Like me," he went on. "But they laughed at me. Me, Lazarre, an ace with seventeen victories. They said I could never wear the uniform of France again."

"You are Lazarre?" Sam asked, impressed in spite of himself. "I've read about you. But didn't—I mean, wasn't there some trouble? You disappeared early in 1916. I never knew what had become of you."

"They said I was crazy—put me in an asylum," the Apache cried wildly, signaling for another drink. "They were always suspicious of me because—well, I had a little record with the police before the war. Nothing serious, you understand, nothing was ever proved. But just because I wore my medals on the seat of my breeches, and showed them to people, and even to a general who was going to pin another one onto me, they put me into an asylum. Me, Lazarre."

In spite of himself, a cold feeling of disgust, like the chill dampness of the sewers and the cellar, was creeping into Sam's being—into his very bones. The place, the people in it, and above all, Lazarre, bore an atmosphere of decay and disease—even of death.

"Shall we go?" he asked. "Have you had enough?" He called the waiter, and produced a little wad of torn, greasy bills.

"Is that all you have?" Lazarre asked. "They do not pay you well, your Americans. *Eh bien*, so much the worse for you." He led the way out into the street, where a fog was already sweeping in, and curling around the old stone buildings, and the dim, blued lights. The pair walked along the deserted sidewalk in uneasy silence.

"This way," Lazarre said, at last.

"No," Sam objected. "I go this way—toward *la rive gauche*, the left bank of the river."

A sharp, excruciating pain hit him between his third and fourth ribs on the left side. Instinctively he tried to move away from it, but the thin, ropelike arm of Lazarre swept around him, and held him against the agony with surprising strength.

"Half an inch more, and the point will pierce your kidney," the gangster hissed. "You will go this way. I would rather bring you alive, but it is not necessary."



## III

SAM went. His thoughts whirled wildly, then steadied.

"Where are we going?" he asked, at last. There was no reply—only a slightly deeper pain in his back.

"How much are you getting for this?" he asked suddenly, after a pause. The answer came automatically.

"Two thousand francs!"

"Two thousand francs?" Sam gasped. "You are doing this for two thousand measly francs? Why, you fool, I have five thousand francs in a money belt under my shirt. And where I am going I could give you ten thousand more. Why, if you play ball with me, I could get you enough so that you could spend the rest of your life in Rio or Buenos Aires. And you'd turn me over to the Germans for a lousy two thousand francs. Maybe they weren't so far wrong when they locked you up in that asylum!"

Sam felt the pressure of the knife between his ribs relax, and a warm trickle down his side. Lazarre gasped,

"I had to have money to buy absinthe. It's all that's kept me alive all these years, since that other war—since they let me out of the asylum to beg or starve.

"Before the Germans came I could get money from tourists, for showing them my medals. And my own country would have nothing to do with me, they would not allow me to serve. You say you have five thousand francs with you? And ten thousand more to come?"

Sam smothered his disgust. Who was he to judge anyone, let alone an ace with seventeen victories? It was plain that the man was more than a little insane. The American reached inside his shirt, unbuckled the money belt there, and handed it to the Apache gangster.

"Put away your knife," he said, shortly. "You'll find five thousand francs in that belt. Come with me, and I'll give you ten thousand more, just as I promised. I'll trust you, who were once an officer of France, not to betray me now that you've taken my money—now that you've 'eaten my bread and salt.'"

"Never—never will I betray you, *monsieur!*" Lazarre sobbed, tears running down his thin cheeks. "You shall see!"

The pair turned right toward the river and the bridge. Fog was swirling thicker now—they could hardly see ten feet in front of them. The figures of two SS men in black uniforms loomed suddenly before them.

Or rather, before Sam. A quick glance told him that the Frenchman was gone. The fellow must have had the instincts of an animal to smell danger and avoid it so quickly.

The bigger of the Nazis seized Sam by the front of his coat, and shook him violently.

"Where are you going, you French dog?" he roared. "Don't you know that it's curfew for swine like you? Where are your papers?"

Sam managed to mutter, between shakes,

"I'll show them to you . . . If you'll just give me a chance. I'm from the country. . . . I did not know. . . ."

The German loosed his hold, and Sam fumbled for and produced his identification papers. The Nazi examined them by the flare of his flashlight, and muttered,

"They seem to be in order. He just arrived in Paris today. Should we bother with him, Franz?" he asked of his companion.

"His Excellency may wish some hostages to shoot tomorrow," said Franz, with a boisterous laugh. "Why not take him along? It's only a hundred meters to the station. Better cuff some sense into him first."

Listening, Sam thought fast. He knew that he could never stand a close examination, even if they didn't shoot him out of hand as a "hostage." His soft hands and feet alone would prove that he was no French farmer. There were dozens of things to betray him if he were arrested and examined. There was nothing to do but fight—an unarmed man against two with pistols and daggers at their belts, as well as the inevitable blackjacks. It was hopeless, but it might be quick. And the Germans were off guard. Perhaps he stood just the faintest chance.

He clamped his foot down on that of the nearest German, and swung his fist with all his might into the soft spot just below the arch of the man's ribs. The Nazi expelled air like a bellows. Sam seized him

by the belt, and shoved him into the other German. Then he butted him in the chin with his head, and kneed him in the groin, while he reached for the pistol on the trooper's belt.

It seemed minutes instead of seconds before he could get the holster flap open. He wondered what the other Nazi was doing. The man, strangely enough, didn't seem to be doing anything. Neither did the one he was holding. When he stepped away, holding the German's pistol in his hand, both men slumped limply to the pavement with the horrible boneless limpness of the newly dead.

Behind them loomed the sinister figure of Lazarre, a long, thin poinard in his hand.

"Quick!" the Apache hissed. "Their bodies must not be found here on the street. Help me get them into this doorway. Ah, that is better. The smaller one is not much larger than you—we will take off his uniform. You had better put it on and drive me before you down the street. It is true what he said. It is now past curfew, and Frenchmen are not allowed on the streets of their own capital."

Much as it went against him, Sam did as the Frenchman suggested. It made good sense. They reached the little hotel where Sam had spent the day.

"I will see you here tomorrow after you have completed the arrangements for the delivery of the explosive," Lazarre said. "Too bad that these peasants will trust a foreigner sooner than they will their own countrymen, even if we are beggars and Apaches. I do not understand why."

Sam thought he *did* understand, but said nothing. Lazarre went on.

"You have my ten thousand francs? Good! *Merçi bien, monsieur!* And now would you like to see my medals?"

Turning around, he bent over and flipped up the tails of his long coat. Pinned to the seat of his pants, Sam saw a long row of the proudest decorations of France and several other nations besides.

"And now, *au revoir,*" said the gangster, as he straightened up and stalked out of the door.

ON the following evening, Sam stood anxiously at his window, waiting for Lazarre. He had done a hard day's work. Of more than fifty small loads of con-

cealed TNT, all but two had been smuggled safely into the city, and delivered to the beggars. Already the legless colonel of sappers and his crew were busily engaged in planting their great mines under the headquarters of the Gestapo in Paris.

But Sam was uneasy. Toward the end of the day, he had felt that he was being followed. Even though he could not see anyone, he had a hunch that watchers were around the hotel. But there was nothing that he could do until Lazarre came. The King of the Beggars was so secretive that he had no idea how to find his way into the sewers without a guide.

It was long past dark, but he could distinguish figures passing in the dimout. At last! There was no mistaking the thin figure and weak swagger of Lazarre. The Apache came down the street, and turned into the doorway below the window where the American was watching for him. But he did not enter. Two big, black figures, seeming to spring from nowhere, seized him on either side, and led him away. Others like them, six in all, hammered at the hotel door. Sam knew that the game was up. Or was it? He'd play it out, he thought. He, too, was wearing the black uniform of Hitler's prize spies and killers. As if a director had shouted, "Camera, action!" the American melted into his part.

Swiftly he ran downstairs, and into a room where the old woman who ran the hotel was sitting with her daughter, both of them trembling with fear. As the old porter opened the front door, and the SS men came boiling in, Sam appeared, driving the two women before him.

"So here you are at last!" the American shouted in German. "It took you long enough, I must say. I have the two women here."

The non-commissioned officer eyed him with surprise. He thought it strange that an extra man should be there, and one he did not know, at that. But his mind worked slowly. The American bulled his way past. "I am taking these two along," he said, and suited the action to the word, pushing them out of the door onto the sidewalk. Once there, he whispered to the two terrified women in French,

"If you have friends, perhaps you had better go to them." Then he melted away.

There was only one place in Paris where

he might be safe, and to which he knew the way—the Cafe of the Broken Faces. He made his way in that direction. But he also knew that to enter the place as a member of the SS guard would probably mean his death. He must find another outfit besides the uniform of the hated Nazis before he could approach any loyal Frenchman—or woman. As he turned the problem over in his mind, striding along with a purposeful step as if on urgent business for *der Fuehrer*, he wondered what had happened to Lazarre. Even the broken ace and gangster would have been a welcome help now.

Lazarre was indeed broken. The two SS men who had seized him hustled him along fast and roughly, paying no attention to his coughing. Soon the Frenchman knew where he was being taken—to the headquarters of the deputy chief, Colonel Siegenthaler. Cold fear crept up the Apache's spine. He had heard tales of what happened to people who fooled with the dread Gestapo chief. They were better dead. He was limp when they dragged him into the colonel's big office. The Nazi's eyes shone green, and his mustaches bristled like those of the great jungle cat that he sometimes resembled.

"So, you French pimp," he shouted, "you have failed to earn your money. You did not betray the contact of the American spy with the King of the Beggars."

Lazarre took a little heart. Here he was on safe ground.

"On the contrary, your Excellency," he protested, "I did point out the spy, waiting for his contact. I mean, I told you where he would be. It is not my fault if your men could not catch him."

The very truth of this further angered the colonel, who was himself secretly terrified at the knowledge that besides the small amount discovered, a great deal of explosive must have been successfully smuggled into Paris. Herr Himmler did not deal lightly with subordinates who failed. No one in Gerany, not even a deputy chief of the Gestapo, was safe from the concentration camp. Fear made Siegenthaler even more cruel than nature had done. He slapped Lazarre across the face.

"Search the dog!" he cried. The guards obeyed. From the shrinking Frenchman's pocket they produced more than sixteen thousand francs. The colonel examined the

money, then turned, his passion terrible to behold.

"So," he whispered, "you would play the double spy, eh? Tell me, where is the American spy?"

"Excellency, I do not know," the Apache cried.

"So!" yelled Siegenthaler. "I will make you know. Before I served *der Fuehrer* in a greater capacity, I studied to be a dentist. I flatter myself that I have not yet lost my skill. Hugo, the forceps, and hold this dog, while I extract a few of his teeth. French dogs should not be allowed to have teeth to bite their benefactors," he added, with a frightful grin that bared his own yellow fangs.

THE two guards forced the miserable Lazarre into a chair. One of them grasped him by the forehead and the top of the head, the other pressed his fingers into the base of his jaws so that the gangster's mouth flew open.

"So," Siegenthaler breathed, "Only thirteen teeth left. That is a pity. But, we shall see."

He seized the helpless Frenchman by the chin, and thrust the forceps into his mouth. With a practised combined wrench and pull that verified his claim to having been a dentist, he extracted a yellow fang from the Apache's jaw, then another, and another, until seven lay on the polished floor. With each wrench, the Frenchman's body arched up from his chair, and he moaned through his nose. Blood ran down his chin. At the seventh tooth, the Nazi paused, and motioned to his men, who released Lazarre.

"Now will you tell where the American is to be found, or shall I take the rest?" the colonel asked, wiping the bloody forceps across the Frenchman's greasy coat.

Lazarre thought he did know where Sam was—in the little hotel. But he gathered the remnants of his courage. He had promised the American when he took his money that he would never betray him. Blowing bloody bubbles from his bruised mouth, he gasped, "I do not know."

Again the German advanced, while his two henchmen seized the Apache by the head and throat again. Siegenthaler did not pause until he had pulled the miserable Frenchman's last tooth. Then the Nazi

torturer seized Lazzarre's left hand, gripped the thumbnail in his forceps, and tore it out of the flesh, leaving a bloody, spongy stump. When the two SS men released him again, Lazzarre screamed.

"Now will you tell where the American spy is to be found, or shall I take the other nine fingernails?" Siegenthaler snarled, thrusting his savage face close to Lazzarre's.

"No—no, no!" the Frenchman screamed.

"No, what?" the Nazi colonel asked. "No, you do not wish me to operate on your other fingers and toes, and you will tell me where the American spy is to be found?"

"No, no!" yelled Lazzarre. "I do not know where he is, or anything about him," Then he slid from the chair to the floor. A hemorrhage of blood from his lung burst from his lips, and he fainted.

"I believe the fellow is speaking the truth, *Excellenz*," one of the S.S. troopers ventured. Colonel Siegenthaler scowled.

"He would never have the courage to do otherwise," he muttered. "Take him away, revive him, and then follow him. Perhaps he may lead us to something. Report here at once when it is discovered where he goes."

When he came back to semi-consciousness, Lazzarre, still partly dazed, and even more crazed by pain, started away toward the cafe of *Les Gueules Cassees*. It was the place where instinct told him he would be able to get a drink, even without the money the colonel had taken from him.

SAM SNEED thought of Hollywood as he made his way across darkened, foggy Paris. It was so different.

A harsh voice brought him back to realities. Before him loomed a man in a black uniform similar to his own. The voice was that of authority, and Sam saw by the gold braid and collar tabs that he was up against a bigger Nazi than the one whose uniform he wore. An officer, a captain, perhaps.

He saluted stiffly in the German manner. The officer fired questions at him, faster than he could answer them, even if he had known the answers. He saw that he was going to be sunk. He couldn't talk his way out. The German sensed his hesitancy, and advanced upon him, thrusting his face into that of the American.

He saw something in Sam's eyes that warned him, and reached for his pistol, but the American was quicker. Snatching his Mauser from its holster, he pressed its muzzle into the German's stomach and fired twice. As the S.S. officer slumped to the pavement, Sam dragged his body into a dark alley.

The S.S. captain who emerged from the alley five minutes later was whistling softly, but not a German tune. It was a catchy air whose words concerned an apple tree.

A cloppety-clop of hoofs gave Sam an idea. A Paris cabman can go anywhere, and is taken for granted. He waved down the ancient open fiacre which came weaving down the street, its horse so old, thin and bony that he did not tempt even a half-starved population. The cabdriver was even older, and an equally pitiable sight. His nose was losing the red it had acquired over a period of forty years, and the skin of his cheeks fell in dewlaps, like a hound's.

"Old man, go into that alley," Sam told him. The dazed driver obeyed. "And now, come down off your perch," the American continued. "You have a rope in this old wagon?" Dumbly, the old coachman produced a long hitch-rope from beneath his seat. He was beyond being surprised at anything.

"You are not going to lose by this, old man," Sam told him. "Here is a thousand francs. But I am going to tie you up."

When Sam came to the doorway of the Cafe of the Broken Faces, nobody paid any attention to the old coachman, with his battered silk hat, and his muffler up to his eyes, as long as he had money to pay for his cognac. And nobody paid any attention to the bundle of clothes under his arm. If they had known that it was the uniform of a captain of the S.S. Guards, things would have been different.

When Lazzarre staggered in a moment later, all eyes turned toward him. The Apache's face and coat were black with dried blood, and he could only point to his mouth and mumble for a drink of his favorite *Pernod*. After a glassful he could talk more plainly.

"I wouldn't tell!" he shouted. "Although he pulled out all of my teeth, and my thumbnail, still I would not tell."

The Broken Faces crowded around the Apache.



"Tell whom? Tell him what?" they demanded.

"That Boche pig, Colonel Siegenthaler," Lazarre replied. "He demanded that I tell him where the American agent is hiding. But I wouldn't tell, although he pulled all my teeth out, he—personally. I wish that the American knew that I did not tell. Even though the dirty Boche stole all the money that the American gave me."

Sam decided that it was time he revealed himself. He had to depend on Lazarre to guide him, until he found someone better, preferably the girl, Therese. Taking the cabman's muffler away from his face, he went to the table where Lazarre was sitting.

"I am glad that you didn't tell, Lieutenant Lazarre," he said, giving the Frenchman his old rank, and extending his hand. "I knew that I could trust you. And don't worry about the money—there is more where that came from."

Before Sam could stop him, the Frenchman was kissing his hand with bloody, slobbering lips.

"Ah, *monsieur*, so you escaped after all," he mumbled. "I am so glad that you know I did not betray you. And now I will guide you to the King."

#### IV

THE spies who had followed Lazarre had reported by telephone to Colonel Siegenthaler. The Gestapo chief had shouted,

"So, the dog has gone to ground in the *Cafe des Gueules Cassees*? Good. I always suspected the place was a nest of traitors. Send a detachment to arrest everybody there, and bring them in."

As Lazarre and Sam started to leave the restaurant, a squad of S.S. Guards, headed by a beefy, red-faced sergeant, burst into the cafe.

"You are all under arrest!" he shouted, in guttural French. "Stay where you are, all of you."

And then he made his mistake.

For the first time, he noticed the peculiarities of the clientele of the *Cafe des Gueules Cassees*. Slapping his thigh with a big, thick hand, he started to laugh.

"What a crew!" he spluttered. "Might as well send me to arrest a hospital—or a

cemetery. They are all half-men—half-dead! Ho-ho-ho"—As he threw back his head to laugh better, a thrown knife struck him in the throat, and his guffaw ended in a gurgle.

The other S.S. men grabbed for the pistols they had neglected to draw, but they were too late to fire more than a shot or two. An old Chauchat automatic rifle, a relic of the last war, was mowing them down.

Only one plainclothes spy, who had remained outside the cafe so that he would not be seen and recognized, remained to run and give the alarm. But when a full company of Germans with machine-guns arrived fifteen minutes later, the cafe was deserted. And their searchings did not reveal where the broken men had gone. Avenues into the sewers of Paris were too well concealed for that.

IN his long office, Colonel Siegenthaler was as busy as the big executive that he was. The bell of one of the telephones on his desk rang, and he snatched up the instrument.

"What?" he bellowed. "What's that you say? Everyone of them got away? Lazarre, too? Sergeant Breur, and eight troopers killed? Bah! Well, get that Lazarre. Send out his description—you have it. And round up all of those Broken Faces that you find. I'll make an example of them." He slammed the telephone back on its hook, and turned to the trembling little woman waiting before his desk.

"And, as for you, Madame Dnfour, you still say that you do not know how your oldest son got away to join the traitor, General de Gaulle? That is too bad—for you and your other children. I shall take up all of your ration cards, and you can go hungry until you remember. I have heard that starvation is a great help to the memory. Take her away!" he ordered.

As the sobbing Frenchwoman was led away, the telephone rang again. Siegenthaler took it up eagerly, hoping for news that Lazarre had been captured. What he heard only enraged him further.

"What's that?" he asked. "What's that about *Kapitan Fahnestock*? You say he was found dead—murdered? Wait just a minute. Hold the line.

"And now, what is all this?" he asked,

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as three men came into the room, two apparently holding up another.

"It is this swine, Schwartz, *Excellenz*," replied one of them, a corporal. "He was found in the cellars—in the cognac bin—and he had been drinking, we believe."

"It is not so, *Excellenz*, at least not much," stammered the man called Schwartz. "I thought I heard a noise, a pounding, underneath the building. Someone is drilling there. I heard a pounding"—

"Bah, *schweinkopf*," thundered the Gestapo chief. "Drunken fool, and at my cognac, too. The only pounding that you heard was in your own pig's head." He slapped the man across both cheeks. "Take him away and lock him up, and do not be too gentle."

"*Zu befehl, Excellenz!*"

Siegenthaler returned to the telephone.

"Yes, you are there? Go on—about *Kapitan Fahnestock* being found dead. What's that you say? He was stripped of his uniform? Some spy will be wearing it now, I suppose—perhaps the American spy. I have been hearing reports from our agents about him. It is said that he is a great actor. Have every captain in the S.S. Guards detained and investigated until it is positively determined that he is the man he is supposed to be. What, you want a written order to that effect? I'll have one at your office in five minutes, *Herr Major!*"

**T**HAT five minutes was to prove one of the most important periods in Sam Sneed's hectic life. Things were moving fast all over—and under—captive Paris.

The pounding of the hammers on the drills under the Headquarters of the Gestapo was coming to an end. The charges were ready to be laid—and fired. Siegenthaler's impatience with the drunkard, Schwartz, had been a mistake.

Sam Sneed could not afford to make any mistakes. Dressed in the uniform of a captain in the S.S. Guards, he followed Lazzarre out of the sewers into the Place de l'Opera. He was frightened, but he put down his fear. To himself he said,

"They will see the uniform of a captain of Stormtroopers, and they will assume that there is a captain inside it. I have only to act accordingly." But gnawing fear returned when he wondered how long it

would be before the body of the captain that he had killed was found and identified. He resolutely put the thought out of his mind. Approaching a staff car parked on the square, he strutted up to its driver, and barked,

"*Achtung!* To whom does this car belong?"

"To *Oberleutenant von Kotz, Herr Kapitan.*"

"Good, I need it," Sam snapped. "Drive me to the airport at Orly at once."

Rank and discipline prevailed. As Sam herded Lazarre into the tonneau, and followed him, the driver overcame his hesitation, and acquiesced.

"*Achtung!*" Sam barked again at the gate of the field. He was thankful for the word—it, breathed harsh authority, and put the Nazis on their toes.

"I am *Kapitan Fahnestock*, and a pilot," he continued. "Where is the Commanding Officer—the Officer of the Day? What, not here? They shall hear about that! Warm me up a two-seater, at once! Don't stand there gaping like a fish. I said, at once!"

"We have only an old Junkers 87," excused the chief mechanic on duty, when he appeared.

"It will have to do," Sam snapped. "Warm her up."

The process seemed extraordinarily long. Lazarre was shivering, and Sam feared that he would fall to the ground. He was hard to explain at best, if the Germans had time to start thinking. Why should a French civilian, and such a civilian, be riding in a German military plane, anyway?

But the American had his promise to keep, money, and a chance for the derelict ace of the last war to end his days in South America. He felt that he must keep his promises, in order to hold the confidence of the French, the Beggars, and the Broken Faces if for no other reason. And Lazarre had not told under the torture.

At last the engine was warm. The mechanic climbed out of the cockpit.

"She is ready, *Herr Kapitan,*" he reported.

Sam climbed smartly into the front cockpit of the Junkers. As if given a new lease of life, after so long a time, Lazarre summoned enough strength to get into the rear,

where he started to fondle the heavy machine-gun turreted there. Sam had long since noted the direction of the wind, and he taxied swiftly to the end of the field. It seemed too easy.

Even as he commenced his run for the take-off, he saw a commotion near the hangars. Men were running around. One of them raised a light automatic gun, and started shooting at the fleeing Junkers. Orders to stop and examine and identify all captains of the S.S. Guards had just come in.

But they were just too late. Sam lifted the Junkers off the ground, and swung west in a *chandelle*.

Colonel Siegenthaler was foaming at the mouth, and spraying spittle on the telephone.

"What's that you say? *Kapitan Fahnestock* and a disreputable French civilian who seemed to be dying on his feet took off in a Junkers before he could be stopped?" He started to swear, then decided that he did not have the time. He bellowed into the receiver,

"Get me the airdrome at Rouen! Get me the night-fighters!"—

They were the last words that the colonel ever spoke, for the time had been even shorter than he'd thought.

The great hotel on the Place de la Concorde suddenly rose into the air, and then collapsed into a heap of smoking ruins. The mines of the legless colonel of sappers had functioned perfectly.

As the great red glow of the explosion mushroomed into the sky, Lazarre summoned the last vestige of his strength. Unknown to Sam, he'd taken a bullet from the gunner on the ground in the chest, and he was dying fast. But he seized the American by the shoulder, and pointed backward. A ghastly grin of triumph spread over his pale features. As Sam turned around, and saw him in the glow of the flames, he noticed that the renegade ace had pinned his medals to his chest, and that his lips were forming the words,

"*Vive la France!*"

Perhaps he'd never wanted to go to South America anyway, the American thought. He swallowed the lump that had somehow got in his throat, and kept the Junkers on her way back to England.



# LIGHTNING OVER TUNIS

By ROE RICHMOND

*Illustrated by H. W. KIEMLE*

From the secret landing field the P-38s rose to blast the Nazi blitz. And then, on whispering wings, came betrayal.

*A Novelet of the Second Front*

**S**WEATING in the shade of the brush, Dave Wardner waited for the sound of planes. He was more worried about the new replacement than over the

return of Tomasetti and Jankwich. Those two boys were all right; the Lockheed Lightnings could run away from anything the enemy had in North Africa. But what





*Dave scoured the length of the carrier. The others followed suit.*

would the new man be like? In a spot like theirs, teamwork was even more essential than in ordinary combat, and one pilot who didn't click could wreck the efforts of the small squadron.

They had been a perfect team of six until Piette got it off Cap Bon when those Messerschmitts dived suddenly out of the sun. The six Lockheeds had been intent upon the destruction of the big transport planes and their escorts. Piette saw the Nazis first, gave the warning, and zoomed up to shatter the German formation and send two Messerschmitts smoking into the sea. He broke up the enemy attack, but

they swarmed around him, shooting away until his P-38 tumbled into a crazy spin.

Piette bailed out but two of them went down to machine-gun him and his 'chute to pieces. That murderous act spelled suicide for the two Jerries, for Dave Wardner and Edlund flashed down to blast them apart in the air. But that didn't bring Piette back. He was the first casualty, after three weeks of harassing the enemy from that tiny hidden airfield in the Tunisian bush.

It had been luck finding that small smooth strip where no landing fields were supposed to exist. Dave Wardner had seen



it one day returning from a scouting sweep. He had gained permission to return and establish this outpost. For three weeks the six Lockheed Lightnings had struck repeated and devastating blows, coming out of nowhere to strafe Rommel's rear-guard and supply lines, to ruin Messerschmitts on the ground, to shoot troop transports out of the sky. The Germans couldn't comprehend where they came from or how they survived to return again and again.

Now Edlund came to sprawl beside Dave Wardner and smoke his pipe. "They oughta be coming, Skipper." Edlund's face was burnt red and bearded with a yellow stubble, his eyes were pale blue.

Dave Wardner lit a cigarette. "They'll come back, Ed. I'm thinking about the new man."

"Yeah, I know, I've been wondering too. Hard to replace guys like Pete . . ."

They were both seeing it again, Piette helpless under that parachute, the two Messerschmitts pouncing to tear him to pieces. . . They knew they couldn't last forever, or even for very long. But while they lasted they meant to inflict a terrible toll on the Nazis, every day they lived the Germans would pay for that at a dreadful price.

"This is better than the routine back there," Edlund said.

Dave Wardner nodded. He was a medium-sized man with a dark blunt face, fringed now with black whiskers, and calm brown eyes set deep. He was young but there was an air of quiet assurance about him, a steadfast quality of solid competence. He was already a captain. The other pilots, nearly as old in years, seemed boyish in comparison.

"I hope those Bedouins get back with some more supplies," mused Dave Wardner. "Of course the new man will bring as much as he can. They'll have to get some more gas to us soon. We've been lucky so far, Ed. The ground crew's standing the strain well, too."

"Not much fun for them. Connors is trying to cheer 'em up now."

Dave Wardner smiled gravely. "Perhaps they prefer monotony to what you call fun, Ed. Or even Connors' Irish jokes and songs."

They heard the motors at the same time,

straining to listen, smiling as they recognized the twin Allison motors of two Lightnings.

"Tommy and the Witch all right," grinned Edlund, lifting his lanky figure. "I've been worrying a little about Tommy lately."

"Tomasetti's high-strung," said Dave. "A touch of temperament there. But he's a fine pilot."

"One of the best," agreed Edlund warmly. "And Jankwich—that Witch is a wizard."

THE two Lightnings circled and dropped toward the treetops, straightened off and slipped down into the narrow bumpy runway to taxi under cover at the end. The mechanics ran to the machines, and Tomasetti and Jankwich walked wearily toward the crude camp. Tommy, grinning vividly as usual, was darkly handsome as a movie star. The Witch, solemn and silent, had the rugged ugly face of a prizefighter.

"We did all right, Skipper," said Tomasetti. "We raised hell with a supply train and strafed hell out of some straggling infantry. We busted up a bunch of planes on the ground. When they finally got some up after us we knocked down three for sure—two possibles. Fiats and Bredas, pitiful." Tommy grinned and shrugged. "As usual the Witch got two to my one."

"I think Tommy got two," Jankwich said. "Couldn't be sure."

"It doesn't matter," Tommy said. "No newspaper reporters here, Jank. What about our new ace, Skipper?"

"Not in yet, Tommy."

Tomasetti grinned brittlely. "He'll probably come in under an escort of Messerschmitts." He spat and turned away jerkily. Tommy felt the loss of Piette more than any of them. There had been a rare friendship between those two American boys of Italian and French descent.

They listened for the coming of the plane and they were all under a strain. Dave Wardner thought grimly that the man who came to replace Pete Piette was not to be envied. . . . When they heard it at last they looked at one another in bewildered surprise. That was no Lockheed coming. It sounded like a bomber—was it ours or theirs? Had this secret jumping-off place been located finally? But

they'd never send a single bomber. It puzzled all of them. Then they saw it against the bright blue African sky, and it was a Martin B-26. What the hell were they sending a bomber for?

"Loaded with gas instead of bombs," Dave Wardner ventured.

The pilot found the field and set the medium bomber down with some difficulty. The take-off would be a close thing, but empty, it should be possible. The pilot was a little fellow, looking like a caricature with lop ears, a long sunburnt nose and a big grin. Name of Knapp. "Had an escort," he reported. "But the damn fool left me to chase some Focke-Wulfs."

Dave Wardner swore with feeling. "Our replacement, by any chance?"

"That's right. They sent me out with him, loaded with gas. I'd rather carry bombs myself, but you probably need gas more right now. If I get in and out okay they may send me back later. Bombs next trip. A bomber operating from here could do plenty damage." Knapp, a cheery flip-pant youngster, seemed unperturbed by the desertion of his fighter escort.

But the pilots of the Lightning Patrol were burning up.

"So that's the kinda screwball they send to take Pete's place!" snarled Tomasetti. "If the Jerries don't knock his ears off I will!"

"Take it easy, Tommy," soothed Dave Wardner. "Easy, boy, easy."

The gasoline unloaded, Knapp nonchalantly climbed into his Martin and made a take-off, barely lifting it over the first trees. They debated idly as to whether or not it could be done with a loaded bomber. They were inclined to agree that the Martin B-26 could make it. But their minds were really on the missing replacement.

And every man there hated him, whoever he might turn out to be.

IT was late afternoon when they heard the Allison twin-motors of the Lockheed P-38 in the west. But it was not alone. There were at least two other planes up there. The waiting men exchanged bitter glances. Tommy's ironic prophecy had come true. The new pilot was leading the enemy right to their hide-out. The men on the ground clenched their

fists and turned their unshaven incredulous faces toward the fading blue dome.

The P-38 came merrily overhead, flirting and playing tag with two Messerschmitts. The same thought struck every watcher below. The Lockheed, fastest fighter plane in the world, could have run away from the Messerschmitts. The maniac in the P-38 must have led them on deliberately. Now, if either of the Germans got away, the secret was out and the game was lost.

"We better get upstairs and lend that idiot a hand," said Edlund. "Got to make sure those two never get back home."

"No," Dave Wardner said. "We aren't going up, Ed. Chances are they'll never notice this field at all. And there may be more of them coming. I won't risk going up there, giving everything away, and perhaps losing more men. Let that damned fool handle it alone, it's his game."

Tomasetti was moaning, cursing, beating the air with his fists.

Overhead the unknown American was putting on a fantastic show, luring first one Nazi and then the other, dodging one after another, rolling and looping and twisting in and out of amazing maneuvers.

Young Connors gasped: "He thinks he's playing the county fair! Carnival stunt stuff. The guy's loony as a goon!" Connors, a red-haired freckled stripling, was the baby of the outfit with only a faint fuzz showing on his thin red face. "What a man!"

"He's nuts all right," gritted Edlund. "But he's a flying fool. Look at him toss that crate around up there."

"Circus show-off!" spat Tomasetti. "Hope he crashes both Huns and they come down together."

Now with infinite daring and infinite skill the lone Yankee lured one German onto his tail, faked a dive, kicked over into a tight loop, and brought the second Messerschmitt square onto his sights. The 37 mm. cannon and 50-calibre machine guns of the Lockheed burst out in flaming jets at the foe. The Messerschmitt exploded in the air and fell in two sections shrouded black with smoke.

Turning with unbelievable sharpness and speed, the P-38 leaped at the remaining Nazi. Almost head-on they exchanged

blasts from cannon and machine guns. It looked like a collision, but the Lockheed swerved off and flew clear, while the Messerschmitt hung and crumpled on the tremendous impact of American bullets, floundered and fell into a fiery spin. No Nazi parachutes blossomed from either ship. The Lockheed swung into an exultant sweep and headed for the field.

The onlookers sighed and swore and shook their heads in wonder.

"I never saw but one man fly like that," said Dave Wardner. "And he's dead now."

"And this one should be!" grated Tomasetti. "But he'll probably get all of us killed off and live to brag about it."

"Tommy, you'd better not be around when he lands," Dave advised. "We can't have any feud started. You sleep it off, kid, and let the rest of us work on him."

"Okay, Skipper." Tomasetti walked off scowling blackly.

The newcomer brought the P-38 in close to the treetops and set her down neatly. He jumped out with easy grace and moved toward the group, a tall lithe boy with cropped brown curls and a laughing face. Dave Wardner stared at him with disbelief and awe, breathing: "Great Scott, it can't be!"

The new pilot, clean-shaven and immaculate even in his flying suit, smiled at the ragged bearded men and said blithely: "Lieutenant Leslie Wade reporting. Hullo, everybody, how's tricks?"

Dave Wardner ignored his hand. "Have you any excuse for bringing *them* along with you?"

Leslie Wade laughed. "Sure, Skipper. I didn't have enough gas to engage in a dogfight until I was practically home. So I brought 'em along and dropped 'em right in your lap. Didn't you enjoy the show?"

"No," Dave said curtly. "I suppose you also have a good reason for abandoning the bomber you were escorting here?"

"Well, I saw some Focke-Wulf Kuriers, the big bombers, you know. Three of them without escort. I knew it was duck soup, I *had* to go after 'em. Only got one of them, but that's something. Turned the others back toward their own lines."

"*Only* three today for you," drawled Edlund. "That'll hurt your record, mister."

"It won't help it much," Leslie Wade admitted cheerfully.

"Wade, I should send you back and recommend you for court-martial," Dave Wardner told him. "A man like you is a menace to every move we make up here."

"I'll be good hereafter, Captain," promised Wade lightly. "I wanted one last fling before I came under your command."

"So, you knew who you were coming to?"

"Sure, of course I did, Davey. Aren't you glad to see me?" Leslie Wade lounged there before the hostile eyes, cool and easy and unafraid, almost insolent in manner.

"No, I'm not," Dave Wardner told him. "Come over here, I want a few words with you in private."

"Sure, Skipper," smiled Leslie Wade. "See you later, boys."

They walked to one side, Wade tall and loose-limbed, Dave Warden looking short and stalwart and stiff beside him.

"Surprised, eh, David?" inquired Leslie Wade casually.

"Naturally. I thought the Japs got you in China."

"Sorry, but they didn't. I was just missing a couple of weeks, reported dead. Maybe the Germans will do a better job of it."

"Why didn't you stay there?"

"Why should I? No more American Volunteer Group, no more five-hundred-buck bonus for every Zero. I was fed up anyhow, wanted a change. Felt like killing Germans instead of Japs for awhile."

"Listen, now, you'll take orders here or I won't have you. I'll send you back under arrest."

"Sure, I'll take orders, Davey. Don't worry about me." Leslie Wade seemed perpetually in a state of mild amusement, tinged with mockery. "I'll even stop calling you, Davey—Davey."

"You're damn right you will!" Dave Wardner told him fiercely. "You'll stop all your funny stuff—*starting right now!*"

"Okay, Dave—I mean yes, sir, Captain."

"You're replacing a fine boy," Dave Wardner said. "He hasn't been gone long, and the boys aren't feeling too good about it. I wouldn't advise you to do much wisecracking around here, understand? We've been out here three weeks and it's been tough, as you'll find out. I don't care how tough you think it was in China. So you'd better keep your mouth shut and not

swagger too much, kid. And when we go out we work as a team, a unit, and this individual stuff is strictly no good, see? I don't want any trouble from you, Leslie. You've caused me enough grief in the past."

Leslie Wade seemed sober and subdued somewhat.

"All right, Skipper, I'll be a good boy," he said. "But this is sure one hell of a way to greet the only brother you've got in the world, David."

## II

THE next day they received radio instructions to sit tight and wait. It was unfortunate under the circumstances. The arrival of Leslie Wade brought tension into camp. Time dragged in sawtoothed agony across raw frayed nerves. The heat pressed down suffocatingly upon sand and brush and forest. Men lay panting and sweating in the steaming shade, sick with heat and boredom. Some of them shaved to pass the time; there was no water to spare for bathing. It was unbearable and without reason they blamed Wade for it. Tomasetti eyed the newcomer with actual hatred. The others tried to ignore Wade.

Only Red Connors, the kid of the outfit, seemed unaccountably attracted to the new man. Connors, friendly and affectionate, still youthful enough to be a hero-worshipper in spite of his own experience, had been awed by Wade's performance yesterday. Leslie Wade did have undeniable charm, when he cared to use it, and he exerted it now to bring the red-headed kid under his spell. The others didn't like it, of course, and that gave Wade some perverse satisfaction. Young Red was completely fascinated by this glamorous superior being.

Observing this increased the hate that was in Tomasetti. The other men, fond of the likeable Connors and used to his adulation, were resentful and jealous of his quick attachment to the outsider. It was a dangerous situation, as Captain Dave Wardner realized, and the slightest spark would set off the fireworks. With a sounder basis for his own feelings toward Leslie, Dave Wardner found it difficult to main-

tain his usual balance and composure and ease the tenseness of the atmosphere. *Anybody but him*, he thought, *Anybody but him*.

Jankwich was more sour and morose than usual, and even Edlund was nervous and impatient. There couldn't have been a worse time for enforced idleness.

"What do you suppose is up, Skipper?" asked Edlund, shaking his yellow Viking's head.

"Something big, Ed," said Dave Wardner. "Troop transports coming from Sardinia or Sicily most likely."

"Wish they'd hurry 'em up," muttered Edlund. "Hope there's a lot of 'em. All they've got in one big flight."

Leslie Wade was telling Red Connors: "About a six to one ratio. In one six-week period we got a hundred and forty Japs and lost only twenty-three planes. Those Curtisses can't touch Lockheeds either."

"Poor China is sunk," sneered Tomasetti. "Now that Wade's gone."

Leslie Wade looked around laughing. "Just a nice happy family here."

Tommy started up snarling, but Edlund and Jankwich forced him back. Dave Wardner told Wade to take a walk for himself. Wade saluted mockingly and strolled away, with Red Connors tagging along. The others stared after them with hot eyes and twisting dry lips.

"I'd hate that guy anywhere I met him," Tomasetti said. "It's not just Pete, or that silly show *he* put on yesterday."

"Most men do," Dave Wardner said. "With women it works the other way. They love him."

"I suppose so," murmured Edlund. "I can see how they might."

"I can't," said Tomasetti, spitting on the sand. "If a woman went for him the other guy'd be lucky to lose her."

Dave Wardner smiled gravely. "I think maybe you're right, at that, Tommy. But the other guy never knows that at the time."

Edlund looked at the Captain. "You must've known Wade pretty well sometime or other, Skipper."

"All my life more or less, Ed." Dave Wardner was back in the past and, while it was not pleasant, it no longer hurt as it had once. "We outgrow lots of things."

"That Wade will never grow up," growled Tomasetti.

"Right again, Tommy," smiled Dave Wardner. "That's his one redeeming feature."

The call to action came at last and the little outpost sprang into quick, purposeful and happy activity. It was as Dave had guessed, a great armada of Axis transport planes from Palermo bound for Tunis. Their task was to arrive and strike before any Allied fighters could possibly get there from the known bases. The element of surprise was all in their favor, but as always they would be hopelessly outnumbered.

Still it was not a suicide mission. They were to strike quick and hard, disrupt the enemy formations, scatter the escort, throw the transports into confusion, and escape in full force—if possible. The great speed of the Lockheed Lightnings gave them some chance of success. "Boy!" said Red Connors. "The best show yet."

One after another the six roared down the dusty runway, and climbed over the sand-and-brush wastes of Tunisia to the 10,000-foot level. Soon they were cruising off Cape Bon above the intense blue of the Mediterranean, visible now and then through rifts in the white ruffled floor of the clouds.

Fifty miles out they saw below them the first of the huge transport planes, Junkers and Dorniers, and there was the same natural impulse to dive directly to the attack. As Dave Wardner had expected Leslie Wade pointed down impatiently, fairly quivering to jump upon those lovely targets and let go with all guns. Dave shook his head and waved his squadron forward and up, but a chill premonition was growing in him. He wished Pete Piette was back. He wished anyone was there but Leslie.

Just as they sighted the German fighters something happened. Dave almost felt the break in his formation and knew what had happened before turning to look.

**L**ESLIE, unable to resist the temptation of those targets, was screaming straight down at them. Leslie, his kid brother, diving to what could only be certain death.

The others seemed to falter and hesitate. Young Red Connors gestured downward

excitedly. They were no longer a unit; they had been broken into six separate components. Dave Wardner tried to hold them together, did hold three of them. Tomasetti, Edlund and Jankwich stuck close. But Red Connors pitched into a steep dive and followed Leslie down.

Dave Wardner cursed his brother as he had never cursed anybody or anything. "Die, damn you, die!" he shouted without knowing it. That had done it for sure. This was the finish—in utter failure. Now they would all die to little or no avail, because one of them was proud and wild and reckless, headstrong and selfish beyond belief.

The only thing to do was take as many of the Nazis with them as they could. The German fighter pilots still hadn't seen the four that stayed above in the sun. Some of the Messerschmitts were swooping down after Leslie and Red Connors, too late to save some of the transports but in plenty of time to wreak vengeance on the two madmen in the Lockheeds.

A Dornier Do 24, the tri-motored flying boat, burst into black smoke split with scarlet under Leslie's guns. A Junkers Ju 52 crumpled and flamed before Red Connors' headlong rush. Coming back up from underneath, Leslie lashed the belly of another Ju 52 wide open with a storm of steel. Climbing clear of the wobbling wreck, he lunged in to help Red Connors, who was having trouble with a Dornier. Between them they blasted the transport to pieces. But now the air all around them was thick and angry with Messerschmitts closing in for the kill. There was no escaping that net of death.

"Well, they got four of them," Dave Wardner said, almost proudly defiant. "They're gone now though, two more crazy American kids. . . . We can't help 'em. We'd be gone too if we went down there. We are gone anyway, but we can take more Jerries from up here."

He switched on the inter-phone to tell the boys not to dive yet.

"But Red's down there," came the sobbing snarl from Tomasetti.

"So's my brother," said Dave Wardner. "But we can do more damage up here." He signalled sharply for the attack.

From high and straight out of the sun the four Lockheeds hurtled down into the



Messerschmitts, smashing and scattering them like autumn leaves in a sudden gale. Dave Wardner got his first one so easy it seemed ridiculous. The gray-green body loomed broadside and exploded on his sights as he turned cannon and machine guns loose. Tomasetti shattered the cockpit and pilot of another Me 109. Edlund zoomed underneath to shoot the belly out of his victim. Jankwich fastened onto a Messerschmitt tail and poured bullets into it until it flared and fell like a torch. Four of them on the first assault. The air seemed full of burning ships. But the rest would come harder.

Far below Dave Wardner glimpsed a P-38 spinning toward the sea, and he wondered if there went Leslie or Red Connors. . . . But no time to think of that. It was a weird crazy scramble all over the sky now. Bullets began to chew and chip at his own wings and fuselage, crackle his windshield and clang his armor. Dave pulled out just as Edlund's calm voice told him someone was on his tail.

Dave got his second German from below, climbing fast and seeing his bullets stitch across the belly until the black smoke billowed as the Messerschmitt came apart. Then there were black-crossed wings and bodies all about him like something in a nightmare, and Dave twisted and turned in vain to weave his way out. They had him now. The air was alive with searching scoring bullets, tracers so close they singed his cheeks. This was it all right. This was the end of the road. . . .

Then suddenly, miraculously, he was flying clear, and looking back he saw three more Nazis trailing smoke and fire toward the Mediterranean, and strangely it seemed there was an extra P-38 in the picture. It came to him on the earphones, that familiar laughing voice: "You can thank your kid brother for two of 'em," and he knew that Leslie was alive, and young Red Connors was dead. . . .

**L**ESLIE had fought his way out of that death-trap and come up to shoot two Germans right off his brother's tail. It was the Witch who knocked off the third one. The other Messerschmitts had gone after their convoy.

It was an impossible dream but the heavens were nearly empty now, as Dave

Wardner gave the homeward signal. By some freak of fate, of the six of them that had plunged into that horde of Huns, five of them were coming out of it alive. But all of them knew that the wrong one had died, and the man who had led him to that death was alive and laughing. There was small consolation in the fact that Red Connors had scored two-and-a-half in his last combat. The Redhead, the baby, was gone, and Leslie Wade was to blame.

Their total for the day was fifteen. "But fifteen hundred wouldn't pay for a kid like the Redhead," said Tomasetti. Leslie had downed four besides the one he halved with Red. Jankwich was credited with three. Dave and Tommy got two apiece, while Edlund accounted for one.

But they weren't thinking of their records on the way home. They were thinking of Red Connors.

As soon as Tomasetti put his plane down and vaulted out, he strode up to Leslie Wade, called him a fighting name, and struck him across the mouth. Leslie drove a left into Tommy's face, and they slugged away savagely in the dusk.

It took all the pilots and most of the ground crew to pry and tug and hold them apart. Captain Dave Wardner sent Tommy away and turned to his brother. Dave was numb, without feeling of any kind.

"You'll never fly with me again," he said flatly. "Consider yourself under arrest for disobeying orders."

"But, Dave, for the—"

"Shut up!" commanded Dave Wardner. "You cost us one life today. You'll never get the chance to kill another man of mine."

"But, Dave, I *saved* your life, you know I did."

"We don't talk about saving each other's lives here," Dave Wardner said coldly. "That's expected, that's routine. Go to your quarters, and I'll have some food sent to you."

It was apparent that it wouldn't do to let Leslie linger in camp. Dave gave it to him frankly: "I'm sending you back at once. I ought to make you walk back. But as there's no other way you'll have to fly. Return directly and give your C.O. this message."

Leslie's long fingers fretted the envelope. "But, Dave, you know how much you need an extra plane. You—"

"Not with you in it," Dave said brutally. "Get out of here before somebody beats the life out of you."

Leslie's insolent smile returned at that. "Do you think anybody here could do that, Skipper?"

"I know it—and you'll find out if you don't leave. You came here to replace Tomasetti's best friend, and you get his next best friend killed the first thing. If Tommy ever got after you right, you couldn't stop him with a gun. So long, Leslie."

Dave Wardner turned away abruptly, but not without a pang. After all that boy was his brother. They had never been friends but they were still of the same flesh-and-blood. Leslie had always been a source of trouble, pain and sorrow for his older brother. Even so Dave still felt the protective instinct that had led him to defend Leslie, in spite of many betrayals. The worst of course was when Leslie came swaggering along to take Carolyn away from him, but Dave had finally recovered from that wound like all the rest.

"Just one thing, Dave," called Leslie. "About Carolyn—there was never anything between us. You were so sure of her, I just wanted to show you, I guess. But you're the one for her, David, first, last, and forever. She's waiting for you back home, boy."

Dave smiled thinly. "I'm afraid she'll have rather a long wait. Goodby, Leslie. I'd wish you luck but you don't need any more."

### III

**F**LYING back westward alone Leslie was not happy. For once something had pierced his bright armor, touched and hurt him sorely. It was unusual for him to feel depressed, defeated and lonely. He had prided himself on being self-sufficient, a complete individual asking nothing of anyone, making all grades under his own power. But all this had broken suddenly and gone, leaving him naked and defenseless and half-afraid.

Leslie shook his bright arrogant head as if to cast off the strange unpleasant shadow that lay across his mind. But it remained and grew darker and heavier. He tried to sing as was his habit when flying alone, but his voice cracked off-tune. Usually he was able to amuse himself in private con-

versation and witty cynicisms—but not today. "What the hell?" he muttered. Was it Red Connors? Was it his brother Dave? Was it Tomasetti's black fury? Or was it in himself?

He felt better when he saw a squadron of about fifteen enemy ships, bombers and fighters, black-crossed wings glinting in the sun. He wondered why they were flying east, away from the British-American lines. . . .

It came to him in a quick flash of intuition. They were out hunting for that secret airfield from which the Lockheed P-38's had been coming to prey upon the Axis forces. They were heading in the right direction, they would find and destroy it.

And his folly in leading those two Messerschmitts there had brought this on. More lives would be on his head—his brother's among them. Dave, Tommy, Edlund, Jankwich, and the ground crew. And the loss of a vital point within close range of all important Nazi targets.

Now the shadow was gone and Leslie's brain worked swiftly and sharply. It was senseless to hurl his Lightning into the midst of them. Once he would have done that unthinking, but not any more. He'd get two or three of them maybe that way. Then they'd get him and carry on to their objective. No, he must show himself and then run away, leading them as far off the trail as possible. That was the ticket. Take them to hell-and-gone into the southeastern wilds.

Leslie Wade Wardner's smile came back and he felt fine, now that action was at hand and his course was clear. "Davey would like this," he told himself. "It's the way Davey'd do it himself. He'd be proud of his kid brother—for once."

The Germans saw the lone Lockheed coming out of the east and surmised correctly that it came from the hidden field they were in search of. Some of the Messerschmitts detached themselves from the formation and climbed in pursuit. "Those babies can climb," said Leslie with admiration, circling above them to pick up a southeasterly course.

He let the foremost Nazis get close enough to try a few long-range bursts and laughed as their tracers flew wild or fell short. Then he opened up and let the

mighty Allison motors roar at over four hundred miles per hour. From time to time he glanced back, noting with satisfaction that the entire enemy squadron was following. Four Messerschmitts kept pace with him, while the others stayed back to shield the Heinkel and Dornier bombers. It was the first time Leslie had ever enjoyed running away from a fight.

He understood all at once that he was probably on his last flight. Might have escaped, but he wanted to make sure that the Germans did not locate the tiny outpost to the north. When the fuel ran low the Nazis would perhaps turn back, and he could try to set his crate down somewhere in that wilderness of sand and brush and rock. If they kept coming he'd fly until his tanks were empty and then try for a crash landing. Either way his chances were negligible, virtually nothing. Somehow he refused to consider bailing out.

His tanks hadn't been full on starting. He had taken only enough of the precious gasoline to reach headquarters. As the Germans kept up the pursuit and his fuel gage dropped, Leslie decided they were going to stick to the chase, figuring that in the end he'd have to lead them to home base. . . . He laughed aloud. He'd crack up himself but he'd take plenty of Nazis down with him—and without firing a shot! Strange but effective victory, and Davey's outfit safe.

Well, time to take a run for it now, distance the Germans if possible, and swing back toward the north to try for a landing. He gave her the full throttle and crooned: "Come on, Lightning Bug, show those Nasties how to travel. We're in the stretch, sweetheart."

He'd had to choke down the almost overpowering impulse to turn back and plunge into one final fight. Once he never could have done it, but today Leslie Wade Wardner was a different man. "Maybe I've come of age at last," he mused. "Too bad Davey couldn't see it. . ." He gained a bit but the Messerschmitts were tenacious. He drove the Lockheed to its utmost speed, drawing ahead slowly but surely. Then the port motor began to skip and miss, and Leslie knew the finish was near. He could have parachuted, but he wanted to take the plane down.

No landing place anywhere in sight. Not

even an open stretch of sand to set her down in here. Nothing but sand hills and forest and bush. His fuel was failing fast. All he could do was take her down easy and slow as he was able to, and hope the smash wouldn't be too bad. If he had to go he hoped it was quick and clean. But if he got all busted up he could finish it with his automatic. So what the hell?

Leslie Wade Wardner had little expectation of surviving. It looked plenty bad down there. His main regret was that his brother Dave couldn't see him go. "Still playing the gallery," he grinned. "But now there's only one spectator you want in it." He glided down toward the tangled terrain in long banked turns, still searching. "Going to be a tough one, baby," he told the P-38.

A funny way for a guy like me to go, he thought. A hell of an end for the old grandstand kid himself. No crowds, no cheers, no headlines, no posthumous decorations even. Nobody will ever know anything about it. He wished suddenly, desperately, above all that his brother Dave might get to know about it. The rest didn't matter. Except Tomasetti, he'd like Tommy to know too. . . . But nobody would—ever.

"Inglorious ending for the great glory-grabber," Leslie said. "Here we go, Lightning!"

The earth rushed up at him with astonishing speed, the green-brown surface blurring and looming close and dark and deadly. Treetops skimmed past. Branches thrashed and tore at the wings. A wrenching shock smashed the P-38 into a crazy crashing spin. Deep into the forest it ripped like a shattered and dying monster. Then all the world stopped in a blinding deafening explosion, that echoed on for a long time in the reeking wilds. But Leslie was beyond hearing or caring.

"THIS is the biggest one yet, boys," Captain Dave Wardner said quietly. "Our toughest assignment to date."

The three pilots stood before him, lean and haggard and sunburnt in filthy tattered khaki. Tomasetti, dark and handsome, brooding now, his boyish smile gone. Edlund, the Viking, big and blond, steady and reliable with pipe in mouth. Jankwich, the Witch, craggy face scowling, a grim silent

man who lived only to kill Germans. They were all dedicated to that purpose, of course, but Jankwich had more reason. His whole family had been murdered when the Nazis invaded Poland.

"There'll be a great Axis fleet off Pantelleria, and now they have an aircraft carrier. It's something new for them and evidently meant as a surprise. For that matter the presence of such a fleet is a surprise. Our Air Arm is to strike at it with a heavy force. We are to get there first and our mission is all-important. We are to attack the carrier and prevent their getting planes into the air, as much and as long as possible. We'll be accompanied by a Martin medium bomber."

They avoided speaking and looking at one another. Tomasetti kicked at the sandy soil nervously. Edlund went on sucking calmly at his pipe. Jankwich nodded several times and grimaced something like a smile. They all knew what it meant. It was really suicide this time. Working in that close under the guns of an entire fleet, there was no chance of coming back. Or so little chance it didn't count. Their consolation was in knowing the enormous significance of their task. The success or failure of the raid rode with them. Four Lockheeds and one Martin.

"The Martin is coming out today," Dave Wardner went on. "I want a volunteer to meet her and escort her in."

"I'd like to go, Skipper," said Edlund. "I want to see how my ship's acting. Thanks." He bent his yellow head to tamp out his pipe and place it carefully on the camp table.

After Edlund took off the other three sat around smoking and sweating. "Any news of—your brother, Skipper?" Tomasetti asked awkwardly. "Funny, that day. I thought you'd gone wacky when you said, 'My brother's down there too.'"

"Not a sign of him," Dave said. "Just vanished completely."

"Must've run into a flock of Nazis. Anyway, you can be damn sure he took quite a few of 'em with him. Whatever else he might be, he was a flyer and a fighter."

"Yes, Tommy," Dave said wistfully. "All he ever was good for. Fighting and flying."

Then they were silent waiting for the planes to come in.

When they heard the Martin B-26 it was alone, and they looked at each other's anxious faces and shook their heads. "That damn Martin is a hoodoo!" mumbled Tomasetti. "Every time it brings trouble."

"Ed'll be coming in," Dave said. "Ed'll be all right."

Then they heard the P-38 and they laughed and slapped one another on the back, and Tomasetti kicked the sand around in a dance as they watched the bomber settle down and bump along the dusty runway.

"Good old Eddie," sang Tomasetti. "He's a tough Swede, that guy."

"He's a good man, Ed," Jankwich spoke surprisingly. "I don't want anything to happen to Ed."

"Hey!" Tommy cried, sobering quickly. "Something's wrong up there. Eddie's wobbling all over the place." There was something decidedly erratic in the way the Lockheed approached.

Bomber pilot Knapp came up, lop-eared and grinning as ever, to shake hands and introduce his crew. "Had a little frolic back a ways," Knapp announced cheerily. "Bunch of Jerries jumped us but we beat 'em off. Your boy's all right, Captain Wardner. He knocked off two Nazis so fast we couldn't believe our eyes. Neither could the Germans. We damaged one, and the rest high-tailed for home. That tow-headed pilot of yours is a honey!"

They were busy watching Edlund. He came in rather uncertainly but made his landing all right. The P-38 taxied to a jerky stop nearby and they saw the bullet marks and holes. Edlund sat curiously slumped in the cockpit as if too tired to move. Tomasetti ran over and jumped up laughing to greet him. They all ran forward as they saw Tommy turn a stricken dark face and yell for a stretcher.

There was blood on Edlund's blond head and beard, blood all down his chest. He looked at them with pale blue eyes and smiled wanly.

"No hurry — about the stretcher — Tommy. They got me—this time."

They lifted him out as tenderly as they could and lowered him to the ground, where Tomasetti held him cradled in his arms.

"I'm a mess," Edlund said wearily. "Didn't think—I could—make it." He

smiled at Dave Wardner. "Hate to miss—the big show—Skipper. Thought maybe—you could use—the ship. Give 'em hell—tonight. . . ." Edlund's bloody Viking's head dropped heavily on Tomasetti's shoulder.

Afterwards, when they gathered to discuss plans for the raid, they all saw that pipe on the table. Dave Wardner picked it up and placed it gently with the rest of Edlund's things.

"His, huh?" Knapp murmured. "Jeez, that boy was all shot to pieces and he brought his plane in like that."

"Shut up!" Tomasetti said fiercely from the shadows.

The council of war was over when someone said three Bedouins were coming into camp. Somebody else said: "Hellfire, one of 'em's a white man!" The tall gaunt scarecrow in advance was unquestionably white, underneath the dirt and sunburn and whiskers. He was nearly naked, but he walked strongly enough and his voice was almost gay as he called out: "Cheerio, comrades, how's tricks?"

Dave Wardner, going over to see who they were and what they wanted besides food and drink, was startled when the tall one fell upon him with starved eagerness.

"Dave, Dave!" cried the derelict. "Am I glad to see you! And you can't refuse to welcome me this time, David, for I'm truly a man returned from the dead." A heart-wringing sob came from Leslie. Wade Wardner's tortured throat. "And I'm really your brother for the first time in my life."

"You poor devil," said Dave Wardner. "You poor kid." And without thought or shame he threw his arms around the wretched figure and held him close.

After Knapp found out who the unexpected arrival was he told them all the story of what Leslie Wade Wardner had done on the day of his disappearance from this earth. Details of the exploit had just been made known at headquarters. The wrecked Lockheed had been found in the brush, and also the ruins of six Messerschmitts and two Heinkels, none of which had been shot down so far as could be judged. With information gathered from German prisoners the story had been pieced together bit by bit. Leslie was a dead hero come back to life.

So not even Tomasetti could offer a pro-

test when Dave Wardner stated simply that his brother was going to fly in Edlund's place that night.

#### IV

ACCOMPANIED by a Martin B-26 piloted by a jolly little gargoyle named Knapp, four other young Americans in four Lockheed P-38 Lightnings soared out over the moonlit Mediterranean on their way to die.

"Too bad Pete and Red and Eddie aren't here for this one," Tomasetti had said before they took off. And Leslie knew that the boy still hated him as much as ever. Jankwich also felt that way, Leslie imagined. Dave had taken him back but neither of the others would. Well, it was his own fault primarily. Couldn't be helped now. Perhaps he could make it up to them in some way. He was mildly amazed to realize that he'd like to try, at least.

For his own part Captain Dave Wardner was thankful to have his kid brother along this time. Edlund's death had been a hard blow, even worse than losing Piette and Connors. Dave saw that Leslie had honestly changed, and it made him warm and glad inside. As Leslie said, they were really brothers now. It was a good feeling to have when you went out together to face death. It was fine to fly with men like Tommy and the Witch, and the man that Leslie had become.

Below them in the blue-and-silver night, they picked out the hazy form of the little island of Pantelleria, and lying in its lee the blurred gray figures of the Axis fleet. A primitive exultance flared up in Dave Wardner and the others as they thought of the fight ahead. A rare and intoxicating sense of power filled them. The blood leapt like liquid fire in their veins. But their trained minds stayed cold and sharp and cruel in concentration on the task.

A large squadron would have been detected, but with only five planes they were able to slip in close and fairly low over the sleeping fleet. There were battleships, cruisers, destroyers, transports, and there was the broad flat top of the carrier. Young Knapp's Martin bomber poised for that first target, the bombardier intent at the bomb-sight. A five-hundred pounder plunged down and tore through the flight-deck.



The explosion seemed to set off anti-aircraft guns on all sides. Knapp swung back for another go at the carrier before the Lightnings went down. The second bomb crashed one side of the flat-top. Dave Wardner dipped his hand and nosed into a steep screaming dive through brilliant bursts of ack-ack and bright streaming tracers. The others tipped over and went howling down after him, Tomasetti, Jankwich and then Leslie.

Unleashing cannon shells and machine-gun bullets, Dave scoured the length of the carrier, and the others followed suit, sweeping the deck from stern to stern with explosives and slugs. They were in under the ack-ack curtain now, but machine guns opened on them from all directions. Bombs were still dropping from the Martin, blasting into transports now. The sky was crisscrossed with searchlight beams and fiery chains of tracer bullets, while ack-ack bursts blossomed vividly here and there. The Germans were baffled to find only one bomber up above. They directed all their fire at it but the Martin seemed charmed.

Swerving back for another run, Dave Wardner found the Nazi airmen clambering into their craft. He swooped in at them; he had never known such high exultance. A German plane caught fire under his guns, lighting the flight deck weirdly. Tomasetti followed with another terrible blast. German planes were shattered where they stood and bodies were sprawled in the firelight.

Jankwich dived in daringly close, too close, to pour his livid hate at them from blazing gun-barrels. When the Witch pulled out, his ship was aflame and his own brawn frame was broken with bullets. Without hesitation, with the last strength left in him, Jankwich drove his plane like a flaming arrow straight into the nearest warship. That horrible explosion rocked the sea and the sky. Amidship the Nazi vessel became a red furnace. Even dead, Jankwich's hate hounded and scorched them.

Leslie took his turn and caught a German in the act of taking off. The pilot was dead before his wheels left the splintered deck. The plane went off at a blind tangent and somersaulted into the sea.

But there were Nazi planes aloft by now, not many yet, but enough to endanger the

Martin overhead. Already Dave Wardner and Tomasetti were climbing to intercept them. Leslie Wade Wardner debated briefly and climbed after them through a brilliant display of fireworks. Flac erupted so close it shook the ship, and bullets were humming and whining ever nearer.

Dave got one German from below, slashing shells and bullets into its belly and rolling clear as the disemboweled craft plummeted seaward. Tomasetti rode the tail of another in dizzy circles, hammering home burst after blistering burst until the Nazi flopped over and fell in smoking spirals.

But now the Messerschmitts were darting and diving at the Martin B-26 in wasp-like fury. Leslie came rocketing up, picked a target, framed it on his sights, and cut loose his guns in a terrific torrent. The Messerschmitt blazed like a beacon and toppled toward the Mediterranean.

The Martin was still heavily beset, trapped in a searing skein of tracers. The three Lockheeds tossed and turned and twisted away from attacking Germans, striving to free the bomber for the homeward flight. Their part in the raid was done, their ammunition running low.

AND now the night was filled with the roar of many motors as the main American and British force swarmed over the fleet, and ton after ton of explosives rained down upon the Axis vessels, lighting the waves for miles.

In a reckless rush Leslie hurled his P-38 into the midst of the enemy and blasted another Messerschmitt screeching out of the sky. Knapp seized the opening and knifed his Martin out of the wild welter into the clear. "Run for it, Knappy, run for it!" ordered Dave Wardner.

Two Nazis were on Leslie's tail now. He dodged and ducked, looped and rolled, but they stayed with him and their bullets ripped closer and closer. Dave Wardner dashed in and decapitated one pilot with the smash of a 37 mm. shell. "Thanks, Davey," sang out Leslie. Tomasetti threw his Lightning in and drove the second German off, hawked hard after him and got him with a final burst. "Thank you, Tommy," said Leslie.

"I'm fresh out of bullets," Tomasetti said.

"We're all going home anyway," said Dave Wardner. "I'm out too."

Leslie Wade Wardner said: "Beat it, I'll bring up the rear. I've got a little left."

Surprised to find themselves still alive, they took after the Martin B-26, with Leslie trailing behind. The battle was over for them. Back there the Nazis were catching hell from Allied bombers and fighters, their fleet being knocked to pieces, their planes shot out of the sky.

But the Martin was in trouble and progress was slow. Knapp had one dead and two wounded men aboard, and the bomber was badly shot up. "You fellows go ahead," Knapp told them. "I can't make time, but I'll get in somehow."

"We're going in together," Dave Wardner said simply.

There were still two Messerschmitts bent on destroying the planes that had started all this. Hanging back, Leslie saw them coming and climbed sharply to wait for them upstairs. Grim and vengeful, the Germans closed in on the three American ships ahead, as if aware of their helplessness. Lurking back and above, Leslie Wade Wardner wondered how long his own ammunition would hold out. He had to get those two Nazis or they'd shoot Dave, Tommy and Knapp down like ducks.

An idea grew in Leslie's mind and he laughed softly to himself. Nosing down swiftly, he settled onto the tail of the nearest Messerschmitt, fixed it firmly on his sights, and jammed the fire-button. The first Nazi flared up and fell like a burning brand in the darkness. Wheeling cleanly, Leslie swooped onto the tail of the second German. It was going to be easy after all. . . .

Pressing in tight to make sure of the kill, Leslie thumbed the button once more. But this time nothing happened. His guns were empty and useless. Now all four of them were at the mercy of the single Messerschmitt.

*Like hell they were!* Leslie Wade Wardner snarled in savage defiance of such a notion.

"Got to do it the hard way, that's all, sweetheart," he said. "The old Leslie luck's run out at last." He thought he had cheated Death in the desert, but Death had merely granted him an extension of time. At least

it had given him the chance to save his brother and Tommy and the bomber.

Ahead, the Messerschmitt was once more creeping in to pick off the Lightnings and the Martin once after another. Leslie Wade Wardner set his teeth and opened the throttle wide. "Here we go, baby," he said. "And this time there won't be any raincheck."

The German was just starting to fire when Leslie overtook him, passed him, and sent the Lockheed Lightning in at him like a striking eagle. The planes crashed in a shocking impact and exploded with a tremendous concussion. The last thing Leslie Wade Wardner saw was the horrified face of the Nazi fier. Locked together in ghastly embrace, the aircraft went spinning down toward the Mediterranean Sea.

The Martin and the two Lockheeds went on their homeward way. There wasn't anything else at all to do.

WHEN they got back and landed on the flarelit field it seemed as if about fifteen people were missing.

"Frankly, I didn't expect to come back," Dave Wardner said.

"None of us did," said Tomasetti, and he was crying. "None of us would have if it hadn't been for your brother, Skipper. He was a *man!* I'm ashamed, Skipper. I wish I could've shaken hands with him."

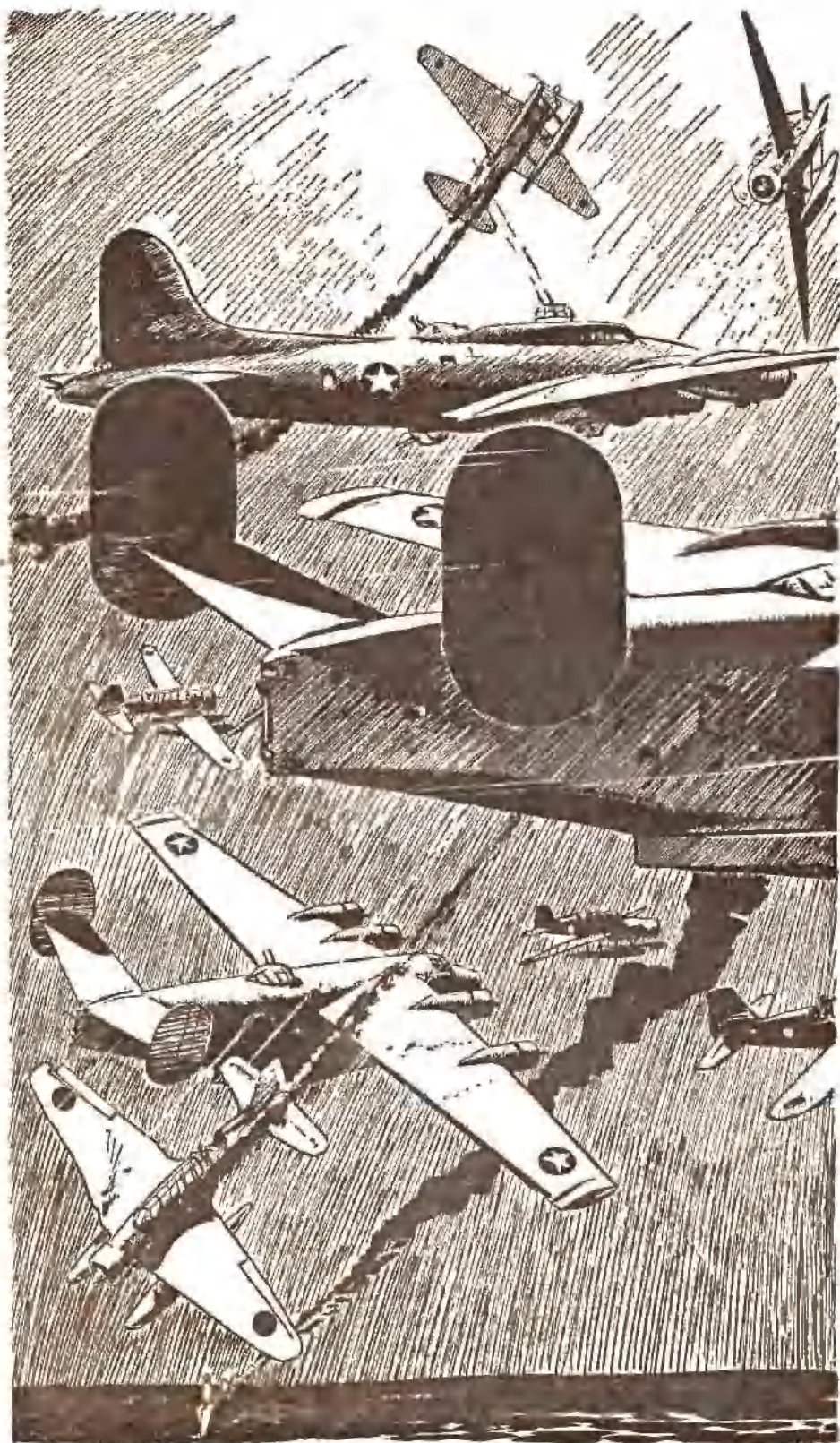
"He thought he owed it to us, I guess," Dave Wardner said, choking on his own dry and dreadful grief. "He grew up all of a sudden, Tommy—just in time to die."

"Too bad the Witch couldn't have seen it," Tomasetti sobbed quietly. "Did you see the way Jankwich went out himself? He and Leslie were the best I've ever seen."

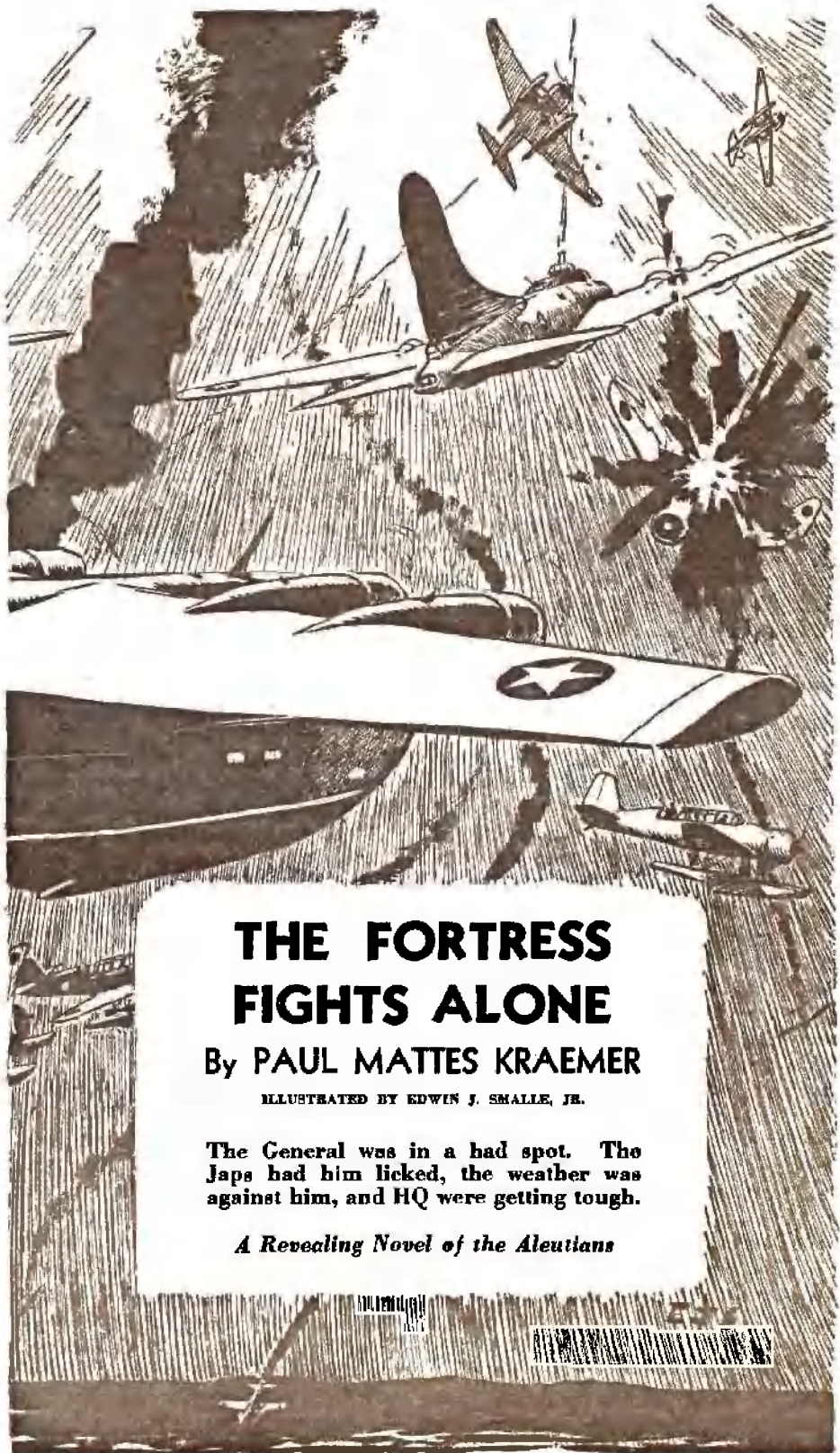
Dave Wardner put his arm about the boy's shoulders. They were the last two left of the original group, and it was a lonely empty feeling. The others were gone, bravely, gloriously: Piette, Red Connors, Edlund, Jankwich, and Leslie Wade Wardner. . . . But they had left something to fight on for, and there were more men like them to carry on the fight.

"Well, we did a good job, Tommy," said Dave Wardner gravely.

"You're damn right, Skipper!" Tomasetti said fiercely. "And we'll do a lot more of 'em, too."







# THE FORTRESS FIGHTS ALONE

By PAUL MATTES KRAEMER

ILLUSTRATED BY EDWIN J. SMALLE, JR.

The General was in a bad spot. The Japs had him licked, the weather was against him, and HQ were getting tough.

*A Revealing Novel of the Aleutians*

# THE FORTRESS FIGHTS ALONE

By PAUL MATTES KRAEMER

**K**ATKA . . . bleak and stormy. Fog-bound and rain-drenched home of the huge Coronado patrol bombers. Katka, secondary air and naval operations base in the middle of the Aleutian chain—seven hundred miles out in the cold North Pacific. Katka is the last jump-off for the American bombers headed for the entrenched Japs four hundred miles further westward on the island of Siska.

George Becker Lake, the brigadier in command, sat in his office in the camouflaged Base Headquarters building. He had a lot on his mind . . . a three-cornered headache. The Japs were infiltrating on Siska in large numbers under perfect weather protection. The same weather was practically demobilizing his PB2Y3s. Even in good weather, the Zeros polished off his sixty-six-thousand-pound flying boats in a manner which put the general in a continual rage.

Now, to top it off, the commanding officer of the Kodiak Base was demanding information on the Japanese expedition, not routine reports of reconnaissance operations but vital facts on the enemy's movements. Lake's face began to glow pink as he considered the Kodiak C.O.'s communication. With present weather conditions, terrific winds, blinding fog, torrential rains and cloud masses, the order was well-nigh impossible.

The general was in a bad spot. The Japs had him licked and Headquarters had challenged his ability. Even the weather was against him—a three-ply handicap. Lake determined that somehow, some way, he'd show all three where to get off.

Lake discarded all conventional maneuvers from consideration. He had already tried them all. Whatever he did would have to be new and probably very daring to be really effective. There was some half-formed hint struggling in his mind which he could not quite grasp. The harder he tried the more it eluded him:

Something from Marshal Bledoney's "Military Tactics." But he hadn't the book.

Suddenly he became alert and listened. There was an almost inaudible sound of distant engines high overhead in a drone of power. Lake wondered. The planes might be Japs coming in for an attack; that was now an ever-present probability. He had a flight out but it was not due in. The radio beam, when they dared to use it, was not on yet; too much danger of guiding in the Japs.

The drone quickly arose in volume. Lake let out a relieved breath. They were his ships. They came down in the nearby harbor, engines blasting the air in a heavy-throated crash of power.

Lake took up his problem again while waiting. Twenty minutes later there was a sharp rap on his office door. "Come in," the general invited, glad to shelve his headache for a while. His caller entered, Captain William Nolan, in command of the just arrived flight of patrol bombers.

"Back already, Nolan?" the general welcomed. "How'd you make out?"

The flight commander cursed. "Same old stuff. We haven't seen a patch of ground since we left!" Nolan pulled a chair before the general's desk and flopped into it.

There was little formality between the two. Not so very long ago both men were of equal rank and fifteen years of pioneering together in the bomber command had built up a strong friendship. Nolan was well set up physically. A typical military flyer. His was a strong face, the kind that made one feel he was instinctively a fighter.

Nolan detailed his flight's round trip to Siska. It was brief and little more than a weather report. Lake did not comment. It was what he had expected. Nolan's flight was a total loss. There was nothing to discuss.

"How's your new crew? How do they like Alaska?" Lake asked for want of a



better subject. New crew members were mixing in regularly.

Captain Nolan gave a sarcastic grunt. "They haven't seen it yet—for fog." He frowned and look displeased. "I've got a top crew," he went on, "except my navigator. I think he'll work out better with somebody else."

"What's the matter with him?"

"Smart-aleck," Nolan replied. "Just arrived here from school in Texas and he thinks the navigator rates AA-1. He acts as if he thinks the pilot is aboard just to handle the ship for him."

Lake nodded. "Yes, I've heard something of this new rivalry that's developing among the crews coming out of the schools down in the States."

Nolan's face creased in a scowl. "This chap fancies himself rather well. There's no rivalry about him. He's it and that's all there is to it. Now, take this last trip. We got to Siska all right, that is, the vicinity, but what does it count? The soup under us was so thick you could almost get out and walk on it. We might have been over the beach or on top of our target. But if you can't see your mark, what the hell?"

"Well, this chap, Markasen, laid out our course and kept nagging me with pointers and directions all the way. You might have thought I was taking a student flight! Then to top it all off, he tells me when we're over Siska harbor! Not the vicinity, mind you, but smack dab over the harbor! He made that plain. How do you like that?"

The general smiled. "Wouldn't think he'd get by the examiners. He isn't whacky, is he?"

"Not at all. That's the funny part of it. He was as serious about it as he could be. He was surprised that I wouldn't give orders to bomb!"

"Humph," Lake grunted thoughtfully. "Upon what does he base this uncanny ability to see through the soup?"

The captain scowled. "Conceit, I'd say! That kid's conceit would hold up anything!"

The general was still thoughtful. It was fantastic but it perked up his interest. If there was anything real about the captain's navigator's ability to spot unseen targets—

**B**UT no, he wouldn't grasp at straws. The factors of navigation were common knowledge and he knew of nothing which could give such transcendental accuracy. In clear weather, yes, but in soupy fog such as the entire Aleutian chain was under right now, it was impossible.

Lake looked up at the captain as a thought occurred to him. "By the way," he asked, oddly, "what kind of weather did you run through on the trip back?"

Nolan shrugged. "It was all the same, going and coming."

"And over the harbor—here at Katka?"

"Pretty thick," he said, soberly.

The general looked extremely interested. "And did this fellow Markasen lay the course back and spot you down in the harbor or did you all fumble around for it?"

"Yeah, we did come right down to it," the captain admitted just a bit sheepishly.

"Mmmm," Lake mumbled, thoughtfully. "That's mighty interesting, Captain."

The general seemed preoccupied in thought and he scarcely heard Nolan detailing some sort of collaboration with the Navy on a scouting venture. The general was debating whether he should risk making a fool of himself and call this Lieutenant Markasen in and quiz him.

"If you don't mind, Cap," Lake said suddenly, looking at his wrist watch and noting it was four-twenty, "I think I'll call your navigator in for a little talk."

Captain Nolan looked his surprise. Both at the interruption and the request. "Sure, it's okay with me," he said. But his expression did not confirm his words.

Lake put in a call for Markasen and in about ten minutes the lieutenant entered the office. Unlike the average enlisted man or officer of the lower ranks in the presence of a general officer, Markasen seemed very much at ease. At the general's request, he pulled up a chair. The preconceived impression Lake had of the man was quickly dispelled. Markasen's eyes gave him the feeling that the man was quite capable, alert and probably much above the average in intelligence. There was one thing about him he did not like; Markasen was entirely too much at ease, too cool and aloof. However, Markasen

did impress one as having something on the ball.

"Glad to have you up here with us, Lieutenant," Lake began in his deep cordial voice. There was a quality in the general's voice which always made the one addressed feel as though the general held him in particular esteem. "Captain Nolan gives me a very good report on you," Lake lied, realizing the man might get the wrong interpretation of being called in.

Markasen nodded and looked at Nolan with raised eyebrows. He was not fooled. "Thank you, sir, the feeling is mutual. I mean, between the Captain and myself."

Captain Nolan did not need to express in words what that feeling might be. The general could read it on his face.

"Ahh, Markasen," the general said, "under the present circumstances, particularly complicated by the present weather conditions, this garrison is in a nasty spot and the Captain and I were just discussing theoretically perfect navigation. Now, how close in your opinion could or, rather, can we attain bull's-eye navigation?"

The lieutenant had a ready answer. "You mean under adverse conditions, of course, sir. Well, I'd say that without radio or any contact and with visibility nil, the average pilot, under the conditions we have up here right now, could not approximate a position within thirty to fifty degrees of his destination. That is, for four to six hundred miles."

Lake chuckled. That was what he knew. More than a few of his PBs had gone out and had never come back and not through Jap gunfire either. He'd have to be more direct.

"How close, to be specific, could you come, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"Well, sir," Markasen answered, very matter-of-factly, "I think I could hit it within a twelve-mile radius, say, from here to Siska."

The general coughed. "That's nice going, Markasen. But it is wide of the mark from what I understand you did today. The Captain tells me you hit it on the nose. Now you give me a range of twelve miles."

Markasen smiled. "I did, but I didn't tell the Captain I saw a tiny hole through the soup. It was gone as soon as I saw it. That was just luck and it was no good

to try to use it. Even if we had tried, we couldn't have found that hole again to save our hides."

"That isn't the way I heard it!" Nolan exclaimed. "You claimed you steered us right into it!"

"That's all right, Captain," Lake interposed. "It's still good! But how do you do it, Lieutenant?"

"It's simple enough. I start off on a bearing. I know all the factors; air speed, drift, time, deviation, variation. I just keep orientated."

Lake said, "Yes I know, that's all elemental. Everybody does the same thing, but they don't hit their marks. Not in the stuff we have up here! You know as well as I, navigation is not a science, it is an art."

"Yes sir, that's right. With science, you do a thing and can tell just how you do it. In art, you also do the thing but you can't tell how you do it."

"Do you mean you can't tell me exactly how you keep out of a drift angle?"

"Well, sir," Markasen said, picking his words. "There's more to it than just watching your instruments. I've developed my own method. But if you please, sir, it is too technical to go into detail right now."

There was silence broken only by the seemingly loud ticking of the ornate clock on the wall. Lake was just where he had started, except for, perhaps, a little more confidence in Nolan's navigator. But that was not much to go on. Before he risked three-hundred-thousand-dollar ships and men's lives, he would have liked to have had something more tangible.

His thoughts drifted and all of a sudden the line from Marshal Bledoney's book popped into his mind: "Old ordnance and time-worn maneuvers can surprise the enemy into defeat when used with ingenuity and audacity under unexpected circumstances."

Lake did not sleep well that night. A very daring idea was forming in his mind. He rolled and tossed for a good three hours.

HE was awakened early by the rattling of the windows in a spanking breeze. He got up and looked outside. It was still dark and rain came tapping down

against the windows. He lit a cigarette and sat on the bed.

Even if Markasen turned out a dud, he had to do something. He would try Markasen's talent with a test flight of two Flying Forts and a couple of patrol bombers. If the attempt succeeded, he would make an attack in full force.

First Call seemed a long time coming, and Assembly unusually long. He told the adjutant to have Captain Nolan and Lieutenant Markasen in his office immediately after mess. Two engineering officers were told to hold themselves in readiness and to have a crew of armorers and riggers ready for orders.

The general had his cigar about half burned up when Nolan and Markasen put in appearance. He didn't waste any time on pleasantries.

"If you can't force an action through the enemy," he explained, "you can often go around him. Sometimes, if you're audacious, you can find a way to flank him. If you're smart enough, and if your method is sound, a trick always beats a frontal attack and it's cheaper.

"Now, these damned monkeys have had the weather made to order for them and so far the weather has beaten us. If the Japs can use the weather as a natural advantage, then, instead of regarding it as a handicap, we'll use it as an advantage ourselves! I'll promise you one thing. If my plans work out, those Japs on Siska will dive for their funk holes every time they hear an American airplane!"

The first step in Lake's plan took place in the main machine shop. It was a large building set off from the field, constructed and blended into the terrain. The engineer officers set their crews to work on two of the Flying Forts, installing five more gun positions, making eighteen guns in all. There was one more gun in the front greenhouse, doing away with the bombardier. One more top gunner, another in the made-over bomb-bay, and two more in the waist positions.

Captain Nolan watched the proceedings in frank disapproval. "I beg your pardon, sir, for uncalled-for advice, but this is a boner! No matter what you do, you just simply can't make a pursuit out of a bomber!"

6—Wings—Summer

"Who said they were going to be pursuits, Captain?" Lake retorted gruffly. "This is an innovation! I'm going to make your precious Forts into flying gunboats! We can't take fighters with us, but when we get these ready, we will have no need of them. These babies will serve just the same as a destroyer to a carrier."

"The idea's all right, maybe," Nolan objected, "but cutting into those members will weaken the ship's structure."

"The riggers will reinforce those places. It's the best we can do now. We've got to experiment. Later on we'll engineer the whole job. We'll get by."

"They'll be no more good as bombers with a gunner down there in the bomb-bay. You've already got a belly gunner."

"Of course not! They're not bombers at all any more! They're sky cruisers! Two belly-turrets will make it suicide for any fighter to climb up under these ships. I hope I'm not too busy to see the fun when they try it tomorrow."

In the next operation they got out two anti-aircraft-gun electronic range finders and mounted one in each of the patrol bombers. That was all they could spare. For the two Forts, they had to use some older sonic altimeters. The general figured these would be indispensable when they arrived at Siska. Landing blind on the island in a probable dense fog without them would likely prove disastrous.

For another item, Lake picked four of the base's best radio men, told them to ready-up two portable two-way outfits and gave the men specific details under which they would have to operate. Then a trip to the operations room. Here, Lake had the cartographer draw up a dozen grid-index maps of Siska Island. The harbor, and Jap installations likely to be in that vicinity, were blocked in close cross-reference scale.

It took fast work to get everything done in one day. An hour after evening mess, all flying officers and crews which Lake and Nolan had hand picked, assembled in the operations room for the detailing, coaching and discussion of their mission in the morning.

They were an unusually attentive lot this night. The whole base had been conjecturing on Lake's preparations all day.

Lake stood before them with his inevitable cigar.

"Gentlemen," he began, "I think you'll all be interested in taking part in a mission which for the first times utilizes a definitely adverse weather factor as an otherwise indispensable asset. In the few times we have found conditions clear enough for bombing, we also found the operation difficult without fighter support to keep off enemy attack in the air. This time, with a heavy fog and cloud strata between us and our target, we intend to bomb without interference.

"Also for the first time we are operating under protection of what we might call aerial battleships. These Forts we have reconstructed today have by far the greatest fire power of any warplane ever projected. Their radius of fire is universal. Imagine the problem fighters will have in attacking a squadron of them!"

The general picked up a pointer and turned to the large map behind him. "Here we have a four-hundred-mile flight to our target. Siska has an area of about thirty square miles. Our bombing area will be in the vicinity of the harbor, say about six square miles. Back here, west of the center of the harbor, is a great knoll. We'll land two radio men to act as directors for lateral index. Down here on the south side is Severs Head. We'll land another pair here to direct your vertical index. These men down under the fog will give the bombardiers a radio cross-index on each burst."

"Those two lookout points where you intend to place observers," someone interrupted, "those are strong points. Maybe anti-aircraft positions. How will you post your men there?"

"Well, after all, this is no picnic," Lake replied. "No operation such as this can be made with every move safe. Our men can fulfill their mission without getting too near. If they are careful, I think, they have a good chance to sneak into their positions."

"Suppose we find clear weather when we get there tomorrow?" another officer asked.

"It's all the same, gentlemen, we're prepared. That's what we've got the two new Forts for. Only thing is, we'll have a battle on our hands. Understand now, while this mission is a test attack, it will

differ from a full-force bombardment only in the number of ships engaged.

"Now, about our directing of fire. These maps are sectored in hundred-foot intervals. I think, flying nearly blind, our pilots will not be able to correct their headings any closer than that after making a hundred-eighty-degree turn and taking another pass.

"I want to caution the ground observers and the bombardiers especially. Exactly ten seconds after the bombs hit, the observers will report. Vertical first, lateral second. Reports will come only once and in code. You bombardiers had better be on your toes! We know the monkeys will be on theirs and we run the risk of their radio men detecting our system. If they do, they'll track your wave or jam your broadcast. Remember this; every word gives their listeners a chance. Code will cut this down. Any excess talk is just an invitation for them to come and get you. The radio observers will have to be on guard against attack!"

It took another hour for Lake to get everything clear. Assignment of pilots, method of blind flight, flying formation, signals.

Then all hands went to quarters.

## II

**I**N the morning, they assembled in the ready-room for a brief check-up and meteorological data. Out they went then through a chill fog and a drizzling rain to their ships. Captain Nolan was in command of the four-plane flight and piloting one of the two Fortresses. The group split up and the big-boat crews followed Lake down to the harbor and went aboard the two flying boats.

Lake was piloting one of the PBs. This was a personal experiment and he felt he could not take anything less than an active part in the attack. As a pilot of big boats, he needed no odds from anyone. Lieutenant Markasen sat across from him as co-pilot and navigator. Lake looked back, got the okay for the crew and heard the hatch slam and secure. Down below and forward, through the anchor-hatch, a crewman waited for the order to cast off.

Lake cast a quick, expert eye over the big instrument panel, checked his engine



temperature, switches, controls and set his prop pitch. Then came the business of starting the four engines. They barked into life in great, lazy coughs, then ticked off in a flat, measured drone. They had already had a warm-up and they kicked out steady on throttle test.

Lake shouted and the anchor hatch banged as they headed out. The drone rose to a four-engine chord of thunder as Lake's right hand grabbed a handful of throttles. They roared out across the bay and the hull shook with the staccato slap of the waves. They climbed to a thousand feet to rendezvous with the other PB and the two Forts. The weather was nearly as bad as the day before. Everything below and above them was obliterated. The other three ships quickly caught up with them and they were off on their gamble.

Lake checked his heaters and adjusted the props and set the ship on automatic, then glanced over at Markasen.

Markasen looked busy and serious. "Correct your course five degrees south," he said, stowing his chart-board.

That gave Lake a confirmation of his expectations. He had purposely offset his heading to see if Markasen would detect it. Markasen was all right—so far. He couldn't have determined anything from the spinning compass. Lake corrected his course and reset the directional gyro.

They flew on monotonously through the murky stratus. The steady, ponderous, monochord of the powerful engines rapidly cut down the distance. Lake was doing his own navigating but Markasen frequently corrected his course. Markasen's method was not very tangible. He sat up in his seat and there was a sober, intent look on his face. There was almost no conversation between them.

There was nothing to cheer about.

The cloud strata and fog was getting thicker with time. The other three ships tightened up their V formation. Lake could scarcely see more than half of his wing ships. He ordered all of them to use their improvised adlis contact lamps. The drizzling rain developed into a good fall and flooded over the windshield. Although they couldn't see anything, the rain-splattered windshield, as though under a hose, made Lake feel a tinge of that

loss of orientation which, to an inexperienced pilot, can rise to a panic.

The general did have one very real worry . . . that his ships might become separated and lost. He looked out, left and right. All he could see of the ships was a hazy outline, but the flare of the red adlis came through the rain reassuringly. Lake looked over at Markasen, who seemed to be taking it in stride. Markasen's intent expression had not changed since they had left the harbor. There was a real doubt growing in Lake's mind at last that Markasen could navigate a true course in this fog and rain squall any more than anyone else. He had been watching Markasen stealthily all the way out to see how he did it, but all Markasen had done to guide his course was to consult his intricately dialed wrist watch, the tachometer and keep the gyro precession set.

"Neutralize your controls," Markasen requested, after a long silence.

Lake's face showed angry surprise. "What? Again? Can't do it now. We'll snack into our wing 'plane in this wind."

Markasen's voice took on a tone of command. "Rev up and get ahead then! You can hardly expect me to use a drift sight in this stuff!"

That was another idiosyncrasy of Markasen's navigation. Every so often Markasen had asked him to do that to check their drift. But with the ground obliterated, Lake saw no sense in it.

"You're not flying a range now, Lieutenant. If you can't see the ground, what are you going to use to check on?"

"The plane itself, sir," Markasen said, with a little more respect for military rank. "It is necessary!"

Lake wasn't going to mess up his formation in this squall. It was dangerous. He did carefully straighten his tabs and trim from their drift position without changing the speed or position of the planes. Markasen casually looked through his window for a moment, then nodded to Lake, signifying he had made his check. Lake hadn't paid much attention the other times, but Markasen had always done that before, too. It didn't make sense.

"Correct your course two degrees south, sir," Markasen said. "I think we're getting a bit of wind off the Japanese cur-

rent." Lake kicked the rudder back on the indicated heading.

"What do you see out the window?" Lake asked, curiously.

"Can't see much in this fog, sir," Markasen replied and Lake thought the reply was evasive.

Lake did not press the point. They flew on in the downpour, the sixteen engines of the four bombers blasting out their steady, minor-toned roar. They had been in the air now for about an hour and fifty minutes. They should be closing in on their target. Markasen knew it and asked for another check and Lake, somewhat disgruntled, gave it to him.

"It won't be long now," Markasen said.

Lake noted a new interest in Markasen's voice. "What's all the mystery, Lieutenant? What have you got out there?"

Markasen looked reluctant. "A sort of drift gadget, sir."

Lake snorted. "You mean to tell me you're navigating with some sort of damned weather-vane?"

"I'm using a scientific indicator, sir."

"Gad! If I had known that. . ."

"Yes, sir, I thought you might not have made this attack mission if I had told you about it."

"Yeah? What did you care whether we did or not?"

"I heard about you, sir. About that battle of Midway. That's why I wanted to come up here when I left the bomber school down in Texas. I wanted action."

That stopped the rush of words Lake was on the point of pouring on Markasen. He said, "I'd have made this sortie as a matter of course, Lieutenant. I just thought—Oh well, skip it."

"I knew I could do it," Markasen explained. "Besides, I didn't want too much talk about it. You see, I haven't got it patented yet."

Lake felt his gorge rising. Here they were, racing along in an impenetrable rain squall. Lake knew in his bones he could never find Siska and here this punk was calmly resting the safety of the four bombers and sixty men on a trick flying gadget!

"Why, you idiot! What's so hot about that gadget? You can do the same thing by watching your tail assembly!"

Markasen's face heated. "I'll be damned

if you can, sir," he shouted. He studied the gyro, tach', and his watch again. Lake noted he skipped the airspeed indicator.

"What's the matter with the airspeed indicator?" he asked, sarcastically. "You might stick a couple factors off that for your horoscope, too."

"Too inaccurate. I've got my own system of determining airspeed," Markasen replied tartly.

It was odd, Lake thought. A dangerous bombing mission—flying blind in a solid cloud mass—had not fazed the Lieutenant, but a slur on his method of navigation had made him hot under the collar.

"We're about over our target, sir," Markasen said, after a long silence.

"Yeah? By the gadget or by guess?" Lake asked, sarcastically.

"Better start working your electronics before we miss it."

Lake spoke into the transmitter and gave the order for the specialists to start poking around below for their objective. The electronic range-finders could detect ground and altitude unerringly despite weather conditions. That was Lake's reason for mounting them in the ships. Erratic meteorological conditions and temperature could make the altimeters on the instrument board worthless; might cause them to crash. For regular use, however, the electronics were too awkward and bulky.

"Eleven hundred feet!" came the voice of the rangeman.

Lake's heart skipped a beat. Lucky he had brought those electronics! His altimeter showed twenty-six hundred. It was a near thing they had not already crashed on Siska Peak.

"How about peaks?" Lake called back. "Watch out for high points!"

There was a short wait. "High point about twenty-four hundred feet; hearing zero nine five."

Lake looked out and checked the positions of his planes. This was the big moment. Markasen had made good!

HE opened the inter-plane radio and gave the other ships the agreed short signal. The rangemen kept poking below and calling out their soundings until Lake had a good outline of their position.

He put the PB into a long glide and cut

his manifold pressure down to seventeen inches. He listened intently to the soundings as they lost altitude and prayed they did not crash into the coast. Five hundred feet! Three hundred, one-fifty . . . if luck only stayed with them . . . if only they did not run into a Jap patrol ship. . . .

Then Lake let out a relieved breath as he noted the fog brighten under them and then saw the bluish, fog-hazed water. He leveled off and feathered on his guns to thirteen-fifty revs.

Now came a trying operation. By prearranged flight, the other three planes rose just inside the fog ceiling which was about fifty to seventy-five feet, and kept contact with Lake's ship. Lake cruised to within bare sight of the beach, changed to lateral course until they passed the end of the island, then back to the opposite end to determine the landing point of his observers. The observers had to be landed advantageously to enable them to reach their posts as quickly as possible. The ships could not cruise indefinitely while the observers walked miles from a mistaken landing.

Lake finally picked his spot, set the big PB down as close to the slate-blue, rock-studded beach as he dared, and watched his two intrepid radiomen make off in their rubber raft. He waited until they were clear, then headed around and took off. On contact with the other three ships again, he moved cautiously down to the south side. It was easier here, as Lake had a landmark, Severs Head, to spot their position, but he had to keep an extreme range from it, as the point was undoubtedly fortified. That meant a longer wait after his last two radiomen had been landed.

On final rendezvous, the four ships headed away from the island and went into a flying circle to kill something like an hour and fifteen minutes while the four radio observers got to their positions.

Lake's mind filled with apprehension for his radiomen as he cruised and waited. It was now six a.m. It wasn't likely any Japs would be out this early and as far from their cantonment as the points where they had landed. Under such dense fog and rain they would undoubtedly feel safe and let down their vigilance.

But still, the risk was there. Too, the men might become lost, they might find themselves stymied by some unforeseen impasse of the terrain of the island. The rain took Lake's attention from his foreboding. It was coming down now in torrents. A stiff, spanking wind was picking up, too. It called for the utmost care, keeping the four ships in contact. For better visibility, Lake dropped the flight under the low ceiling and was not pleased to find it had raised a hundred feet. It might mean clearing weather.

Markasen voiced his thought. "Sudden downpour after a long rain. And strong warm wind. . . . Japanese current pulling it up. Maybe this spell is clearing at last."

Lake looked at his watch. "Time to get down to business," he said, tersely. "We'll take up the weather forecast later on." He signaled.

They headed again for Siska Island, climbing as they went. Lake gauged their position over the harbor and cantonment and set their altitude at three thousand feet. They cruised back and forth a couple of times working the electronic range-finders. Lake was ready now for bombing. He was impatient for the observer's signal, especially so, because his men might be a half-hour yet before finding their positions.

Then it came! Lake scarcely needed to give the crew orders. They were alert and waiting. Lake could only grope for the first burst and he maneuvered the two PBs and two (now bombless) Forts into their run. The bombardier under these conditions did not operate independently but only on Lake's orders. The bomb release on the other PB would release on light signal.

"Bomb-bay doors open!" Lake ordered. "Open! Number one selector ready!" said the bombardier over the interphone.

"Bombs away!" Lake ordered, reversing the usual routine.

The general waited for the detonation. Flying blind, it was important, vitally, to keep orientation; position at release, time of burst, time of his observer's report, dead reckoning of position on swing-back, all affected the accuracy of the next pass. In a sudden frenzy of movement, lest he should miss it, he jerked open his window and thrust his head into the torrent of

wind and rain. A good thing it was he did, too. He just did hear the muffled flat jar of the explosion under them. He counted off the seconds on his wrist watch.

"V-four-one-hundred right," came a voice in the ear-phones.

"L-Zero-three-hundred right," reported the second observer.

Good boys! Lake thought. And not a bad guess either! He had put the first burst down in the lower left center. Not vital, but there were without doubt some installations there. The important thing was that they had spotted the confines of the harbor interior. Lake headed the flight around for the pass back across the plat. He judged a good release point and gave his other patrol bomber the *ready* light which was flying at his left and just behind them. Conserving bombs, the second ship had not released until Lake had determined on the target.

"Bombs away!" Lake ordered for the second time. If he had guessed right, the Monkeys would get a good hot-shot this time. He scanned his watch again for dead reckoning and Markasen also took up the check.

"Watch that peak!" Lake called through his inter-phone to the sounders on the range-finders as the thought suddenly recurred to him of the ever-present danger of their crashing into Mount Siska . . . if the specialists did not keep that point centered.

"Watching, sir," the rangeman called back. "Bearing zero-two-five, distance, seventy-eight hundred feet!"

For a moment, Lake was in a rage. He was trying to listen to two men at once and he missed the report of the ground observers.

"Left rudder! Forty-five degrees! Drop it! Quick!" Markasen shouted as Lake looked at him, about to ask if Markasen had caught the report.

Markasen's face was twisted into a snarl as he shrieked the command and Lake instantly decided the Lieutenant knew what he was doing. Simultaneously, he kicked his rudder and flicked the signal light to Number Two and gave the bombardier the order to dump.

"Markasen!" Lake shouted, "this had better be good! If you wasted those two shots I'll kick you out the bay!"

Markasen started to explain. "That last report. . ."

"Quiet!" Lake roared.

MARKASEN clammed up, catching Lake's purpose at once.

"Bull's-eye!" the radioman below them reported elatedly. "V-two-six-hundred, left."

"L-three-hundred, left," came the lateral report. "Right on the button!"

Lake smiled broadly at Markasen. "Nice going, Lieutenant. Good thing you didn't muff that last report as I did."

"You didn't muff it, sir. If you hadn't been on your toes, maybe we wouldn't have made this last burst. We might have smeared up on Mount Siska!"

Now that Lake had found his mark, which was the power plant, warehouses, sanitation facilities and probably some barracks, they made six more bomb-runs. It was a hazardous business now. The anti-aircraft guns were sending up a barrage but, of course, it was wild and it was blind. Occasional showers of shell fragments fell back on the ships like hail. The Japs were shooting fast and it was a constant possibility that a shell would plow through any or several of the planes.

In their absorption of their lethal business, none of them had noticed the clearing weather.

"Fog's blowing off, sir," Markasen warned. "We'd better work fast. They'll have fighters up after us any time now."

Lake studied the weather. "You're right! It is clearing up." But still he made no move to break off.

The wind was pretty stiff as they made the next pass and they ran into a great clear space. Lake looked down. The wind was rolling the strata into large, gray oval masses and driving them before it. Lake could see more than a thousand feet below him.

"We'll finish up and get out of here," Lake remarked.

Markasen looked dubious. "It's clearing too fast, sir. I don't think we'll have time. If they get fighters up they'll make it impossible to take off our observers. We need all the cloud protection we can get!"

That was exactly what Lake was thinking. But this was an experimental bomb



attack. The opportunity was hard coming and they had taken a great risk doing it. Leaving without releasing every bomb, without striking every possible blow, was going against the grain. He decided to chance it and headed back over the harbor.

The general had nice shooting there. The system worked like a charm. But the weather suddenly made him regret his choice. On the last pass, he did not need his observers at all. He took, therefore, somewhat more feeling in sticking his last bomb in a direct hit in the dock area on his own sight. He poured on the guns then and they headed south over the sea. He ordered the radioman to signal the ground observers to rendezvous in readiness to be taken off.

Off the island, they split up into two pairs, a PB and a Fort, a PB and a Fort. Captain Nolan flew back around to pick up the observers on the west side while Lake's two ships went down to the south side.

Lake swung around far off the island because visibility was increasing rapidly. To offer as little chance as possible of being seen, he came in low by sea. He cut his throttles down to fifteen hundred revs and flattened out at fifty feet over the water. As the ship neared shore, Lake's heart sank. He made out his two daring observers but he knew he could not take them off!

That spanking wind had not only cleared off the fog and cloud but it was piling up big ground swells which were breaking on the narrow beach in a white, frothy surf. The two men stood there, Lake could not help but feel, in fatalistic dejection, watching the big PB lumbering in. They made no attempt to get the rubber raft lying behind them into the water. They knew they wouldn't have the slightest chance getting past those breakers. One of the men raised a hand in a wave to the ship. Not a hail, Lake thought, but a farewell.

The men on shore knew Lake was as helpless as they. If Lake set the big boat down, plenty dangerous in such large swells, he'd never get off again either.

Nor was it possible for the two radiomen to go around to the west side of the island where the combers were parallel to shore. They were hemmed in by huge crags and fissures.

Lake ordered a crewman to toss out an

emergency kit to the two marooned men.

There was no time to dawdle. Lake felt a constricting lump in his throat and his mouth tightened into a hard line as he poured twenty-seven inches of coal into his four Wasps and corkscrewed back to sea.

They swung around to meet the other two ships and met due west of the island. With the increased visibility they sighted the other pair easily. Lake welcomed the turn in weather. He had another job to do. Photographic reconnaissance on this mission was unexpected luck. He signaled Nolan's flight to follow. He had to be niggardly with communication on account of Jap interception and gave the Captain a terse coded "Photo."

The Captain's case-hardened disposition could at times be stubborn to the point of being foolhardiness. He spoke over the inter-plane radio to Lake. "Get them?"

"No! Breakers! Impossible!" Lake answered, in a rising temper at Nolan's breach of prudence. If he had not answered at all, he knew, Nolan would have put more talk on the air. Lake had not asked Nolan if he had picked up his two men. Had it been possible, Lake knew, Nolan would have them aboard.

They were in cruising V formation again and approaching Siska harbor to bisect it for the photographers and then, Lake intended, to head for home. They would run into anti-aircraft fire but, at full speed, it would be wild. Lake opened his guns and the big Consolidated leaped out like a shot, engines blasting in a pressure which seemed enough to split the exhaust stacks. They shot across the harbor like a comet and they got their pics. Lake felt a pang as he thought of the two observers.

Radio silence wasn't important now and Captain Nolan's voice came through the inter-plane phone. "Nolan to General Lake. Sir, what are you going to do about those two men?"

"We'll have to leave them. We can't land and they can't get through the surf. If we wait for that sea to smooth up, probably none of us would ever get away from here."

"Maybe I can pick them up."

Lake's voice was a rasp.

"Do you suppose I'd have left them there if we'd had a chance?"

"I can't go on, sir, without a try at it."

"What the hell are you talking about, Captain? You want to try landing that Fort on the beach?"

"Maybe."

"You're crazy! That beach is strewn with rocks! You couldn't set down there without tearing up your bottom. If you got it on, you'd never get it off! Too short! We've got to get out of here! They'll have a batch of fighters up any time now!"

There was silence after that. Lake wasn't sure about Nolan. He looked back to Nolan's ship at the tail of the V. He was just in time to see the big fort swinging around for a hundred-and-eighty-degree turn.

"Hey! Nolan! Damn your insubordinate hide! Come back here!" Lake bellowed into his transmitter. "I'll strip every button off your shirt!"

Nolan did not answer. Lake took a quarter of a minute to make a decision. He turned the flight around to follow Nolan's fast-disappearing Fortress. His anger at Nolan's action had cooled fast. Leaving those men had come hard, and going back was unconsciously soothing.

But with the Japs already aroused, going back was likely to become dangerous business.

### III

**T**HEY caught up with the runaway Fort and the reformed flight swung wide of the island to come in as Lake had before. But Lake did not follow Nolan's plane up the beach. He put the three ships into a flying circle to wait well off shore. He watched Nolan make three passes across the length of the beach and then head away.

The General spoke into his set. "Come on, Nolan. What are you going to do, wait for the monkeys to catch you practically grounded?"

Nolan's ship swept around and up the west of the island. "If we could only get those men over here," Nolan said, now out of sight. "If any of the Nips dive on me, we'll give your new extra top turret a tryout!"

Lake's patience was barely under control. "Never overplay your luck," he

shouted back nearly loud enough to dispense with the radio. "If you're looking for more space, leave off! It isn't there! The Japs haven't a runway on the island themselves! There's nothing but hard rock. Even the Monkeys couldn't cut it!"

That was the only apparent explanation for their not having been attacked before now. It was also the best evidence that one or more Jap carriers were standing by in the near vicinity. Lake did not mind a fight if it was necessary, but he did not relish the prospect of exposing his four ships to fighting off thirty to fifty Jap fighters when they could have gotten off unscathed.

On their return, Lake had opened his short-wave receiver. The two stranded observers were not visible on the shore. When they had left them the first time, they were not set up but they might be now. Nolan was still out of sight and Lake was on the point of calling him when the short-wave started to crackle. Lake tuned it in. "Vertical calling Lake. . . . Vertical calling Lake. . . ."

The general's hard pan broke into a grin. "Lake calling Vertical," Lake answered. "Where are you? What luck are you having getting out? Can we help?"

"We did get out of that pocket, sir! We're over near Lateral's position," the observer said.

"Hurrah!" Lake called back, "Get over on the west beach just beyond the cape and we'll take you off."

"Not now, you won't, sir," the radio-man replied. "Call in that Flying Fort that's cruising around. The Nips are shooting off fighters to get after you. We can see them from here. This place is all rock. There is no landing field. They're sending their fighters up with three catapults and they land on a short runway with arresters."

"I thought it would be something like that," Lake remarked. "What have they been waiting for? What's on the way?"

"Our first burst knocked out one of the catapults and damaged the other two. They just got them going. Their fighters look like Mitsubishi ninety-sevens."

"Good work, mister! Now get over above that cape and be ready! After we get through handling the Monkeys we'll come after you."

"Yes, sir. Give us a good show, Skipper!"

Captain Nolan's Fort was coming up fast as Lake flicked his inter-plane switch. "Lake calling. All ships report in. Prepare for attack!" All of them acknowledged at once.

Then came the deluge.

Within thirty seconds the air shook with the blast of a squadron of diving Jap Navys. Lake slammed thirty-seven inches of pressure into his screaming Wasps and put the four ships into a Lufbery circle. The odds were perhaps thirty fighters against them but Lake's interest was not so much concerned with their danger as with the performance of his experimental flying gun-boats.

There was no sun to blind his gunners now and the crack crews went into action as one man. They sounded like a dozen bunches of glorified Chinese fire-crackers going off at once. From the two Forts with thirty-six positions, some of them with twin fifties, and ten more on the PBs, they gave the little Rising Sun brothers a veritable lead hosing such as they had never gotten before. Lake's battery of fifty-caliber machine guns tore the Japs visibly to pieces.

The diving Japs rocketed down as though they would never stop. Two of them seemed to be headed into an inevitable crash into Lake's bomber. The ship weaved under their air-wash. But they did not bluff Lake with that stunt. Lake made no attempt to dodge the streaking Jap flight as they flattened into their pull-out. Six of them did not pull out at all but went right through their circle, non-stop to sea.

Lake thought it best to try for a little altitude as the screaming Nips zoomed with their momentum. He spoke into his transmitter and lifted the big boat into as steep a chandelle as his four roaring Pratts would pull it. But the Nips didn't let him get much needle travel. He saw them reform preparatory to another attack.

Lake was satisfied as to the ability of his four planes to "take it." He decided to dish some of it out. He gave the order crisply and slammed the throttles. The four ships moved into a line of twos, echelon, at left oblique to the on-rushing Nips' course. They tried to get on full

tail attack. Lake counteracted that somewhat by racing into an attempt to cut his angle. But it was all right . . . he'd teach the Monkeys to stay away from these babies.

"Come on, you woodchucks!" he shouted. "I've got a little surprise package for you!"

"Thank you for the compliment," said an unmistakable Japanese voice in Lake's ear-phones. "Only an unspeakable Yankee should know what a nasty bite a woodchuck has."

The battery of the four United States ships cut Lake's profane reply short as they opened up another hosing into the Japs. Lake grinned in satisfaction with his experiment. The Monkey flight moved as though it had run into a thunderhead. Their ships scattered in all directions, except those mortally hit.

But they were game. They came back again. They had a clever leader. He attacked from directly overhead this time. That was Lake's most awkward fire angle. But it was not an easy position for the Japs to hold either. Lake's PB suddenly sounded like the inside of a boiler with an air-gun on the outside. A line of holes stitched across his cowling. He banked and squirmed the ship out of fire.

The Jap squadron had lost half their ships by now and they had learned to keep a wary distance. They were stubbornly staying overhead. Lake began a neck-breaking maneuver to either get up to them, coax them down, or cut his angle of fire so he could get all his guns to bear on them, except, of course, his belly-guns.

In his concentration, Lake had forgotten everything but the business in hand. His eye fell on Markasen. The navigator was slumped against the cowling, unconscious, held in his seat by his safety belt. He was bleeding profusely at the base of his neck.

"Hey! Somebody back there!" Lake shouted toward the rear. "Bring a compress and take care of the navigator!"

**T**HEN began for Lake, a bitter, angry, back and forth, fast race in ascending arcs. When he couldn't climb, he moved off on a lateral. Anything to keep moving . . . anything to equalize the altitude of the battling ships or decrease the fire

angle. Lake's heavy ships could not outmaneuver the Jap fighters, of course, but thanks to his tenacity and the Japs' moth-and-the-flame desire to mix it, they did close in.

The Japs finally had to come into the full scope of the American guns or run off. But they did not run off until Lake, successful at last, gave the Monkeys a devastating taste of his full fire-power. Under full fire, even fifteen Jap fighters could not last long under the battery of belching fifties and there were only seven left to break off for home under full throttle.

Back over on the west end of Siska, Lake had no enemy interference in taking off his two observers. Then, jubilantly, he was in the air again and off for home. He put the ship on automatic and called his captains to report in.

They had not fared so badly. He felt an intense gratification in the mission and his method. Thanks to the break in getting for once a clear view of the cantonment and the harbor, his suspicions and summation of conditions on Siska were verified. The Jap facilities were too extensive. The Navy was going to have to come in and give the Japanese a working over.

They began running into thick weather again an hour after leaving Siska. The temperature dropped rapidly. They bored through the cloud mass and fog. Darkness and rain and wind whipped the four ships up and down and brought back the fatiguing job of keeping contact. But they could use running lights now.

It got worse and thicker as they went. Lake had flown blind in as bad weather many times but always with some sort of beacon or radio range. His totally blind flights without radio had never before been over such a long distance as this four-hundred-mile flight to Siska.

To make his job far more hazardous, there was a forty-five-degree wind blowing against them from the northeast, result of the turbulence set up by the warm Japanese current and the cold Arctic front. He tried dropping the flight down to sea level, just over the water. That was no good either. Ceiling was almost zero and tricky gusts of wind several times nearly hurled them crashing into the sea. Lake

climbed back, up and up, trying to get above to clear weather, but at twenty-seven thousand feet they were no nearer a clear sky than before. Worse, up here, air turbulence was greater than at four thousand. Lake took the flight back down. Static conditions had long since made his compass useless. About all Lake could do was to keep the plane in level flight.

They had been on the return trip for more than two hours. During this time and since they had left Siska, Markasen had lain on the floor back in the navigator's compartment, too weak to sit up. They were overdue at Katka by a half-hour. Lake had done his best and failed. He had only a vague idea where they were. This was an extremity which justified his breaking radio silence. He was lost!

He switched in the short wave and called the Katka base. He got no answer, not even a signal. There could be many reasons for that. Perhaps the base was on an alert, even under attack from a carrier. There were numerous conditions of atmospheric disturbances which blacked out radio reception. Lake asked a crewman if Markasen was strong enough to come to the cockpit.

Markasen's figure loomed in the area behind him and as Lake turned, the navigator slipped wearily into his seat. His face was pale and his eyes were wide in apprehension.

"Feeling better?" Lake asked.

Markasen nodded.

"My navigation hasn't been so hot," Lake went on. "Can't get a signal from the base, so the radio compass is dead. We've had a strong cross headwind ever since we left Siska. Compass has been spinning like a top. We're about thirty-five minutes overdue—think you can steer us in?"

A pained look came over Markasen's face. He seemed alarmed. "No!" he replied, and there was a note of fear in his voice.

"Why the hell not?" Lake asked, "That's what we brought you along for!"

"I know," Markasen said, dully. "But I've been out cold. You've covered almost the entire distance. I've got to work the trip from the beginning or I lose orientation. Don't you see, I haven't anything to go on to build up a running, ahh . . . an



alignment of the course flown. I'm all at sea!"

"If you don't snap out of it, Markasen," Lake said brusksly, "you damn soon will be and I don't mean literally!"

## IV

LAKE knew the lieutenant was groggy. Markasen was wounded, had lost considerable blood. That alone was enough to take the starch out of him. A man does not lose courage immediately after being wounded. Let him lie for a while and his courage is apt to be gone. Flying blind, waiting for gas to give out and then an inevitable crash . . . there were few who could face that without cracking.

Lake was too strong for it. His emotions had been schooled too long and he had been in this situation before and lived through it. But he had to take Markasen in hand.

"I can't!" Markasen replied hopelessly. "That bullet carried away my gauge before it hit me. I was looking at it when I was hit."

"That's bad!" Lake agreed. He held Markasen's indicator in respect since Siska, yet did not believe Markasen was helpless without it. "But you're a navigator. Your ability isn't tied up in a gadget!"

"It is, under these conditions. That gadget, as you call it, was a real trick. I could tell airspeed, drift, heading, and wind velocity with it!"

Lake felt like putting his impatience into words. Instead, he said, "Young man, I know you better than you know yourself. I don't believe it! You're confident of that device, of course, but believe me, it is only a fetish. Now, I can give you all the dope for a reckoning. You get busy and we'll compare notes."

Markasen looked sour. "And I suppose you can tell me your exact drift, constant airspeed, time and . . ."

"The hell with all that!" Lake interrupted angrily. "All you need is to apply the data I give you. Then, maybe, the two of us can approximate our position."

Markasen looked below in sudden interest. "There's a clear space down there, sir!"

Lake looked downward and ahead. Sure enough, the murky soup had thinned out

and the cloud and fog had separated into small masses of strata. Far from good visibility, but it gave them enough to see a change in the color of the murk under them. That meant clearing air above the water, letting the color through.

"Maybe we can get above this stuff now," Markasen said. "If we could get a shot at Polaris and get a line of position."

"Don't think so," Lake said, shaking his head. "It doesn't clear that fast. Probably just a big thermal. However, we might find a ceiling down there. We'll go down and see."

Lake led the four ships down in an easy glide. He was right, there was a fairly clear ceiling over the blue ocean reaching some three hundred feet. They had hit a warm sector.

"So far, so good," Lake remarked. "We can do very nicely with a breathing spell. Keeping contact in that stuff beats a man down. But if I'm any judge, we're due to run into a line squall."

Markasen bent over and fingered the radio controls. "You reckoned for too much drift," he said. "We should be over land—north of here." The phones rewarded Markasen with some almost inaudible sound.

"Put your loop on it," Lake advised.

Markasen rotated the loop antenna and Lake ruddered the plane to zero and the sound came in strong.

"Hnmm," Lake exclaimed. "Doesn't mean anything to me! That's code but it isn't ours. And it's coming from the wrong bearing, too."

They cruised on, not sure, for the moment, that the radio signal was definitely out of bounds for them. They scudded low, just off the jutting, slate-blue headland of the coast. Lake headed the four ships in a slow, three-hundred-sixty-degree loop while Markasen searched around with his antenna for possible reception from another quarter. Then, at long last the belated acknowledgment to Lake's call to the Katka base came through.

"Arcturus calling Eagle . . . Standing by. . ."

"Eagle calling Arcturus," Lake answered. "We're lost. Give us a directional signal on estimated bearing. Try one-three-zero." Lake turned to Marka-

sen. "Put your direction finder on one-thirty."

There was a short wait. "Arcturus to Eagle," said the voice in the phones. "Signal is on." But there was no sound in their phones and the needle was dead.

"Eagle calling," Lake called in. "Try one-two-zero. Work counter-clock to one-zero-zero. Then back to one-five-zero."

"Arcturus to Eagle," said the voice from the base. "Will hold signal on one-two-zero for five minutes."

Lake put the PB on a due-east heading while Markasen rotated his antenna to two-hundred-and-seventy on the azimuth. They got reception after about two minutes' cruise. The earphones buzzed with the null signal; they were on the beam! Lake turned the ship until Markasen could spike the loop dead on, then set the directional gyro to zero.

That put all of them back to normalcy. Lake grinned at Markasen. "Well, Lieutenant, looks like it's all over but the shouting!" Then the general spoke into his transmitter to the base. "Eagle to Arcturus. Hold signal for ten minutes until we establish course, then proceed with emergency schedule eight."

Schedule Eight was an arranged plan. Under it, signal broadcast for a lost homing plane would be sustained for intervals of two minutes followed by twelve minutes of silence. During the silent period, the ship would depend on the directional gyro. When the homing ship reached its dead-reckoned field, it would ask for a landing check. The object was, of course, to offer as little presence on the air as possible. It was dangerous and to be used only in an extremity.

Lake headed the four ships in a fast climb. They already had a thousand feet and he wanted at least two before leveling off for checking course before the signal cut off.

"What do you make our distance?" Lake asked Markasen, who had been checking Lake's dead-reckoning.

"About a hundred-twenty miles on this course to Katka."

Lake laughed. "You don't rate me so high as a navigator, do you?"

Markasen's reply was cut short by their mutual sudden interest in their 'phones. There was an inexplicable sound coming

in instead of the null signal, the steady humming of the beam. The sound now in their ears was as though gravel were being blown through a pipe under air pressure.

"Damned odd!" Lake exclaimed. "That's surely not from our base."

"This country is bad for magnetic disturbances," Markasen said.

"I don't think that sound is a natural disturbance," Lake argued. "Come to think of it, that code we heard a while back might be breaking in. Maybe my imagination is stimulated today, but I think our little buck-toothed friends might be back of this."

Lake pushed the PB a little further on its course. There was a puzzled frown on his face. The signal in the earphones changed in tone and the gravel sound smoothed into a high-pitched whine.

"Our base broadcast has gone off," Lake remarked. "Watch that gyro close! It might be all we'll have to go on. Our station is now on a twelve-minute silence, yet we're getting a beam from somewhere!"

"Perhaps the command at Siska contacted an offshore force to intercept us," Markasen suggested.

"No doubt about it!" said Lake. Lake switched the inter-plane radio. "Arctic Squadron . . . Arctic Squadron . . . Lake calling Arcturus . . . Lake calling Arcturus . . . Acknowledge." Lake waited until his four ships and the base stated they were standing by for his message. "Lake calling . . . observe schedule one-seven . . . acknowledge."

That was code for all to maintain strict radio silence until further orders.

"I think we'd better go back and do a little reconnoitering, Lieutenant," Lake remarked significantly, leading the four ships into a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn.

**G**REAT, dark cumulus clouds cut the light to that of dusk. The plane resounded to the seething impact of fine hail. They cruised back past the great rocky headland and out to sea again. The surface of the sea was heavy with rising vapor. Visibility was fair but distant observation was tricky due to separated cloud formations. Time was important and Lake opened up the four roaring engines.

"Look!" Lake exclaimed. "We have company!"

Markasen looked out to their left, guided by Lake's outstretched arm. There, flying parallel in direction with them and about fifteen hundred feet below, was a Jap shipboard fighter. He was hitting a good clip, perhaps two hundred fifty per hour.

"Scout plane," Lake remarked casually.

"Off a carrier! Checking visibility?" Markasen asked. "They're probably preparing for an attack on Katka!"

"They're readying up for an attack all right," Lake corrected, "but that plane isn't checking meteorological conditions. He's checking for our hostile surface craft, Subs, destroyers . . . anything. His carrier should stay in its present position in this pea-soup after they send up planes on a blind flight."

The lone fighter, streaking along on a course as straight as a plumb-line, was now almost out of sight.

"Hell!" Markasen exclaimed. "They're stealing your stuff! Return attack! Blind flight!"

"Yeah. But they haven't got one of your indicators," Lake replied sarcastically. "Nine hundred and ninety-nine times I could broadcast to the four winds and no one would ever hear it. But when I need a homing signal the worst way—those damned Jap culls have to catch it. You see, Lieutenant, every man in the military services kick against what they call damn-fool regulations. Well, here's your example as to why the services make them."

"Why not warn the base?"

"We'll reconnoiter first," Lake objected, thoughtfully. He flew on in silence for a couple of minutes. He looked around and backward to his three consort planes. He signaled them to close formation. "I don't know but what we might have a swell opportunity playing into our hands here, Lieutenant," he said.

The weather was mugging up again. The heavy air was clabbering into great globular masses obstructing vision for any distance. Lake's mind was busy on another problem.

They were so close to home and yet—so far from it. The Jap aircraft carrier had caught his homing signal from the base. They had established their position

and that of the Katka base. Weather conditions at Katka were better than anywhere else in the area. The Japs knew that. They would have a blind flight of one hundred twenty-five to one hundred seventy-five miles. At their target—Katka—they had a fair gamble of finding the vicinity clear enough to dump their bombs and shoot up the base.

Undoubtedly, the Jap command at Siska had signaled the carrier well out to sea during the attack. They likely figured they would catch the Katka base defended with only a portion of its force.

"Do you think we should warn the base?" Markasen asked again.

"I don't know yet, Lieutenant," Lake answered. "If I do, our birds will probably escape. That will be negative. If we have a bit of luck, we might possibly bag the whole outfit; carrier and all. That's positive. After all, we're at war. Our business is to fight!"

He called the senior radioman to the cockpit. "Evans, I want you to hook up a short-distance circuit for inter-plane broadcast. Cut your power or hop your resistance, whatever it is, so I can talk to our ships without our communications carrying to the Japs."

"Don't get any closer!" Markasen warned. "There's your carrier!"

LAKE looked down. About fifteen miles ahead of them he could make out the silhouette of a Jap carrier. It was a large, modern craft, not a converted dinky.

"What a shot!" Markasen exclaimed. "Will we attack?"

"What with, Lieutenant, machine guns? Right now, bombs would be worth a hundred thousand dollars apiece and we haven't got a one!"

Lake put the flight into a wide detour around the carrier and, to cut down any mark they might offer the carrier, they dropped to wave height.

The carrier was now just barely within-straining-sight. Lake handed Markasen control of the ship and got out his glass. "They're taking off right now," he remarked after a good study. "They've let loose fifteen of them. Looks like Nakajima light bombers."

Lake's detour completed a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree circle and they

were now again ahead of the carrier and under three vast clouds which Lake had picked to guide his pivot. The Jap light bomber flight was ahead of them, protected by their fighter escort.

Now would begin Lake's tactical stalking maneuver. The stakes in this game were about as big as one man and four ships had ever played for, but luck would have to be with them to win.

Lake let them get ahead until he could get the cloud formation he wanted. He then began climbing his flight of four ships. The Japs were getting a direction signal from the carrier. As long as they were in line with it, they could receive it, either going or coming. The signal was intended to guide the attackers to their target and later, guide them back to the carrier.

The only hazard—for the Japs—was whether or not they would find clear enough weather to see to bomb the base at Katka. That would be Lake's element of luck, too. Lake was praying for pea-soup over the field, while the Japs hoped for ground visibility.

Luck was with him.

Lake leveled off just under the ceiling and pressed his interplane switch. "Attention Arctic flight! I intend to make a running attack on the rear ships of the enemy squadron ahead of us. All ships attack from overhead and left oblique, keeping all possible protection of cloud formations. Avoid any contact fights. When possible, knock off fighters first. . . . Utmost importance you keep close contact with me. . . . Keep alert for visual and radio signals. . . . Acknowledge!"

Now for business. Lake put the pressure into the four Wasps and the big PB leaped ahead under full throttle. He had to take a chance in his next step. He instructed the radiomen to put the circuit back on full power. He gave him a message to code and send in to the base in Morse.

"Have all fighters ready for immediate flight. . . . All bombers ready for immediate attack!"

He got prompt acknowledgment and the circuit was cut back to short distance.

They raced on after their game. The light, very poor, and the great dark globes of storm cloud, cumulo-nimbus, under

which drifted a fall of soft hail, was just what the general ordered.

They sighted their quarry cruising in the scud, just under the varying ceiling which rose and fell under the cumulo bases. Lake pointed the plane into a climb and raced in and out of cloud towers until they were above the Jap fighters which, in turn, were above their own bombers. They were neat little jobs, those fighters.

Lake signaled. His machine-gun battery opened up on the fighter escort, some twelve to fifteen planes. It hit the Nips like a battery of shotguns into a flight of ducks. Four of them dropped like plumbets. The fighters cocked and rocketed up toward where they supposed the attack came from and they were not far wrong. Their climb was almost vertical and unbelievably fast.

Lake moved fast too, putting his ships into a reverse, downward loop, then, diving through a cloud and coming up under the bombers. While the fighters were hunting him upstairs, Lake's strategy got his ships in position to permit a fire angle from all his gunners except the port-waist and belly gunners to open up on the bombers from underneath.

Lake's handiwork on the Forts made for very fast work. They cut down five of the "mission to Katka" party. The rest of the bombers weaved in their course as though uncertain what to do. Lake did not wait for the fighters to determine what had happened, and knowing his ships were in an exceptionally vulnerable position if they were sighted, he led his flight this time in a right-hand reverse loop into a climb. All of his movements were executed to take all possible advantage of cloud cover.

The Nip fighters still did not know where their attackers were. Lake got a flash of two fighters through a cloud break, streaking downward in a near vertical dive. He caught another flash of them a little later, still shooting around like angry hawks searching for their prey.

This was extremely risky business. If he failed to keep close to the Jap squadron he'd never find them again. He had to stay close and exercise the utmost caution in weaving in and out and around the clouds. Meanwhile, Markasen strained to keep an accurate orientation of these erratic maneuvers reconciled to their hearing on

Katka. It was a joke on the Japs that Lake's greatest help was from the Japs' own signal beam. Naturally, the Japs did not stray far from center themselves.

The jap squadron settled down on their course again, still game to carry out their mission. Lake caught occasional flashes of them from his position above and behind. Their fighters had separated into two groups. There were five below the bombers now and five above. That would stop Lake from any more easy, sneak attacks. They had left the coast perhaps half an hour behind. That should bring them within possibly seventy to one hundred miles of Katka.

Lake debated mentally when to try another attack. His object was to get the Japs close to Katka—send in a signal calling all planes into the air, to cut down most of the Jap squadron, and then continue back to the enemy carrier to bomb and sink her.

He had to time it just right. If he got the Katka planes up while his four ships and the Japs were too far away, then the ships from Katka might easily lose contact in the fog and cloud formation. On the other hand, one more attack, if successful, might scare off the Japs and send them racing prematurely to their carrier. If the Japs started back too soon without Lake tailing them with Katka reinforcements, there was little chance of finding and sinking the carrier.

Lake made a calculation. They had been headed for Katka and on the way thirty minutes; they had made probably one hundred miles; they likely had about another fifteen minutes' flight to reach his reckoned position of Katka; fog and haze and cloud scud were thickening rapidly.

"How far to Katka?" Lake asked Markasen to check his calculation.

"Maybe fifty miles," Markasen replied.

Lake waited another eight minutes, then directed the radioman to put him on distance. "Eagle calling Arcturus . . . Eagle calling Arcturus . . . Acknowledge!" The base came in and stated they were standing by. Lake handed the radioman his coded message. "Send it in Morse," he directed. When he got his acknowledgment he had the circuit again put back on short distance.

"Well, Lieutenant," Lake remarked grimly, pulling back on his elevator and

climbing the ship, "I guess this is where we start heading the Nips back home."

## V

MARKASEN knew what he was about to do. "Why tackle them alone? Why not wait for the base ships?"

"The Japs might scatter and get lost. We'll attack and this time they'll head back to the carrier. Our ships coming up are all fast enough to overtake us. They have the bearing and I put them wise to the beam and they have the approximate position of the carrier. You see, we will have a much easier and faster job finding the carrier if we have a beam back to it. If we knock them all off, the carrier will cut its signal!"

"I don't believe we can knock them all off and I don't believe any of these Monkeys would order a signal beam silent when it would be his only chance to get back alive," Markasen argued.

"No?" Lake said. "Well, don't be too sure about that, Mister. Anyhow, every one of those flyers must report periodically. If only one or two were calling in, the command would smell a rat and they wouldn't hesitate to go silent and let the survivors plop into the sea."

The Japs ahead of them were pouring in the coal now and Lake had his guns on full to catch up with them. When he sighted them, he spoke into his transmitter.

"Attention Arctic Squadron . . . They're dead-on ahead of us! I'm going to attack just overhead. This has got to be fast work! We've got to hit first, hit vital and—hit hard! Line up on their pilots first and you'll get the ships! All gunners keep your out-of-angle men ready!"

Lake's plan was not regular and it was extremely dangerous. The approved tactic in this maneuver would be to come down on his enemy in a screaming dive. But this situation was unique. Lake's planes were not fighters but great bombers. They did not have the speed to climb or dive or run.

The second the Jap fighters caught sight of them they would hit the bombers like a lot of hawks around a goose. With their maneuverability, it was immaterial whether Lake dived on them or came in almost level.

And that was what he did. Came in level.

Lake's four planes came in close together



with a fire-power which would have given the Nips a chill had they known it. They did just what Lake wanted them to. The ten fighters fairly vibrated Lake's ships with the blast of their wide-open Kinsei engines as they hit the four bombers like a bunch of hornets.

The four American planes opened up simultaneously with the Japs. There was an almost solid curtain of gunfire from Lake's planes. The Japs came into it head-on. Lake and Markasen watched the Japs bore in; their wing leads flashing like death from their fixed guns. It seemed they could not possibly miss and they didn't entirely; the ships sounded with the din of crashing bullets.

But it lasted only a fraction of a minute. The fire from Lake's battery of multiple fifties in the hands of his crack gunners, the pick of the base, hit the oncoming Japs like an explosion. Their ships flew to pieces . . . disintegrated.

What happened next was near suicide for Jap and American alike. The onrushing planes came together so fast that the attempts of both sides in pulling into sharp zooms and banks to avoid a head-on collision, complicated with the hazard of falling Japs ships, either out of control or under the hands of dead pilots, seemed to make any movement of controls as likely to lead into a crash as to avoid one.

An air battle can be one of the fastest and deadliest of military actions. The attack probably had not lasted more than five to fifteen seconds. Lake's men had hit like a cyclone. The Japs scattered like leaves. Six of their fighters had fallen under the American's concentrated gunfire. The remaining four kept on going, overhauling their already fleeing bombers as though they had been standing still. There were not so many of the bombers left either. The powerful battery of four belly gunners had cut down two of them during the time the other gunners were working on the fighters. That left twelve Japs out of a squadron of perhaps twenty-seven planes to streak for their carrier.

Lake's ships took after them. They did not try to overhaul them but only to keep them in sight. It was easy enough to tail the bombers but the four fighters rapidly disappeared. Lake wanted to come in on the carrier with his base force.

But at the rate they were moving, following the Nip bombers, his four planes would be too far out in front and likely to encounter a fighter screen off the carrier. That would not be good. He cut his speed and let the Japs race out of sight. He again bracketed the carrier's signal beam, checked his radio compass and reset the directional gyro to insure as best he could all the aid he could get to find the carrier.

Then the base force came in behind them—heavy bombers roaring like a thousand magnified drums, all but drowning out the metallic whine of the overhead fighters. Lake hailed them exultantly over the inter-plane radio and gave them their orders.

There were three squadrons of bombers and three of fighters. His two PBs were out of bombs and would not be in the coming fight. They might be of help later, however, to pick up possible casualties. Lake put his ships over the bombers and just behind the lead flight in position for direction of attack and observation. His two Forts had proven their worth and he now constituted his planes as an independent unit without any protection from the other fighters.

Lake checked the assignment of the fighting squadrons to their bombers and put the group in attack formation. They were ready now with Lake's ship just behind the spearhead. Lake gave his attention to the sea under them.

"We're coming on now!" Markasen exclaimed. "Their signal is getting louder."

They were still in separated cloud mass. Lake's view of the surface under them was hazy and intermittent. He made out occasional flying shapes in the cloud bases. "Lake calling . . . You fighters, be on your toes, just sighted several planes shooting around. They might be fighters just off the carrier or they might be the ships we were tailing, trying to find their ship. The carrier under us has probably sent up all of its fighters—they'll hit you any second! Get those bastards out of our way!"

With the cloud formation and fog-haze, Lake's air-group would have to bomb from a low altitude. That was not so good. Still, with the clouds, his ships could shoot out over the carrier unseen by the Jap AAs until his bombers were on top of them. It was a toss-up whether short-range for the

Japs' battery was offset by the quick protection of the clouds.

Markasen had been watching the situation closely. His earphones could tell him plenty. "We're in the silence cone!" he cried. "They must be right under us!"

THE position directly overhead the carrier's broadcast would be surrounded by an area of diminishing reception. The center, of course, is silent. Markasen had spotted the carrier's position. Lake headed the group downward in a wide, shallow glide. Shifting winds had piled up fog and vapor into hazy curtains. They could not see for any distance. They cruised around but their game was nowhere to be seen. Lake combed a great area; large enough to get the signal beam if it had been on. The Japs had cut off. Markasen fiddled with the loop.

The radio compass needle suddenly came to life and the phones buzzed with the null signal. The quick radio operation showed the signal had resumed. Had it been on all the time, they would have detected it in increasing strength as they approached center.

"They're nuts!" Markasen exclaimed. "Imagine! Putting out a signal like that when they know we're out gunning for them!"

Lake chuckled wryly, "They're not so dumb—from their standpoint. That signal is back on the air purposely. It's a decoy!"

"You mean they are trying to lure us to the carrier?" Markasen asked, surprised.

"Sure! Their ships landed and reported us—four bombers. They think they've got a set-up! Boy! What a break! If our base force had come in sooner and had been seen—we never would have found this carrier again!"

Markasen looked up sharply. "We've got it again now!" he exclaimed. "We just moved out of the maximum signal. We're in the cone!"

Confirmation of the carrier's location was made by the sudden attack of the Jap fighters. They hit like a flash from under a black cumulus cloud tower.

But Lake's hornets were not caught like a batch of pushovers. The top of Lake's fighter screen followed the Jap dive with a

lethal stream of lead poisoning from which a good number of the Nip combats never pulled out.

The Katka fighters hit swift and hard. The Japs were fast too and gave a savage fight. A big modern Japanese carrier is very apt to get the cream of their own crop. The area filled with the crash of guns and wide-open engines. There were about thirty Jap fighters when they first hit. They were possibly the busiest lot of flyers in the Japanese navy. Their frantic endeavors were mainly directed toward shaking off tailing Yanks and pouring in bursts at any mark wherever offered.

These Nips were desperate. They were outnumbered. They could not fly away except to crash later—out of gas, in the fog. Their only bare, slim chance was to stick or die.

The American bombers gunned out of the way. Lake's heavies had important business below. The group followed Lake's PB downward under the low ceiling and then back up just inside the overcast. They drifted back and forth across patches of deep blue water and through great banks of fog curtains searching for the carrier.

They overhauled it racing out of a vapor screen with a suddenness which made them bank steeply and shake the grates in a blast of power to get out of the carrier's almost instantaneous gunfire.

"They're right on their toes!" Lake remarked. He spoke interplane, directing the ships to keep close contact. He changed course at once to keep out of the cloud area they had sought when they shot away from the carrier . . . the gunners would be directing their fire there.

"That's as close as I ever want to come!" Markasen remarked dryly as Lake settled on a new heading. "How come they haven't got more fighters?"

Lake looked over sarcastically. "Because we knocked off maybe fifteen—eighteen of them at Siska and another eight or ten tailing them toward the base. With the ones back up there that just hit us, that's a total of fifty-five. And then you've got to leave a little room for the scouts and bombers. That gives them a full complement all right."

"Damn!" Markasen said, cutting the subject. "The beam is off! We haven't lost it. They cut off!"

"Naturally," Lake said. "I should have expected it before. Their detectors have finally revealed us as a force of more than four bombers."

"But why this late?" Markasen wanted to know. "Detectors can catch a plane's presence and numbers a far greater distance off than around here."

"Sure. But they had planes up too. That complicates the operator's accuracy. Maybe their goldbergs aren't so hot. Maybe they're careless. I don't know. Don't ask so many damn questions. I'm thinking. We've got a job to do yet!"

LAKE was stymied. He did indeed have some thinking to do. Regular tactics under average conditions would be, after the bomber group had spotted the carrier from a good altitude, to split up into squadrons or flights and attack from seventy to ninety degree angles at an altitude, depending on meteorological and tactical conditions, from three to fifteen thousand feet.

But they had a bad weather obstacle. Their ceiling was low—from the anti-aircraft standpoint, dangerously low. The bombers presented a huge mark for an AA battery and the Nips had just shown they were plenty quick on the trigger. It could be done but it would be suicide for many of the bombers. The carrier was studded with guns and the crews could hardly miss.

Lake directed the pilots to remain above but to follow him at as high an altitude as best visibility permitted. He then dropped the PB well under the ceiling. The carrier would give them no more help now. Instead, the big flat-top would take to movement and hiding and availing itself of all possible cloud cover. Lake, of course, would never find it in the overcast.

They moved back and forth in combing sweeps. The carrier could not have moved fast enough to have gotten out of the area. Lake knew it had to be under them somewhere near. Thanks to the weather, the odds favored the Japs and all Lake could do was cruise and wait. The shape and mass of fog and cloud and vapor was changing constantly. Sometimes the mass broke into small globes, sometimes it merged into large areas, giving the carrier a perfect cover.

"Great guns!" Lake exclaimed at last. "This could go on all night!"

Markasen did not answer. His attention was centered out ahead of them and off to the right. Lake followed Markasen's gaze at a large, dome-shaped mass of thick scud.

Markasen's eyes were bright with excitement. "I think she's under that big bank, sir," he said.

"Maybe so," Lake countered, "but we just passed through it as low as we could without chancing a crash into the damn thing. What gives you the idea?"

"I think I see an overhang of smoke from her stacks!"

"I hardly think so, Lieutenant. Those babies can't afford that kind of giveaway. They have consumers. What you see there as smoke is probably a swirling of more dense vapor."

"Let's get over on top of it and see," Markasen requested.

Lake agreed. "Okay, Lieutenant. But not on top of it! If that carrier is under that dome, they wouldn't need any detectors and the AA's would go to town. That would be a dead giveaway of their position, Lieutenant, but I'm afraid we wouldn't be able to cash in on the information; if you get what I mean."

Lake pushed on over toward the area, keeping to a wary position. It did look like smoke at that, he thought. Markasen shoved his window open about an inch and began a vigorous sniffing of the air. He turned to Lake triumphantly.

"If that isn't the stink of an oil-burner I can't smell!"

Lake laughed. "You *smell*, all right, Lieutenant. You've got more tricks than a pet coon!" But Lake's face sobered as he spoke. "Gad! Mister, I'll take it back! That is oil smoke!"

But how to take advantage of it? The carrier was under a vast mushroom of low-hanging fog which covered a large area. They might bomb the locality heavily and still not get a hit.

"They're wise to us," Lake remarked, frowning in thought. "They'll never come out of that stuff. But I was hoping for a better break than this."

Lake asked the radioman to contact the fighter squadron commanders in code for a report on the fight above them. The reports came back to the effect that the fight was

over; that as near as they could determine, twenty-one Japs had been downed and the remainder had disappeared. The base force had lost five planes. Lake instructed the fighters to fly in a four-mile radius reconnoitering circle at an altitude permitting sight of the carrier if it should try to escape.

Lake's four bombers patrolled back and forth for over an hour across the fog-dome, hoping for a break-up of the carrier's cloud screen. But instead, the huge mushroom seemed to grow even larger.

"We'll have to do something pretty soon or call it a day," Lake remarked. "There's a line squall building up around here. I'd rather not fly back through it if I can help it. Looks like we missed the bus, Lieutenant. Unless you've got any more bright ideas, I think we'd better knock off before we get into some serious weather-trouble."

"Right!" Markasen replied. "With all the base planes here, we'd better play safe and go in. But wait! We've got a chance yet! Why not try to pick up that flat-top with the electronics?"

Lake's face broke into an exultant grin. "You've got something! If those goldbergs can spot a pin-point plane right side up in the sky they can spot a carrier upside down!"

"Next problem," Markasen countered, "is how to center the carrier for the bombers."

"I'll figure that out if I have to go down on a raft and send up a flare!" Lake replied.

"We'll have to think fast, sir," Markasen warned. "That carrier will give us only one chance. If our bombs miss on the first pass she'll take to full speed. The electronics will be little help after she's in motion."

Lake called the bombardier. "Fast work now, Mister," he ordered. "Decide on your highest visibility altitude—dope out the most effective predetermined bomb-release point. We're going to use the electronic rangefinders to locate the carrier. Get your angle figured by the time we locate her. It shouldn't be long." Lake then instructed the radioman to inform both the fighters and the other bombers of the plan in code. The bombers were to form in readiness for immediate attack and to acknowledge.

The rangemen went to work at once,

poking and searching the fog-dome with cathode rays. Within five minutes they got an electronic reaction and plotted the carrier's position. Lake signaled the second PB which had duplicate equipment and detailed it to maintain a constant figure eight above the carrier for a guide. The intersection of the cross loops would, of course, center the carrier. The guide plane would hover at the bomb-release altitude in order that the other bombers in their bomb-run would have a visible release point. When the first bomber was on course near enough to sight the guide, flying a figure eight at right-angle to the bomb course, the guide plane would gun out of the way. The following bombers would release only on Lake's signal.

Ordinarily, any plane hovering over a carrier at such low altitude would be detected by the listening equipment aboard the carrier and would immediately be an AA mark. But in this instance, Lake figured the carrier below them would consider itself invisible and safe; that the plane above was merely patrolling. With a larger body of planes, such as a squadron, it might open up but it wouldn't reveal its location for one ship.

They were ready now. Lake's plane, at the lead-point, cruised back in a great hook to lead the three squadrons of bombers to the start of their bomb-run.

**N**OW, for effective and accurate demolition of any small target, you must see it. This mark was far smaller than the harbor of Siska. Bad weather conditions in this locality were so consistent that Lake had previously prepared for this present eventuality in numerous tactical flights. It was all arranged. There were several attack formations, any one of which he could choose by name. All of the pilots were familiar with the system.

They straightened out on the run, coming up to the guide plane at a slow speed of one hundred and twenty-five miles per hour. Lake was using a pattern formation, that is, he had his ships grouped in a pattern to bracket his target with many bomb bursts. He hoped, of course, that one or several of the bursts would strike the flight deck of the carrier. At least one hit would set up a fire and from then on, it would be duck-soup.

## ... THE BELL!

Rick Decker moved cautiously from his corner . . . stopped short . . . as the voices of a thousand Marines—his buddies—booed lustily—for the mark of the double-cross was etched in crimson on his sodden gloves. Yes. This was young Decker's fight for vindication. Be sure to read:

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Lake watched the flight of the PB making its lazy reverse loops. Even at one hundred and twenty-five they seemed to leap up on it and the PB suddenly shot out and up off the course.

All clear for the pattern!

Lake gave the bombardiers the signal and fifty-four bombs plummeted into a streaking dive. Lake counted the seconds. The sea under them turned alive with a thundering flash. Lake almost forgot he was piloting the PB as he looked below for the tell-tale red glare of a hit on the carrier. The glare died out. Lake strained his eyes through the late afternoon dusk. There was an odd, cold feeling in his stomach. It looked as though they had missed. It wasn't encouraging; if they had missed the first time with all factors fresh and in their favor, it would be doubly difficult the second run and still more so the third.

Then the dark, gray haze under them glowed pink. The general's heart got back to normalcy as the pink brightened into a dark red and there was a muffled rumble underneath. The red flared into a vast glow and Lake at last made out a long shadow near the center. It would be easy now! Lake gave the command to follow for the second run. This time they came up in a line of squadrons, not in pattern. Each flight could see a mark now. The carrier was silhouetted in its own fire but not yet a fatality.

The bombers came back.

They roared over this time, hitting the ball, pouring a succession of eggs on the long shadow. They hit like a long drawn-out salvo. Lake led the bombers in a wide circle around the burning carrier, dropping into a shallow glide to observe better the effect of their work.

What he saw made his heart beat like a triphammer. He pressed closer to the window.

The carrier was settling fast. She listed to port almost to the catwalk and under at the stern. Lake ordered a squadron to make a final run to sink her. The last bombs tore into the upturned side and a deafening explosion erupted almost blindingly into flames which shot more than two hundred feet into the sky, seemingly setting fire to the low-hanging scud of the overcast. The brilliant light dimmed as the big warship slid under the surface and



great globes of spray burst over the place and then darkness.

The general and the navigator exchanged glances, Markasen's cool poise was thawed, and respect glowed in his eyes. A page of military history had just been written.

Lake contacted the Katka base and requested a homing beam.

The flight back was a joy-ride. The interplane radio fairly crackled with the pilots' communication. Sinking a carrier under normal conditions was difficult and hazardous to the extreme; doing it blind was a headline feat!

In the semi-dark cockpit, Lake and Markasen stared ahead in silence, their minds filled with what they had seen and done. Lake's face wrinkled with a reminiscent smile.

"You know, Lieutenant, I used to be quite a practical trickster when I was a kid, but this one is the biggest and best damn stunt I ever pulled off!"

Lake's mood was topgallant. He called Captain Nolan through his transmitter. The Captain came right back with a hail. Service regulations make no provision for exceptions to military discipline or propriety of rank but, under the circumstances, Lake, for once, seemed to forget.

"Hello, there, you flat-footed sailor!" he called jubilantly.

Captain Nolan's reply was a bit too frothy.

But the general laughed indulgently. He was mentally outlining the report he would make to Headquarters—and he was finding satisfaction in the knowledge that Headquarters for once would be pleased.

"What do you think of those new Forts now, Willie?" Lake asked, recalling Nolan's last opinion. "Still think they're a boner?"

"Yes, sir," Nolan replied, his voice not quite hiding his laugh. "One hundred per cent . . . for the Japs!"

"Why drag in the Forts now, sir?" Markasen said. "We just sank a carrier!"

"That's just why I do mention the Forts, Lieutenant. If it hadn't been for these two glorified Flying Forts, that Nip carrier would still be on the surface in one piece and we'd still be back at Siska! And I don't mean in the air, either!"

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*Travers swung  
the gun as the second  
Messerschmitt came like  
a bolt of lightning.*





By

**STUART M. EMERY**

*A Novel of Europe's Biggest Secret*

**England's ace spy was dying in the whispering depths of Europe. And with him was dying the key to the Fuehrer's desperate plan—the mystery of the Luftwaffe.**

**T**HE low, tremendously powerful droning of motors sounded from the north, coming closer every second. Lieutenant Lee Travers, taking his ease on the bunk in his pilots' barracks cubicle, swung to his feet, turned off the light and parted the blackout curtains.

Louder still roared the oncoming planes,

headed for a landing on the drome of the American Bombing Command on the flat English plain. One, two, four flights, Travers counted, rushing through the moonlight at the end of their long hop across the Atlantic. Twenty Flying Fortresses, gunned and manned, coming to tangle in the war. The motors went mute

as the throttles were cut and in perfect formation the giant air forts made their landing and halted. Figures stepped out of them, men who less than twenty-four hours ago had been in the United States.

A grin spread over Travers' vigorous young face and his eyes shone. America was coming in now—hard and heavy. He snapped on the light and turned back to his bunk with a sudden strange restlessness sweeping him.

"Lieutenant Travers." An AAF orderly stood in the narrow door. "You're wanted at HQ building immediately. Colonel Reed."

"And what does that big shot want with me?" inquired Travers. The orderly grinned back with the easy camaraderie of the American Air Forces. "Ask me another. I'm a stranger here myself. Full flying kit, Colonel Reed said, sir."

"That's better." Anticipation ran through Travers' mind as he snatched his pilot's rig off the wall pegs and crammed himself into it. "Let's go, soldier."

They swung out of the barracks and across the flatland to the long, low concrete building that housed the headquarters offices of the biggest Yank bomber-fighter base in England. Travers dropped the messenger at a door close to the entrance and stepped inside.

"Lieutenant Travers reporting, sir," he said and saluted.

Colonel Reed looked up from the desk at which he was sitting in a plainly-furnished office. His fingers toyed with a yellow manila envelope. "I recommended you for three days' London leave, Travers, as I recall, after that brush-up over the Channel last week."

"Yes, sir," returned Travers. Into his mind flashed a memory of blazing minutes far above gray-green water while his wing guns hammered and two Messerschmitts went pitching down.

"You did well then and you rate it. But you don't get it, Travers. No one on this station gets leave from now on. I don't have to tell you what that means."

"No, sir. Something big."

"Something big is right. Rommel"—A queer light appeared in Colonel Reed's eyes. Then his mouth clamped. "That's enough. No, you don't get any three days' leave, Travers, but here is one night in

town for you. This"—he held up the envelope—"goes direct to Major General Conover, chief of the AAF Bombing Command, at AAF headquarters, London. It brings the report of our plane strength here up to the last minute with the arrival of those twenty Fortresses just now. As courier you are to deliver it to him in person and then you can have the rest of the night in town. Get going, Travers. Grab yourself a Spitfire and don't spare the engines. I want Major General Conover to have this before midnight and that's not far off."

Travers took the envelope, saluted and left the room rapidly. It was only minutes before he was airborne, climbing for altitude in a night of perfect flying weather—moonlit and clear up to twenty thousand feet where clouds spread over the arch.

The routine was simple. Land at Croydon drome, south of London, rush the rest of the route by car. He would be in a comfortable grillroom or pub enjoying a quick one in no time. Already, approaching the great sprawling mass of London from the north, he could see the silver trickle of the Thames. He would be flying over the heart of the city itself in another moment. The fast little Spitfire bored on and below London was nothing but a tremendous dark blur of buildings, the invincible citadel that had stood off the full fury of the Luftwaffe times without number.

And then they came.

OUT of nowhere they swirled, engines grinding and droning. They slid down through the veil of clouds in line astern—Heinkel and Stuka bombers and their escorting screen of Messerschmitts.

The upper arch teemed with them. Somehow the advance guard of a Nazi sneak raid on London had crossed the Channel and reached London before the warning had caught them. Out from the bellies of the bombers dropped small objects that screeched for the blacked-out city below. Flame leaped up in hundreds of spots, pinpointing the target as the incendiaries burst.

Instantly the big eggs began to fall. Travers was in among the raiders, caught out cold over the center of the city. It was up to him now to fight his way through, a single plane pitted against scores. He swerved his Spitfire, caught the cockpit of

the nearest Heinkel in his ringsight and let his blast go before a Nazi pilot had spotted him. Straight to the mark plunged his terrific cone of fire and the Heinkel shuddered as though it had been hit by a pile-driver, fell over on its side and spun like a falling leaf for the roofs of London.

All the way to the Channel through the home counties, Travers could see the torches of the searchlights splaying the path of more oncoming raiders. A track of anti-aircraft shellfire heralded their advance. From below, the guns in London's parks and on London's roofs were hurling flame into the skies about him. All London was alerted now and fighting back. In minutes only the Defense of London fighter squadrons would reach the level of the Nazi armada and would be blasting them out of the air.

Wildly Travers banked, caught another Heinkel at short range and ploughed it into destruction. The Heinkels were flinging their bomb-bay contents in a steady rain; the Stukas were going down for low-level dives and everywhere on the ebon expanse of London the red of flames rose.

Travers yanked his Spitfire out of a mass of tracer coming at him from three directions and dove on the back of a plunging Stuka, taking it apart in midflight. He split-aired with lead sleeting through his fuselage and saw another bomber disappear in blazing bits as an anti-aircraft shell caught it full. Crimson hell rioted in the skies above London, and he rode in the heart of it.

"Here they come!" he snarled as the trim little winged shapes scaled from below straight into the tangle. The Spitfires were up and they were up battling with cold expert ferocity. There must be scores of them, flung skyward from the dromes protecting London, but still more of the black-crossed raiders were being poured across the Channel. Travers had heard of a blitz like this but never had he been in one before. It was shoot, kill and get away in a split second. His crate rocked violently and he sent a glance to the port wing. Tracer was cutting through it, the starboard wing gave a jerk and he saw lead ripping through it in turn. On both sides he was boxed in by Messerschmitts that flamed and slashed. He was being cut to ribbons in the skies.

"Dive," he told himself grimly, and with both his wings battered and his fuselage a sieve he thrust the stick forward and went down for the chimney-pots of the blitzed city. On his tail roared a pair of Nazi raiders, shooting still. He knew that in seconds more, if he couldn't shake them off, he was washed out. Up toward him rushed the black shadows of London, ripped by the flame of guns and studded by the light of fires. He tensed, mauled the stick and came out level as volley after volley passed by him.

Then he was flung sidewise in his seat, his crate lurched like a drunken thing and he was tumbling. One swift glance behind showed the pair of Messerschmitts falling also, their wings in ruins. A huge dark floating object, shaped like a fat elephant lay behind and above him.

"Wing gone!" he grated, his glance taking in the wreckage. "I've run into a barrage balloon cable! It kayoed the Nazis!"

The roofs swept up to meet him and with desperate hands he tore open the hatchment of his shattered Spitfire and launched himself into space, hand on the release ring of his parachute. Broken bones, perhaps a broken neck on the rooftops, waited for him, if the maelstrom of gunfire that crashed about him in his descent didn't get him first. There wasn't much chance, it came to him, that Major General Conover would get his report.

## II

"**ANYTHING** from over the radio?"  
"Anything out of Foxcroft in France?"

Air Marshal Scott, Chief of the Air Staff, RAF, asked the question in a low voice that showed the strain under which he was laboring. His clear gray eyes for hours now had been shadowed, his firm, clean-shaven jaw set in a tighter line than ever. His aide, Colonel Tarleton, closed the door of the secret office silently behind him as he re-entered and shook his head. His face also bore the signs of tension.

"No, sir, nothing. Radio room still reports complete silence out of Area 12, Occupied France. No Colonel Foxcroft."

The Air Marshal took a few quick paces up and down the room whose walls were lined with sandbags. Sandbags also cov-



ered the skylight overhead and black curtains shadowed the windows. In the corridor beyond the door guards could be heard moving. The footsteps of guards also sounded on the roof directly above. Outside brooded the black silence of a bomb-battered sidestreet not far from the moonlit waters of the Thames.

"This is serious, Tarleton." The confession broke abruptly from Scott. "It is worse than serious. It may be disastrous. Here the British Eighth Army is poised for a crash-through that may mean the turning point in the war and we don't even know what bombers we can send them to wreck Rommel's defenses and supply lines. Why? Foxcroft never failed us before! He's the best secret service man in the Empire." He raised his wrist and sent a glance at the watch strapped on it. "Exactly forty minutes to midnight. One of the most tremendous decisions since the war began must be made before dawn. And we have nothing to go on—nothing!"

"Colonel Foxcroft's promise, sir." A note of confidence threaded the colonel's voice. "Wasn't it only forty-eight hours ago that he flashed the code through that by midnight tonight he would have the full information? As you say, sir, Foxcroft of Intelligence has never let us down yet."

"One failure is enough in this war to wipe out every past success," said the Air Marshal somberly. His big chest under the double row of ribbons rose as he expelled a deep sigh. "I should hate to lose Foxcroft! But that's what it looks like. The damned Nazis have bagged him. And now"—

"Almost eleven-thirty, sir," put in Colonel Tarleton. "Air Marshal Benton-Kimberly, Commander-in-Chief of our Bombing Command, and Major General Conover, OC of the American Air Forces in England, will be here any minute now."

"For the secret council I called," rasped Air Marshal Scott. The council had been pending for weeks, with all the British Commanders building up to it, from the Prime Minister down. The two air wizards had been called to this "shadow office" of the air marshal, near midnight and unobserved. "And what have I to give them? Again—nothing. Tarleton, this is hell!"

A light knock sounded at the door and

Colonel Tarleton stepped over to it at once.

"Here they are, sir," he said as the door opened. "Arriving together."

Through the door came a pair of figures, both men of powerful height and build. Each had a definite air of command about him.

"Evening, Scott," Air Marshal Benton-Kimberly greeted the Chief of Air Staff with the manner of an old friend. He looked almost as fagged as his superior from the strain of war. "Right on the dot."

Major General Conover's keen eyes, set under thick brows, took in the surroundings in a single glance. He nodded to Air Marshal Scott, shook hands, and a quiet smile creased lips that were set in a determined line.

"All present and accounted for," he said. "Let's go."

"You both were unobserved on your way to this spot?" inquired Scott, as rickety chairs were drawn up to a plain deal table. "It is vitally important that no one should know of this conference."

"I came in a civilian car from my own flat," returned Benton-Kimberly. "A closed car. I ran into Major General Conover at the door of the building—ah—er"—

"Walking," said the American general crisply. The quiet, confident smile that the AEF in England knew and liked so well flashed again in his cool eyes. "In a sergeant's overcoat and cap I left below. I was a sergeant once. As a matter of fact, your guard at the door stopped me cold. Then Marshal Benton-Kimberly came along and okayed me." He reached into the pocket of a tunic that bore the ribbons of an older war, drew out a paper and laid it in front of Air Marshal Scott on the stained surface of the table. "The list of the heavy, long-range bombers I can give you. Complete up to an hour ago."

Scott stared at the sheet with its ordered array of figures. He sat silent for several seconds, then his eyebrows rose. "This many!" he exclaimed. "This is tremendous air strength!"

"The Yank Flying Fortresses are just about coming in now on every dawn wind from the Atlantic," said Conover. "And the boys are raring to go."

"So is the RAF Bombing Command,"

remarked Benton-Kimberly with a trace of grimness. "But where?"

"And that's the crux of the entire situation!" Air Marshal Scott crashed his fist on the table. "We cannot release our bombers, our fighters, in great force for any front until one mystery is settled. And that is"—his tone deepened—"where is the German Luftwaffe?"

A tense, pregnant silence fell in the sand-bagged room with the skylight.

FROM outside in the night rose the eerie, sobbing shriek of a siren. Others took it up until the night screeched hideously with the alarm. Not one of the men lifted his head. They were all veterans, not only of this war but of the last.

"Yes, gentlemen, where is the German Luftwaffe?" repeated Scott heavily. "Not its present fighting force but the backlog of reserves that Goering has been piling up for the last six months. In all that time no newly-made bombers or fighters have appeared on the Russian or the Egyptian Front. And, according to Air Intelligence's best estimates, the Reich has been producing at least a swarm of new planes a month in its factories, hard as we have hammered them with our round-the-clock raids. That would give them a reserve of fifteen thousand planes probably concealed in secret airfields or factories in Germany and Occupied France.

"When will they turn this reserve loose? In which direction will it strike? What types of planes does it include? Will there be new-model bombers and fighters for the RAF and the American Air Forces to combat? That is what we must know before we can strip ourselves at home to turn our own air strength loose on a front far from England."

"Air Intelligence can't find out for you?" asked Major General Conover. The night outside had suddenly become alive with gunfire. The sirens howled on. Voices could be heard speaking excitedly on the roof above. A sudden air raid was being launched on London, mounting in intensity of cannon explosions and noise as the raiders neared. "I know, of course, you've been looking for months."

"For the last five months," said Air Marshal Scott. "Ever since it became apparent Goering was sending no new air

reserves into the desperate struggle in Russia. Our best man, Colonel Foxcroft, has been scouring enemy territory for the information. And he promised, two days ago, over the secret radio transmitter that he has established in France, that he would give me a full report on the Nazi reserve plane force and its location by midnight tonight. Midnight—"

Through the crash of the anti-aircraft batteries outside and the banshee howling of the air raid sirens another sound rose. It was a mellow deep and resounding tone—that of a clock striking from near at hand. One-two-three—and on; it had struck through peace and war for centuries. The twelfth stroke died away on the war-filled night air.

"Big Ben," nodded Air Marshal Benton-Kimberly. "Midnight is passed."

"With no word from Foxcroft." Scott's face grew even more lined and weary. "Gentlemen, the RAF and the American Air Forces are hamstrung on the eve of their greatest overseas campaign. They have been called for—all the long-range bombers we can spare—to insure victory in the drive the British Eighth Army is set to make in Egypt. A drive that is aimed to utterly destroy Rommel's Afrika Korps and his Italian Allies. All of us here know the crucial operation scheduled to follow a crash-through but—" he paused significantly—"we do not mention it. At present we merely speak of Rommel."

"I had intended at this conference, gentlemen, to give you the orders for the departure of your bombers for Egypt. Now I cannot. Major Foxcroft without a doubt is dead or captured. As it stands we dare not weaken England for an air offensive on a distant front when we have that mighty new fleet of mystery facing us across the Channel. If we could locate it, find its destination or destroy it, then our hands would be free. It is an insoluble problem."

All three men looked up suddenly. Out of nowhere came an insane howling. It rose louder, louder, and with a crash that shook the room the screaming bomb exploded. Fragments of stone and showers of bricks erupted roof-high and there came a crash of glass from the blacked-out windows

"Near miss," said Marshal Scott coolly.

Major General Conover drew a battered pipe from his tunic pocket and began to fill it.

"As I recall it's the one you never hear that gets you. What, more eggs?"

Again came the wild screech of a descending bomb and again, while the night raved with gunfire and the sound of careening fire engines. Colonel Tarleton rose and moved for the door.

"Mind if I take a look-see topside?" he cast back over his shoulder to the Air Chief of Staff. "This may be something and again it may not. I'll report from the roof."

Scott nodded and the footsteps of the colonel could be heard outside followed by the closing of a trap. The three men in the sandbagged secret headquarters sat in silence for the moment, each busy with his own thoughts. That they were grim, somber thoughts their faces showed.

"That's bad news you've given us, Marshal Scott," said the Yank general. "Particularly in view of the plan we never mention." He lifted his head as the hellish din outside grew into a sequence of crashes and explosions. "This is a real pasting! It might be the turning loose of those Luftwaffe reserves."

Into the room crashed the voice of Colonel Tarleton. "They're falling like torches all over London! The a.a. guns and the Defense of London Spitfires are giving them hell! The Boche can't take it much longer!"

Major General Conover looked around the room in surprise. Silently the Air Chief of Staff indicated the ventilator leading up onto the roof through which Tarleton was speaking.

"Wardens, first aid crews and ambulances in the street below," Tarleton's voice went. "Half-a-dozen fires near here. This locality is taking it hard." A heavy crash sounded. "ME down in flames in the next block. Pilot must have bailed out. Wait a minute—there's something overhead! It's a chutist! He's dropping right on top of us! He can't miss this roof! Guards, out with your guns and get the bloody Hun! He's almost on us! He's here!" From overhead came a thump and the scurrying of feet. Then Tarleton spoke again. "He's

one of ours! Spitfire pilot! Wait a minute!"

Voices rose in question and answer in a momentary lull of noise and then were drowned out by more detonations. It was a full two minutes before Tarleton's voice came down through the ventilator.

"It's a Yank pilot, Lieutenant Travers, courier from the American Bombing Command base. He's carrying a late report for Major General Conover. So he gets mixed up in the blitz and lands on our roof. Nothing is too jolly peculiar for this war. Shall I send him down?"

"Certainly," said Major General Conover. He sent a ring of pipe smoke ceilingward, his features utterly composed throughout the racket. "I've heard plenty stranger than that. This Yank pilot must have the instincts of a born detective to land ten feet over my head. Or else he's plain lucky."

### III

LEE TRAVERS handed his yellow manila envelope to Major General Conover who flashed a friendly smile at him as he opened it. It was incredible but he had not only landed safely on the rooftops of London but on the only rooftop that mattered. He stood easily, relaxing his worn muscles, acutely conscious of them once the strain of battle was over. Up there in the moonlight, flame-splashed, wing-dotted skies he had been a fighting madman, knowing only that he was out to kill or be killed. Now here he was an ordinary courier who would be dismissed and sent back to the routine of his squadron in a few minutes.

"Another addition," said the Yank general, passing the sheet from the envelope to Air Marshal Scott. "Twenty more new Flying Fortresses just landed at our field. Add 'em to the list of what we can give you for the offensive."

"There will be no offensive," said Scott. His voice shook. "It is long after midnight. I have told you Foxcroft is dead. Whatever he learned has died with him. We are blinded, also —"

"Radio! Radio from Area Twelve, France, Marshal!" Colonel Tarleton had burst into the room, his face muscles twitching with emotion. "It's coming through in code! I stopped by the radio

room on my way down from the roof."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Air Marshal Scott. His whole face lit up with a glow. His eyes gleamed in hope. His jaw lost its line of despair. "Come on, gentlemen. Colonel Foxcroft is alive! In minutes only we shall know the secret of the Nazi mystery ships!"

He swept through the door and down the narrow corridor outside it at top speed with the others following. For an instant Travers hesitated and then, spurred by some instinctive emotion, he trailed the group. After all, he had not been ordered to stay behind and it was obvious that something of terrific importance was brewing. A moment later he found himself standing, unobserved, against another sand-bagged wall in another sand-bagged room up under the eaves of the building. Here were a mass of radio sets, receivers and transmitters alike, with officers and enlisted men at them, their faces pale and worn by hours of intense concentration.

"Where is it?" demanded Scott, and a studious-looking captain tore a sheet from his pad and held it out.

"The first sentences, Marshal Scott," he said. "I'm taking it and decoding it as fast as it comes from this machine." He pointed to a receiving set where a sergeant scribbled, catching each click on paper. "It's from Area Twelve, Foxcroft all right. It's his way of sending but he's very weak and unsure."

Air Marshal Scott flung his glance along the scribbled sentence. "*Area 12, Station 3A. R-2 sending. Have full information enemy air reserves . . . Badly wounded yesterday, . . . cannot last! . . .*"

Marshal Scott's face went white. "That's all on this sheet. Quick, operator, quick with the next!"

In the radio room not a voice spoke. Only the receiving set clicked on—slowly, more slowly—as a desperately wounded British secret agent somewhere over in France tried to get through with his message. Travers sensed that he was looking on at a tremendous human drama, that of a man fighting off death in enemy country to get his job done. Only a dozen words or more lay on the radio sergeant's pad when Scott with his own hand snatched it away.

"I can read this code as it comes," he

rapped. "I invented it with Foxcroft." Again he repeated the message, his brows knotted in fierce concentration: "*'Air menace desperate . . . detailed report . . . barrel . . . silver . . . Luger . . . Am . . . going . . . out.'*"

Air Marshal Scott hurled an order at the radio operator as though he had power over his instrument.

"Faster, man, faster! He may be dying on the other end. Is he coming through?"

The sergeant, taut-faced, was listening with all his ears. His pencil poised over the leaf of his pad—waiting, waiting. It fell and scratched a code symbol, another and another. Scott tore the leaf from him. There was sweat on his forehead.

"It says: '*Send . . . send . . . send.*'"

"That's all," said the radio non-com in a strained voice. "There's nothing now except—" He listened, bolt upright. "One long buzz that means nothing in wireless. Can you hear, sir?"

From where he stood Travers could catch the pronounced, unending noise that came from the receiver. It went on and on.

"Dead at his transmitter and still sending," said Air Marshal Scott quietly. "He's jammed the connection. Wait!"

The buzzing stopped and through the night air over all the miles from France a faint sound traveled out of the secret radio station in Area Twelve. It was a thud, ghostly revealing.

"The greatest secret service agent England ever knew," said Scott. "There he goes. That was his body falling, breaking the connection."

Crashing, a bomb went off, splitting one wall of the radio room wide open and sending sand and bags in a welter in all directions. Through the gap poured the myriad frightful noises of the blitz-guns, bombs, hissing shrapnel fragments, sirens, screams, shouts, fire engine shrieks. All the racket of London in the front lines rushed into the room.

"This way, gentlemen," rose Air Marshal Scott's command. "We have work to do."

THEY were again in the Air Chief of Staff's secret quarters, Travers still standing quietly in the background, he hardly knew why. Air Marshal Scott



stood by the bomb-shattered window, his fists clenched so tightly that the knuckles showed white. Obviously he was laboring under some new and tremendous emotion. But when he spoke his voice was cool, collected.

"Foxcroft has not failed us. He got for us the vital information that we need. But he died before he could send it. It is there with him where he has fallen. Out there—" His hand gestured toward the broken panes—"over in France."

"Where in France?" inquired Air Vice Marshal Benton-Kimberly eagerly. "I can't say those few sentences over the radio meant much to me."

"They mean everything to me. Everything," returned Scott. "Remember that I planned this with Foxcroft. He sent from a woodcutter's hut in Vardeau Woods, Molleville sector, slightly more than a hundred miles inside Occupied France. His *'barrel . . . silver . . . Luger'* means that his report is secreted in the barrel of a silver-mounted Luger that he always carried on him. He took it from a Prussian Guard major in the last war and cherished it as his lucky souvenir. An excellent place in which to hide a secret document. If he were threatened with death or capture a single shot through the barrel would destroy the paper. So there it is—our report—in the pistol barrel in the woodcutter's hut. And *'send . . . send'* means only send a man to get it."

"By Jove, yes," muttered Benton-Kimberly breathlessly.

"Whoever goes will race against time," said Major General Conover swiftly. "The Nazi radio detectors, spread all over France, must have caught his sending. That tremendously long buzz couldn't have gone unnoticed."

"Whoever goes will be taking a more than desperate chance," agreed Scott. His lips compressed. "But lives are nothing compared to getting that report. It was yesterday that Foxcroft was wounded, remember? He must have thrown off the pursuit or they would have had him long before now. Also no radio detector is accurate within a square mile. It will take time for the Nazis to trace the call to the woodcutter's hut, if they picked it up. And a fast-flying pilot, jamming his plane

through, could be at the woodcutter's hut in no time at all from London. The whole thing is a gamble. But someone must go and go on the instant." His glance, swerving from his fellow officers, fell suddenly on Travers, close to the wall in the background. "You still here?" he said abruptly.

"Yes, sir," answered Travers. His mind was racing, leaping forward, visioning a dead man in a woodcutter's shack in a woods in France—a desperate air job to be done and done at once. "I am still here, sir, as no one ordered me to go. And"—he paused—"I've heard everything. I'm ready to take off from this room for that hut in France this minute. I know German if that's necessary."

"Give him the job," suggested Major General Conover instantly. "He was born lucky. Let the AAF do its share, Marshal. As Lieutenant Travers says, he's in on this business, anyhow. Let him go through to the finish. Another pilot would mean putting one more man in on the hush-hush stuff."

"You're right," flashed the Air Chief of Staff. "Travers, here's why that report is particularly vital. Here's the situation in Africa in a few words—" He spoke rapidly, casually, and Travers' heart leaped. "You understand now?"

"Yes, sir," said Travers, tensing. This job was bigger than he had ever dreamed of, now that its background was explained.

"Tarleton!" ordered Scott. "Call Air Intelligence drome, our secret London Field. Fix it up for Travers to go over immediately in German rig and crate. Brief him with maps. Rush him to the drome and never mind the blitz outside. He'll stream back with the raiders. It's a piece of luck they picked tonight. Travers!"

"Sir?"

The Air Chief of Staff's face worked tautly. "You know already that you must get Foxcroft's silver Luger with the report in it at all costs."

"Yes, sir," said Travers wonderingly.

"I have a personal interest in this," said Air Chief of Staff Scott softly. "You see, Colonel Foxcroft was my brother-in-law. And I sent him out, as the best man England had, on a job that killed him."

## IV

TRIVERS jammed on the super-charger of his rocketing Messerschmitt while Spitfire tracer lanced past his wings. All around him flared the finish of battle, the roaring pursuit of the Nazi raiders now breaking in flight for home after the hell of the blitz over London. Out from the hidden field in the heart of the city he had launched his black-crossed crate, zooming through a.a. and tracer fire, and now he was storming over the home counties on his way to the Channel and France. Incapable of firing on his own comrades in the Spitfires, he was running with the long straggle of German crates in their desperate race for safety.

The tracer fell away from him as the ME jumped with its extra power full on and a Heinkel bomber, blazing from end to end, swept past him on its way to the ground. Here, there and everywhere the Swastika-marked killers of civilian men, women and children were falling as the full fury of the Spitfire defense squadrons, idle for weeks, caught them in retreat. The worst blitz London had had in months was over and the countryside would be littered with German wreckage. Beneath Travers' wings the silver ribbon of the Channel rolled out and he relaxed, only minutes later, riding high in enemy air. He leaned forward and re-read the map pinned to his dashboard.

"Due east," he told himself. "Roughly one hundred miles. Easy landmarks—a circle of small lakes. I'll be there in no time."

The minutes passed as he went on at full speed, driving lower to get the lay of the countryside. No searchlight fingers sought him out; no Nazi planes came up to scan him. For a long while the air had been filled with shots, shouts and screams of the Nazi air casualties and he had passed unnoticed in the torrent of retreat. Now with the vengeful Spitfires peeled away at the barrier of No Man's Water, the arch was strangely quiet. So far everything had gone well. "Too well," he reminded himself grimly. The lucky chance of a big Nazi blitz had served as a perfect passport into France.

More miles drifted out behind his rudder and three thousand feet below he

caught the glint of water in patches. The lakes. In between them appeared the dim blur that would be Vardeau Woods.

He went down, gliding for a landing with every sense alert, and the ground rushed up to meet him with incredible swiftness. The broad reach of the clearing sprang up in front of his propeller and with the power off he swept for a landing. Wheels touched and the ME rolled to a halt.

Warily Travers climbed out of the cockpit and stood erect, hand gripping the butt of the Luger that had been given him and eyes scanning the layout. He recalled curt instructions from Air Chief of Staff Scott given in the "shadow office" of the Air Ministry before he had left in a fast car, racing through the flameshot dark of London.

Over yonder reared the gaunt skeleton of a great dead tree, yards only from the black belt of the woods. He walked swiftly for it, listening intently, but only the faint cheeping of night birds reached him. Foxcroft, the dead agent, had chosen his hideaway with superb vision. Travers felt that he was alone with not a human being within miles. He reached the tree, his guidepost, and passed beyond it to the entrance of the narrow woods track that would lead straight to the hut.

Then he halted, hidden in the shadows, glance suddenly called to the skies.

Motors were up there, throttling down, and through the lower arch glided a pair of winged shapes, straight for the clearing. In moments the Messerschmitts would be on top of him.

His palm perspired on the pistol butt as he fought down his nervousness. This landing by Nazi pilots—what did it mean? He gauged the distance between the planes and the ground, turned and began to run at full speed up the track between the dark wall of trees. Was it, after all, a race between him and the Nazis to reach the wood-cutter's hut?

He burst from the road onto a small, grassy space and the dilapidated structure of the hut rose before him. Desperately he fought down the groan that rose to his lips.

He had lost the race. The Nazis were before him.

THE hut showed light, shining through from its raggedly curtained windows and the open door. Men moved inside and he caught a harsh, savage voice giving orders. There came the crackling of a powerful radio transmitting set and the voice became clearer as Travers stole for the wall of the hut. He reached the window and peered in, through the torn folds of the clumsy curtain. At a radio apparatus crouched a man in the uniform of a Luftwaffe colonel and his face was the most feral that Travers had ever seen. Bitter lines channeled from the flaring, sensuous nostrils to the edges of the clamped lips. The man's deep-set eyes blazed with a killer's intensity. His tone, threaded with arrogance, rasped like a file.

"Answer, pilots! Answer! Colonel von Keck, Air Intelligence, commandeering first two airborne pilots in vicinity of Vardeau Woods. Land in clearing in Vardeau Woods immediately and report to woodcutter's hut for instructions. Answer, pilots!"

"We are landing," came the quick reply. "We heard you before. We are over the clearing already."

Travers' brain rioted while his whole frame stiffened with shock. Coming down with his own radio switched off, he had never caught the call that had gone out from the hut. Now he could creep into the concealment of the trees, wait until the two newcomers had entered the hut and then make off down the track to his waiting plane, or—

There in the hut, out of his range of vision, lay the body of the agent Foxcroft. In there, on Foxcroft's person, was the silver Luger with the vital report. He could escape, yes, but empty-handed. He could go back to London and report that he had failed, that Foxcroft had died in vain.

But Foxcroft hadn't let England and America down. He thrust his Luger away, his decision made. He wasn't going to let Foxcroft down, not as long as there still was a mad chance for success.

Out of the shadows of the woods track, two figures were emerging, hardly twenty yards away. Travers drew a deep breath and stepped through the open door of the hut. He knew that he was taking his life in his hands.

"High Command! Calling High Command!" von Keck was snarling into the transmitter. "Colonel von Keck calling High Command! Special Intelligence information!"

The Nazi flyer whirled around as Travers' footsteps sounded and stared squarely at him. In the brief second before their eyes met, Travers' gaze had taken in the scene about him in the hut. Three or four hard-faced Nazi non-coms prowled the shadowed room lit by the flame of candles thrust into the necks of wine bottles on the rickety table.

A crude pallet in one corner was unoccupied. The body lay in the shadows of the wall next the radio set, a body clad in a Nazi flying officer's uniform. The tunic was open and the shirt under it was a mass of blood. For twenty-four hours at least Colonel Foxcroft must have been dying on the job. In a bench close by a scattering of personal effects had been gathered by the Nazis. A well-used pipe, a cigarette case, some papers written in German and—

Travers went hot all over. There lay the silver-chased, silver-handled Luger, piled with the rest of the effects. He brought his hand up in the Nazi salute.

"Heil Hitler! I received your call in the air very near here, Colonel von Keck."

Behind him sounded the noise of entrance. The pilots of the two Messerschmitts had arrived, cutting off Travers' rear. They too saluted. Von Keck glared at the still silent radio set.

"I have found a spy! A British spy!" he grated. "Or rather what is left of him. Our radio detector caught him sending and I have just reached here by motor. I want two couriers at once. I am Colonel von Keck of the Luftwaffe, assigned to direct special counter-spy Intelligence. Strip that body, Sergeant. The cloth of the uniform, the socks must be analyzed for secret inks. The body itself must go to the nearest laboratory. This Colonel Foxcroft, whose photograph and record I well know, may have swallowed a paper or so—the old agent's trick. For months I have been after him and now I find him—England's most dangerous spy—too late to wring anything from him. You—" he jabbed a finger at Travers—"who are you?"

"Lieutenant Heller, Fifty-seventh Jags-staffel," said Travers swiftly. "Returning from the raid on London."

"I hope we hurt the *verdommt* British badly," rasped von Keck. "And you?" He turned to the other flyers.

They stiffened.

"Lieutenant Orbach, Lieutenant Volke." The names rattled off.

Von Keck turned suddenly, holding up his hand for silence. A voice was crackling in the radio. It stopped and he began to speak in his fiendlike voice.

"I have Foxcroft, the British ace agent, dead in his secret hideaway . . . *ja*, Excellence, I have been looking for him since the alarm went out of his escape from Base X. We caught a radio coding from somewhere near at hand at my Molleville headquarters. By quick tracing I located it in Vardeau Woods and here I am with the Britisher's body . . .

"*Nein*, no papers . . .

"*Ja*, I am sending all his clothes and effects to the nearest Intelligence base. I myself am . . ."

He paused a full minute while the voice from the High Command crackled. "Very well, I shall fly myself to Base X . . . *Ja*, I shall conduct an investigation to see if the Britisher had any confederates there . . . General von Carolz is an old friend of mine . . . *Ja*, Foxcroft is really dead . . . Our great secret is safe."

Von Keck left the radio, walking over to the bench. He ran his hands through the belongings of the agent, then put them down to take up the silver-mounted Luger. His hot eyes gleamed as, apparently for the first time, he studied its superb workmanship. Cunning gleamed in his face and he hefted the weapon with a possessive grip.

"This," he said softly, "I shall present to Lieutenant General von Carolz as a souvenir of the occasion. The High Command Intelligence can do without it. No one in this room is to mention it. It is of no importance."

Travers nodded with the rest while disgust filled him. Here was a high Nazi officer indulging openly in looting, a man with the power of life and death over many men in his hands was stealing a valuable pistol to curry favor with a superior.

8—Wings—Summer

VON KECK thrust the silver pistol inside his pocket and spoke again. "Sergeant, you and your squad can take the body back to Molleville in the car that brought us here. Lieutenant Volke, you will fly the spy's effects to Intelligence at Recambaux, where they have the scientific apparatus. Orbach, you come with me as escort. I shall need a courier later. Heller!" Travers stepped forward. "I am commandeering your plane for my flight. You stay here with the sergeant until I send to relieve you. There is always the possibility that some confederate of the dead spy might show up. Now, hurry."

The non-coms moved out of the hut under the burden of Foxcroft's stripped body. Lieutenant Volke, wrapping the agent's effects in a bundle, followed them. Von Keck smiled sardonically, motioned to Lieutenant Orbach, and they too went out of the door into the night. Travers stood quietly while his hand moved to the pistol in his belt and fell away, hopelessness flooding him. The mad idea of shooting it out with from three to seven Nazis he discarded as soon as it had been born. Von Keck was on his way and the precious pistol was going with him.

Slowly another plan was forming in Travers' mind. Seven Nazis he could never tackle—two he could. It would all be a matter of split-second timing. Outside he heard the car burst into power, rolling away down the woods track. An airplane engine roared in the clearing. The non-coms and Volke were off. He whirled, drew the Luger from his belt in a flashing movement and sprang forward, straight for the Nazi sergeant. The barrel crashed full on the top of the non-com's head and he pitched forward, a limp and unconscious heap. Travers was out of the hut, stumbling, racing along the rough woods track for the nearby clearing. He heard Volke's ME take off and drone away, he heard another engine start. Which was it, von Keck's or Orbach's? Into the clearing he burst, streaking through the moonlight just as an ME, moving slowly, ran down the clearing in its take-off. It was his own. It was von Keck being airborne. The second ME was roaring into power, not fifty yards away, and he could see Lieutenant Orbach in it at the controls.

"Orbach!" he called swiftly. "Lieuten-

ant Orbach. Wait! Something has been forgotten!"

"What is that?" called Orbach, throttling down.

Rushing at top speed, Travers tore over the grass, leaped onto the wing next the still open cockpit, raised his weapon and struck. Orbach slumped over the controls, knocked senseless by the force of that savage blow. Travers yanked his figure out of the cockpit and flung it to the ground, squeezed himself in behind the stick and shoved on the power.

Ahead of him in the clear silver of the night he made out the shape of von Keck's plane rising above the tops of the trees and going for altitude in a steep climb. He thrust in the radio jack as the ME began to roll and waited. Von Keck would call, he sensed, giving directions. And he knew now what he meant to do. It would be the cold-blooded killing of a Nazi who believed in cold-blooded killing—one man against one man, no longer a lone Yank hopelessly outnumbered. The plane rushed down the clearing, rose as lightly as a bird and scaled up after von Keck.

"Orbach!" cracked von Keck's voice in his earphones. "Are you following?"

"Ja," answered Travers.

"I am levelling off at eight thousand. Follow me one hundred yards to the rear. Never mind where we are going. Follow me, that is all."

"Ja," bit out Travers.

Far ahead von Keck still zoomed and Travers put on more power in his own zoom after him. In moments more he saw von Keck flatten out, came out himself on an even keel and rocketed straight for the Nazi's rudder, thumb on the firing button. Three seconds, five, and he would be riding on top of von Keck's cockpit, shooting von Keck to ribbons. When von Keck went down, crashing to the earth, the silver Luger would be on his dead body. Only a matter of landing by the wreckage, recapturing the Luger and taking off for England.

Wild hope thrilled him. On he arrowed, rushing closer, closer to von Keck's cockpit. Then, directly on his tail, he had von Keck's head in his ringsight, not fifteen yards away. One blast from his guns in the lonely skies and the Luger was his.

Abruptly his head turned. He was no

longer lonely in the skies. Around his plane and von Keck's, swirling in from the flank, thundered Messerschmitts, eight of them.

VON KECK'S head came around, his voice crashed in the radio.

"Who are you, Messerschmitts? This is Colonel von Keck, Air Intelligence."

"Interceptors from Anti-Aircraft Station Fourteen," tossed back the answer. "An RAF bomber-fighter raid is out in this vicinity going inland. All neighboring interceptors are up."

"RAF planes going inland!" flashed von Keck. "Fall in behind and to port and starboard of my plane as escort for the next hundred miles. I travel for the High Command on special mission."

"*Jawohl*, Colonel von Keck," rose the answer, and the planes swung into position.

Von Keck swiveled in his cockpit and his face glared as he caught sight of Travers crowding him. "What are you doing on my tail?" he snarled into the radio. "Get back where you belong!"

Stifling his despair, Travers fell away and the formation rode on, picking up speed. No chance now to bring down von Keck; if he tried it the escorting MEs would rip him to pieces in the air. At 15,000 feet they were roaring along for an unknown destination. The minutes passed and the miles with them while slowly hope dwindled in Travers' mind. For a long time now they had been streaking above a fleecy bank of clouds that completely shrouded the countryside from view. The cloud bank came suddenly to an end and von Keck's voice barked into the radio:

"Base X! Calling Base X! Colonel von Keck, Intelligence landing. I am six or seven miles away. Put out flares." On the distant carpet light sprang up and a circle of low hills. Von Keck spoke again. "That is all, escort planes. Peel off."

The MEs that rode alongside von Keck and behind with Travers swerved and were gone into the night. Wildly Travers jammed on his throttle, tearing again for von Keck's tail. He was on it, and his guns loosed. The tracer tore through the Nazi's wing and von Keck turned, looking into the flame of Travers' guns. "Got him!" panted Travers. In another second, von Keck would go down, still at least five miles from the base, and he would be on



him on the ground. Again his thumb pressed the firing button for the final burst. Only an empty clicking came.

"Out of ammo!" he gasped. "The Nazi who flew this crate shot it all away over London!"

Around came von Keck in a screeching bank and his own guns slashed their flame at Travers.

This was a Nazi who thought and acted like lightning. Travers was helpless as a clay pigeon in front of his fire. With a thrust the Yank ruddered clear around and shoved on his supercharger.

It was no use. Von Keck's plane thundered still on his tail as the Nazi threw his own extra power into his engine. Desperately Travers scanned the empty skies, the vast expanse of miles that separated him from England. He could not outrun von Keck, whose tracer slashed a yard above his cockpit. And then, directly below, he glimpsed the long extent of clouds over which they had passed. There, if he could reach it, was cover.

Thrusting forward on the stick, he dove for the woolly bank and in that instant the fury of von Keck's guns struck full on his fuselage and tore it apart. In a rending crash the rudder came off and the whole crate lurched sickeningly. It was out of control and plunging for the distant earth while von Keck's spate of metal still tore it.

Thoughts raced lightninglike through Travers' mind. He had one chance in a thousand and he meant to take it. Somehow he wrenched his falling crate out of von Keck's tracer just as the blanket of cloud closed in about him. Then he was wrenching the cockpit hatchment open above his head and flinging himself out into the dank mist. His grip was on the ripcord of his chute but he did not pull it. Down he plunged and burst out of the cloudbank into the moonlight sky. Below him the dark shape of his wrecked plane plunged; out of the cloudbank not fifty yards away in a howling dive plummeted von Keck and passed him by.

Then in a blast of flame Travers' pilotless kite blew up and dissolved in fragments in midair. He saw von Keck flatter abruptly out of his dive and shoot off for the east.

Alone, Travers dropped through the

night. He tugged the rip-cord, his chute canopy opened and slowly the ground drifted up to meet him. It was only minutes before his feet struck earth and he was stripping off the harness. Von Keck had not seen him bail out; he had taken it for granted that Travers had washed out in the cockpit when his crate exploded. He was still alive in the heart of enemy territory and his jaw clenched in a determined line.

"Base X, whatever it may be, is only a few miles over yonder," he told himself. "And Base X is where von Keck has gone with the Luger. Well—" he shook the strain out of his muscles—"I can make it in under an hour easily. I might as well be in Base X as anywhere else."

At a fast trot he set off across the flat countryside toward the looming circle of hills in the east. A single searchlight shaft shot up from their center and suddenly the upper skies were filled with the thunder of planes, coming in.

## V

TRIVERS trudged steadily along the moonlight road that led straight for the circle of hills. With the passing of every moment he was drawing closer to the test. He meant to find von Keck, but would von Keck recognize him? In that candle-lit woodcutter's hut, he reminded himself, his flying helmet, goggle-mask and chin-piece had practically concealed his features and in the shadowy skies von Keck could have seen nothing of him but a head and shoulders in a cockpit. He would simply have to go on, take his desperate gamble and trust to his wits.

His feet ached and his head felt numb with weariness as he pulled up by the side of the road for a breathing spell. His gaze straying back over the road, he spotted the dark shapes that rolled toward him in a long procession and he straightened.

"Convoy!" he exclaimed. "And there's only one place it can be going. The base." Stepping into the center of the road where he would be clearly limned by the moonlight, he held up his hand as the leading car, a light staff machine, came down upon him. With a screech of brakes it stopped and a youthful driver, hardly more than

eighteen, looked out at him from behind the wheel. Travers stepped forward. "Can you give me a lift?" he asked. "I am footing it after my plane came down."

The young private nodded and Travers swung to the front seat beside him. Following the staff car in the semi-darkness came a long string of huge gasoline tank trucks, perhaps thirty of them. It was the biggest fuel convoy Travers had ever seen.

"You are going to the base?" he inquired casually, as the car went into motion.

"Ja," said the young driver. His face was worried and he obviously labored under an unusual strain. "Ja, it is a rush order. It is most unfortunate. It is"—

A deep snore, breaking from the rear of the car, interrupted him. Travers started and peered into the back. There, chin plunged on chest and huddled limply on the cushions, sat an officer in captain's uniform. His eyes were closed and his mouth open.

"Your officer?" asked Travers.

The private's mouth twisted anxiously. "My brother, Captain Witten, in command of the fuel depot at Moulin Vert. A sudden emergency order for him to bring a convoy to the airplane base in person and what happens? Johann is drunk. He is a good officer but it is his failing. We have just had news from home of the death of two more of our brothers on the Russian front and he is trying to forget. Johann has brought a bottle of brandy with him and he has gotten even drunker on the road. What will happen when he reports to Headquarters where we are going?"

"He'd better not," said Travers. "He'll be severely dealt with. Drunkenness on duty—well, you know—"

"They will send him to the Russian front," said young Witten in a scared voice. "And I, as his driver, will have to go with him. The Russian Front has swallowed four of our brothers already out of the six of us. *Gott*, I do not want to go there! But when the authorities see Johann in this condition it will be all up with us. Maybe he will be stood up against a wall and shot."

Another drunken snore came from the rear. The limp figure of Captain Witten slid off the cushions and crumpled, un-

conscious, on the floor of the car. It would be hours before he could stand on his feet.

"They will send for him for the convoy inventory and to sign the receipt. It is the routine," said young Witten miserably. "What shall I do? What can I do?"

The convoy was rolling rapidly along and already the staff car was running through a belt of woods, crowding close to the road. In another ten minutes it should be at its destination. And then—

The mad plan that had been forming in Travers' mind crystallized in a single second into definite shape. Here was opportunity and he meant to take it.

"Do they know your brother at the air base headquarters?" He flung the question swiftly. "Have you ever been here before?"

"Never," was the answer. "It is brand-new."

"Then Captain Witten, perfectly sober, will present his papers and deliver the fuel. Instead of an intoxicated supply officer in the back of this car you will have a drunken Luftwaffe flyer and there are plenty of those off duty to whom no blame is attached."

"What?" inquired the private, his mouth agape. His wits plainly did not move very rapidly.

"You were kind to pick me up on the road when you did not have to do so," pursued Travers. "One good turn deserves another and I would not like to see any more Wittens perish in Russia. I shall change clothes with your brother, play the part of Captain Witten at the base and you can stow your brother away somewhere in my flyer's kit until he sobers up. Then we can exchange clothes again for his return to Moulin Vert."

The driver's face lit up with an awed smile. "That is wonderful of you!" he exclaimed. "It will save Johann."

It would save somebody else besides Johann, thought Travers, while he wrestled the captain's uniform off the drunken officer in the back of the car and effected the change of clothing. In a new disguise he could face any Nazi he met.

HE WAS back in the front seat beside young Witten as the car swept into the circle of hills. It was all forest here, a tremendous expanse of pine woods, the

trees set well apart on a carpet of needles, years old. The sweet smell of the conifers mingled with the heavier fumes that meant planes and fuel.

"We have arrived," said Witten nervously, pulling up the car in front of a low building close by the entrance to the wooded valley. Its sign indicated the supply depot office.

"Hide your brother away somewhere," cautioned Travers, alighting. "I'll locate you later." He marched into the office, papers in hand, and drew up before a desk behind which sat a beefy, run-to-seed major, a typical Boche office head. "Captain Witten, Moulin Vert fuel depot, arriving with truck convoy." The papers slapped on the desk. "Receipt for the fuel, please. I wish to unload and return to my base as rapidly as possible."

The beefy major dipped a pen in an inkwell. In seconds more Travers would be out of the building, free to go on his search for von Keck, unhindered. And a newly-arrived flying colonel would not be difficult to find at any air base. The major grunted and spoke to a pair of troopers sitting on a bench that Travers had not noticed before. Hard-faced and broad-shouldered, they carried pistols and rifles slung on their backs.

"Take Captain Witten direct to Lieutenant General von Carolz." He glanced up at Travers. "I have orders for you to be brought to the general instantly upon your arrival, Captain Witten. Your papers you may call for later. The unloading will be attended to."

The troopers swept to their feet, one on each side of Travers. He was as truly a prisoner, being rushed to face von Carolz, as though there were pistols in his ribs. His search for von Keck had ended even before it had started.

"But—" he began.

"No buts," said the major surlily. "It is an order. Do not ask me why *Excellens* wants an interview with you. Interviews with him always mean trouble. Be off!"

The troopers hurried Travers outside and into a motorcycle sidecar. The extra trooper mounted another single cycle and they roared through the forest. Travers lifted his head, looking skyward, and shock ran through him.

A vast netting of camouflage stretched

like a roof as far as he could see, masking the road against any observation from above. The road suddenly was a road no longer. It had become a tremendously broad concrete surface, running due north and south through the woods. It was a runway that he surveyed. Off to the sides in the filtered moonlight he made out broad alleys and lanes cut through the pines and in these alleys and lanes bulked the shapes of giant ships.

For miles there must be nothing left of the forest itself but a hollow shell with the still-existing pines serving as poles to hold up the expanse of camouflage netting! On charged the motorcycle sidecar so swiftly that Travers had no clear view of the concentration of planes. He had an impression, that was all. An impression of a colossal air armada, secreted in its own nest.

"Here we are," the motorcycle trooper said gruffly and swung the machine in a broad arc that brought it to the edge of the woods in front of a long concrete building with many windows. "Headquarters."

Travers swung out and stared about him. A scant twenty-five yards away towered the biggest pine tree he had ever seen, reaching far up above its fellows of the forest. Its bole had been axed clear of limbs all the way to the top where a plume of thick branches still stretched. Beneath the branches loomed a platform and steel spiral stairs wound up to it around the naked bole.

"Lookout tower," said the trooper, following his surprised gaze. "The tallest tree within a hundred miles. There's an anti-aircraft machine-gun battery and a guard up there. This way, Captain Witten."

Travers passed through an entrance door where a light burned dimly and emerged into a chamber filled with officers busy at desks. They passed down a corridor to a door with an armed sentry before it. "Captain Witten," said the trooper, and the sentry swung the door open. Travers stepped through, stiffening.

At a desk sat a huge man, massive-shouldered and bull-necked, in a uniform blazing with decorations and a general's insignia. He had greying, close-cropped hair and a jutting nose. Half a dozen staff

officers were present and beside him sat von Keck. The test had come.

"Captain Witten," said Travers stiffly. "Heil Hitler!"

His eyes narrowed and his whole frame went taut. There on General von Carolz's desk next to an open bottle of brandy and two glasses lay the silver-mounted Luger, holding down a sheaf of papers.

ONE grab and he could have it. But one grab and bullets would pour into him from every weapon in the room. He could not fire the Luger in return without destroying Foxcroft's report hidden in the barrel. Nor could he lift it, unseen, from where it lay in open view. He was blocked, utterly blocked.

"Witten," rumbled the huge von Carolz, his cold eyes taking in every detail of Travers' person, "I have important news for you." His hand ruffled the top papers of a pile at his elbow. "Here is a list of the amount of gasoline that is now en route to the railroad at your base, Moulin Vert, for immediate convoy to this base. More fuel trucks, all the Reich can spare, are even now on the way to you. The Wehrmacht, with the assistance of the Luftwaffe, is about to launch a terrific offensive."

He paused, scanned the top sheet rapidly and laid it down on top of the silver Luger, the barrel of which projected an inch or so from under the paper. The rest of it was hidden.

"Yes, *Excellenz*," said Travers while an insane hope mounted in him. His hand stole to the Luger in his own belt.

"The location and zero hour of the new offensive is not for you to know. It is an affair of the High Command. I merely mean to give you here and now your instructions as to the part your depot will play." Another sheet of paper riffled onto the silver Luger. Travers eased forward until he was inches only from the desk edge.

"I eagerly await your instructions, *Excellenz*. I am honored," he babbled as though overcome with foolish pride. "The list now."

Out went his hand for the top papers, struck the open brandy bottle and knocked it flat, sending a cascade of powerful-smelling liquor across the desk surface.

"*Gott im himmel*, you clumsy fool!" roared von Carolz, his face purple. He reared to his feet, dripping with cognac. Von Keck jerked a silk handkerchief from his pocket and hurriedly began to wipe away the stain. Both he and the general had eyes only for the general's uniform. And in that second Travers' hand went out with his own Luger in it, dove under the papers and dropped the weapon, sliding out the silver Luger. It was in his pocket and he was trembling in assumed terror, muttering idiotically when von Carolz looked again at him.

"*Excellenz, excellenz*, what a fool I am! Pardon, *Excellenz*, I was so nervous at being so honored by *Excellenz!*" I was so—I was so—" He went into rigid attention with his heels together and his hands glued to his sides as though waiting for the verdict of punishment. "I have a private income," he dithered. "I—I will be glad to buy the general a new uniform."

For a long minute von Carolz glared at him while von Keck mopped the last of the stain from his clothes. He puffed out a final oath and sat down. "You do not look as much of a fool as you act," he said irritably.

Von Keck's eyes, boring into Travers' face, lighted suddenly. "Where have I seen you before?" he snarled in his file-like voice. "I never forget a face."

"I regret that this is my first meeting with Colonel von Keck," said Travers coolly. "You are in the air, Colonel, and I am a humble officer on the ground."

"Air? Air?" repeated von Keck. "Yes, was it in the air? Wait a minute and perhaps by association of ideas I can trace—"

"Enough, von Keck," rumbled von Carolz. "We have no time to waste on trivial matters. It is not of the slightest importance whether you ever saw Captain Witten before or not. Perhaps you ran into him in one of those Berlin night clubs of which you are so fond. We know where an officer with a private income spends his leave, do we not?" He laughed hoarsely at his own feeble joke and then his head turned to the door. "Well, Colonel Strube?"

The tall officer who entered stopped and saluted. His voice was tinged with excitement. "One hundred more of the new planes coming in within the hour,

General von Carolz. Where do you wish them parked?"

"Open the park map, Strube," boomed von Carolz. "That is your department. Lanes Twenty and Twenty-two should be clear."

The colonel strode to the righthand wall where a curtain hung and sent it flying ceilingward on its rollers. Travers saw a contour map of the forest, marked off in long rectangles and lanes that were studded so closely with the tiny silhouettes of planes that in some places the white of the paper could hardly be seen.

"Every single plane at Base X is there, according to your report this morning, Strube," said the general. "Find your own place to park the newcomers."

"Those lanes will do," returned the colonel, touching a pair of empty spaces. "If more come in however we may be cramped for room."

"There will be plenty of room at Base X within the next forty-eight hours." Von Carolz's eyes shone exultantly. "In fact the whole of Base X will be empty."

"We are going out with the entire fleet, General von Carolz? We are attacking? Gott, that is good news!"

"I have told you enough for the moment, Strube."

"Zu befehl, Excellenz."

The tall colonel stalked from the room. Von Keck was reaching out for the brandy bottle, long since placed upright on the desk with some of its contents remaining. He was pouring the liquor into a glass, his eyes still on Travers.

"I find that a stiff drink will often refresh the memory," he said. "In the Intelligence we often develop an extra sense that might be dismissed as intuition. My intuition tells me, Witten—"

He raised the cognac and downed its huge slug. His eyes glinted. "I am beginning to —"

"Stop it, von Keck," ordered von Carolz. "Because you are here on a spy hunt does not entitle you to suspect everyone you meet in my office. Captain Witten is valuable to us. He has to deliver the fuel for our fleet. Captain Witten!"

"Excellenz?"

Von Carolz extended a couple of type-written sheets. "The list of Base X's incoming supplies. Go into the outer room

and study them. I shall send for you before you leave."

"I obey, Excellenz!"

Travers pivoted stiffly on his heel and started for the door. He was on his way. In another minute he would be safely out of headquarters with the silver Luger on him. In a terrific armada of planes such as Base X secreted it would not be hard to make off with one! He had his hand on the doorknob when it was flung open and a group of men crowded through, forcing him back on the general's desk.

"What is this?" demanded von Carolz furiously. "Why are you bringing a body into my headquarters?"

A THICK-FEATURED captain stepped forward. "This flyer was found dead drunk by my military police. A young private was trying to carry him into one of the huts near the main gas tank. I have your orders, General von Carolz, to bring immediately before you any officer or soldier found drunk at Base X."

A cold sensation, bordering on horror, coursed Travers' spine. Between two burly military policemen and held up by them sagged a familiar figure in flying kit. Once again Captain Witten had appeared on the scene, still stupefied by liquor. Travers moved a little, edging toward the door where two more military police stood.

"You are right to bring him to me." Von Carolz' neck-muscles bulged under the force of his rage. There was no mercy in his voice, only a lethal, cold-blooded ferocity. "I permit no drunkenness on this base by anyone. A single drunken officer or man can imperil all. This flyer shall be shot and shot at once. Here and now. Close that door and guard it." The MPs stepped to block the entrance. "Remain in this room, every one of you, as witnesses, to this execution."

"And I shall execute him!" It was von Keck, moving from behind the desk, his pistol jutting out in his hand and a killer's lust flaming in his sensuous face. "I demand the right, General von Carolz. This man is a disgrace to the Luftwaffe and I am of the Luftwaffe! I shall shoot him!"

"He is yours!" rumbled von Carolz.

The inert figure still hung in the grip



of the MPs. The faint flickering of Witten's eyelids showed that in a few moments he would be coming to. Travers realized that he was looking on a scene of typical Nazi sadism. These Nazi higher-ups were born with a thirst for murder. They would as soon kill a German who had displeased them as an enemy. Witten, an able officer except for his weakness, was to die.

Von Keck crossed the room with a tiger-like tread and jammed the muzzle of his pistol within an inch of Witten's forehead.

"Who is he?" demanded von Carolz. Von Keck drew back.

The MP captain felt in Witten's pocket and came out with papers. He scanned them swiftly. "By his credentials this is Lieutenant Heller, Fifty-seventh Jagdstaffel."

"Heller! Lieutenant Heller!" screamed von Keck, leaping back. "I left Lieutenant Heller on guard back in the British agent's hut at Vardeau Woods! This is not Heller!"

He took a single stride forward and his fist took Witten cruelly under the chin, driving his head up. Witten's eyes opened under the force of the blow, staring dully.

"Who are you?" yelled von Keck and slapped him on the cheek. "Speak!" A second blow slashed. "Speak!"

Again Witten's head reeled. His mouth opened, his bemused senses for that second returned. "C-Captain Witten, fuel base, Moulin Vert," he hiccuped. "Where am I?"

Von Keck whirled, glaring in frenzy at Travers. "Then you are not Witten!" The screech rang through the startled room. "*Bei Gott*, I know you now! You are Heller and it was Heller who tried to shoot me down in the air! You are a spy!"

Flame crashed from his pistol and its slug tore the side of Travers' kit, heart-high, as he leaped aside, dragging the silver Luger from his pocket. Straight for the door he dove and the two burly MP's who blocked it. One MP had his truncheon out, the other was reaching for his automatic. Swerving in the last split second as the truncheon swished, Travers brought the barrel of the silver weapon down on top of the MP's head and he collapsed. He plunged on, staring into the bore of the second MP's pistol leveled

at his head from three feet away. When the trigger squeezed, destruction would belch and the MP could not miss.

Crashing, a shot came from behind that whipped past Travers' head so close he could feel the wind of its passing. A dark, round hole appeared in the center of the MP's forehead as he pitched forward to the floor with a thud. Von Keck's second shot had missed Travers and caught the MP full. Again von Keck fired and again. Other pistols exploded.

But Travers was through the door, slamming it behind him and racing into the outer office of headquarters with its mass of officers and soldiers. Yells, curses, shouts rang out behind him and startled faces looked at him from every side, as he tore for the door with the silver Luger held in front of him.

And then the thing he dreaded happened. Lurching away from the wall ahead of him, a huge headquarters guard blocked his path to the entrance door, Tommy-gun swung up to his hip. A pistol shot he might dodge, the raking sweep of a sub-machinegun never.

In sheer, hopeless desperation before the blast could erupt from the guard's hip, Travers raised the silver Luger and fired, straight for the heart.

**T**HE guard reeled under the shock, and toppled backwards with the tommy-gun clattering to the floor. Travers had it in a bound, shoving his pistol away. Across the crowded room where officers and men were now pulling their guns he sent a savage volley, then turned and plunged for the door that gave onto the night outside.

He was through it, standing on the edge of the vast expanse of concrete runway, listening to the clamor of confusion from behind him while his glance swept here, there, everywhere, in desperation. No transportation anywhere in view, no means of flight. And then from above his head the loud-speaker of the headquarters building blared from the roof.

"Spy escaping! Block the runway! All guards to headquarters! Spy escaping! In supply corps captain's uniform! General alarm!"

Travers stood there, disclosed in the first light of dawn. Somehow the night

hours had slipped away. The first shots crashed from a guard post across the runway. A second volley sent lead past him, coming from the left. All through the forest the loud-speakers blared the alarm. There was no direction in which he could run—east, west, south, north—even down or—

"Up!" he blurted. "It's the only place left!"

Close by bulked the bole of the great stripped pine, towering far above its fellows of the forest. Under the branches of its top nested the lookout post, with its machine guns. Only yards from him was the beginning of the spiral steel stairs that wound upward, around the tree to the platform.

"Guard!" he shouted. "Treetop lookout guard! Ahoy, up there! Can you hear me!"

Far above, over the wall of the lookout platform beneath the top branches, a head appeared.

"What is it?" the Nazi called down.

"How many of you up there? I have orders for you."

"Four!" came the reply.

"Lean out, all of you, and listen," barked Travers. Four heads appeared in a line over the platform wall. Travers lifted his tommy-gun and focused its sight on the head to the left. If he missed one he would never get up those stairs. "Listen to this, you damned Nazis!" he shouted and jammed trigger, traversing.

One, two, three, four—like so many teapins the inert bodies fell back from the waist-high railing and vanished. He had knocked out the whole guard. Rushing forward, Travers reached the staircase and raced up it, spiral after narrow spiral, circling dizzily until his brain reeled under the pace of his climb. From the door of headquarters building below a crowd of men erupted, shouting. A figure pointed to him and shots crashed, slicing into the bole of the tree. At each turn he made on the spirals the sleet of metal tore past him. He was panting, gasping, fighting for breath.

Then he was through the opening that led to the platform and standing on the platform itself, clear for the moment. On the iron flooring lay the bodies of the four lookout guards, shot through the head. A

pair of anti-aircraft guns were set up, one on either side of the tree bole, and overhead the branches at the top of the tree stretched out on either side, veiling the post from above. A coil of rope lay at his feet and a case half full of beer bottles and a box with packages of food stood next the tree trunk, on which was fixed a red-inked map and a telephone stand. All these details Travers took in with a brief glance, then stepped over to the platform railing that towered above headquarters. It was an iron shield, a perfect armor of protection, running all the way around the post with a six-inch gap at its base.

He huddled down, shoved the muzzle of his tommy-gun through the gap and fired straight into the doorway of headquarters directly below. The crowd of men there disintegrated, screaming, and limp figures were hauled back out of sight.

"That'll hold 'em for a while," he thought grimly. "Only one man can come up those spiral stairs at a time and I could hold this joint against that kind of attack with a handful of bricks. Food, beer and a phone." A reckless smile crossed his face. "What more could a guy in the AAF want?"

His head came up. The phone was jangling. He went over and unhooked it, grinning. After the strain of battle he felt strangely gay, with the gayety of desperation. "Ja," he said gutturally. "Who calls?"

"You, you spy in the firewatchers' lookout! Surrender!" It was von Keck, his voice choking with fury, calling obviously from headquarters.

"Sorry, sir." Travers' grin grew broader. "Annie doesn't live here any more."

"What is that?" demanded von Keck even more furiously. "What foolery is this?"

"Kindly make no phone calls unless absolutely necessary," gibed Travers. "We need the wires for war priorities. No singing telegrams accepted."

"You madman!" screamed von Keck. "What are you talking about? Surrender!"

"Sorry, sir," repeated Travers politely. "Your three minutes is up. Drop another nickel, please." He slammed the receiver back on the hook.

It was all very well to goad von Keck into an insane fury to relieve his own feelings but his own situation was utterly without hope. There was no way, no way at all, in which he could descend from the post where he was trapped. And he had failed in his mission.

Ruefully he drew the silver Luger from his pocket and stared at it. He thrust the tip of a finger into the barrel and moved it around, withdrawing it.

Tiny flecks of charred ash, the ash of paper, clung to his fingertip. That was all that was left of the secret report of Foxcroft, revealing the details of the Nazi air reserves. It would have been written, of course, on the finest tissue paper, and the paper had been blasted into nothingness when he had loosed the Luger at the guard with the tommy gun. Nothing else, of course, could have been done; if he had not fired he would have been a dead man.

He moved cautiously nearer the railing, striding around the lookout and surveying the vast expanse of view that the treetop gave. Everywhere for miles, to the encircling rim of hills, stretched the masses of camouflage, hung on the upper pine trunks. The road by which he had entered passed through a cleft in the hills and the great runway beneath him, hidden under its netting, ran due south to where the road picked up again and vanished through another distant cleft.

In the pine woods that surrounded him, over which his lone tree towered, were secreted how many planes? And what type of planes were they? He could not tell; the mask of camouflage hid all. The map had indicated perhaps as many as two thousand, tucked out of sight in this marvelous hideaway. Were they the air reserves Foxcroft had found out about?

He found himself at the map fastened to the tree-trunk and its significance was instantly clear. Here were the plats, giving the location of all buildings and centers in the forest as a fire-watchers' guide—main fuel tank, fighter-interceptor park, headquarters, pilots' barracks, ground crew and workmen's quarters, fire-engine stations, hospital. Slowly his mind registered the complete layout of Base X, a marvelous example of German engineering efficiency.

But what was it for? Where were all these planes going?

FROM below, gunfire crashed and slammed against the metal shield surrounding the platform, reminding him that he had other things to think of. No one could reach his level alive on foot; no sniper climbing to a distant tree could get within range without his own fire bringing him down. But he sensed what von Keck would do, and he would be helpless against him.

The phone chattered again and he picked it up. "*Guten morgen*, Hotel Adlon, Berlin," he said cheerfully. "I hope you slept well, sir."

A snarl of frustrated rage carried up from below. It was von Keck again, as he knew it would be. "*Verdammt* jester, will you give up? You have no chance up there."

"*Heil Hitler!*" returned Travers, grinning once more despite the strain that gripped him. "Reverse charges!"

"Fool! Imbecile! Maniac!" howled von Keck. "I shall send the fighters in against you if you refuse to surrender. They will tear you to pieces. Answer!"

"Sorry, sir, Lieutenant Travers, AAF, has just gone out for lunch. Back at three." Travers moved to put the receiver back then halted. "Telephone discontinued!" he barked into the transmitter. "Why the hell don't you pay your bills?"

The instrument clashed onto its hook and Travers stood deep in thought, his grin gone and his jaw set in a desperate line. The brief moment of lightness was over; the battle to the death was coming. He had no hope but he meant to take all the Nazis he could with him.

A strange, tense silence fell. The minutes passed as he kept his gaze to the north where the map told him the interceptor park lay, half a mile from the huge, indistinguishable, camouflaged bulk that projected over the smaller treetops. That would be the main gasoline tank, with smaller tanks near it.

Then he saw them rising, flattening out above the treetops and driving for him on his own level. Their wings glinted in the clear dawn and in another moment they would be on him—five black-crossed Messerschmitts 109s in line. He swung the nearest ack-ack gun to face them, crouching down behind the shield of the platform. The Nazi crates came like bolts of lightning

with their throttles full out. Flame spewed in his face, it seemed to him, as the first ME loosed its wing guns in a storm of steel that slashed into the tree-trunk behind him and zoomed. Then the second one was on him and his gunfire lifted to take it. Straight into the cockpit crashed his steel, and the pilot collapsed. The doomed ship rolled onto its side, plummeted past the lookout platform and went on to crash amid the treetops.

Bullets thudded into the shield protecting Travers, tracer howled and screeched, engines dinned and wings flashed. He shot on, swinging his gun muzzle, living a lifetime in every battle-filled second. The third and fourth MEs were past him, the fifth poured a stream of hot metal a foot above his head and lifted. In that second he caught its fuselage in his gunsight and blew it apart. Reeling, the ME swept on and crashed.

The scream of sirens split the forest dawn as the fire engines came racing from every station in Base X. Travers did not turn his head. He was looking north, gaze fixed on the distance. More wings were up, five of them. But their formation was different. This was no attack in line. Here came an attack with two MEs on the flanks and three headed directly for him. The flanking planes would converge their fire from the sides as the other three took him head on. Screaming, they charged, and Travers gritted his teeth and took the first of the crates with his fire. He dared not look to right or left, only at the immediate target.

Tracer jetted at him from rocketing wings; it came from front, from right, from left. His own terrific blast smashed back while the air around him screamed with metal. In front of him the ME he sighted on blew up, above him a ghastly crash almost split his eardrums. The last two MEs, firing viciously, rushed over the platform and were gone. He leaned back, gasping.

It was over for the moment. Three more MEs had gone down. The two coming in from the sides, hurled out of their course by the explosion of the ME he had hit, had collided overhead within yards of him. Smoke bellied up from the forest close at hand in different places and voices shouted in panic.

"Fire! It is spreading! This place is nothing but tinder!"

Travers drew his hand across his forehead, damp with perspiration, and looked around him. Flame leaped on the woods floor, running fast across its years-old deposit of dry pine needles. The whole place was super-inflammable, like any pine forest in late autumn. Firefighters were shouting and sweating, battling savagely to stamp out the dozens of small conflagrations. Travers reached into the case next to him, brought out a bottle of beer and opened it. His throat was as dry as a bone, his limbs quivered.

"Chin up, Yank!" he told himself. "You're five MEs on velvet. The great ace of the treetops." His brain buzzed and he grinned as the strongly-brewed beer that tasted like nectar went down his throat. He tossed the empty bottle overside and went to the telephone.

"Call for Colonel von Keck!" he yelled into it. "It's your old pal, calling from heaven."

"You swine!" shouted von Keck at the other end. "Gott, what I shall do to you!"

"You know where to find me," yelled Travers. "I live here, or hadn't you heard? And did you ever hear of Wake Island? Send me some more MEs. The last consignment wasn't satisfactory. *Heil Hitler!*"

"*Verdammt asel!*" Von Keck's voice was that of a madman. "I am sending in the Focke-Wulf interceptors with their cannon! Now what have you to say?"

"What the Marines said at Wake Island. What every Yank who gets caught in a jam in this war says. Nuts! Nuts, Colonel von Keck! This is Lieutenant Travers, your favorite treetop tenant, signing off. Thanks for the beer. Send up another case and charge to my account."

He slung the instrument back on its hook.

FROM the north a keen, steady wind blew, rising and falling strangely. It must have been going on for some time without his noticing. The tops of the trees leaned back against its force and there was a strange chill in it.

Travers shivered. He had no chance now of living for more than minutes once the Focke-Wulf interceptors rose. Before their terrific armament of two Oerlikon

20 mm. wing cannon and two 20 mm. Mauser cannon, beside a pair of machine guns, the iron platform shield would be so much paper. They could tear the whole tree down if their pilots felt like it. No machine-gun battery would do him any good now; it was only his brains could get him out of this jam.

Desperately his thoughts raced, desperately he looked about him. Strawn on the platform lay the bodies of the four Nazis of the guard. His gaze veered upward from them to where the thick branches of the untrimmed treetop stretched ten feet overhead. He moved his foot and it struck the lookouts' coil of rope. Then he was acting, putting into motion the plan that was forming on the instant.

He had off the captain's uniform he wore and had on the kit of one of the guards in no time. He bundled the limp body into Witten's clothes and propped it on the empty beer case at the machine gun, huddled in firing position. Into a pocket he thrust the silver Luger.

Then he took the coil of rope and tied another Luger at its end for a weight. Up over a branch sailed the weighted rope-end and fell back into his grip. Pulling the double strand of the rope together, Travers drew a deep breath, leaped and went upward hand over hand. His grip caught a lower limb and with a wrench he swung onto it. Panting, he pulled the rope up after him and untied the Luger.

He was just in time. From the north roared the din of motors and the Focke-Wulfs came, four thundering shapes. Travers drew himself higher into the thick cover of the pine branches, crouching behind the bole. No one could have seen him from below. The MEs had withdrawn and the F-W pilots were too far away to have made out his escape from the platform. Would his desperate trick work?

Toward him hurtled the Focke-Wulfs, eating up the distance in a whirlwind of speed, and the destructive fury of their cannon lanced from their wings, flung straight at the figure that crouched, lifelike, over the lookout's machine gun. There was a crash below Travers and the whole tree shuddered, another crash, another. The blasts of hell seemed to be breaking below him and he clung frenziedly to the tree-trunk with both arms as it shook like a leaf.

And then the Focke-Wulfs were gone, jumping the treetop above his head, and he looked down on a scene of utter ruin. The whole side of the platform where the F-W cannon had hit was gone, or going.

Even as he watched he saw it shudder and break away and through the air amid the wreckage fell a body that had been literally torn to fragments. Its head was gone, carried away by a cannon shot. It struck the ground, far below, and hoarse shouts of triumph greeted its fall. There would be no identification of it possible except by the captain's uniform and the silver Luger.

"The spy!" he heard the shout rise. "We have finished the spy!"

The guards' bodies had gone down with the platform and Travers could see figures running to them. Faces turned upward and another voice sounded.

"That is all. The post is finished. Look at the stairs. Pick up the bodies."

Men lurched off with the limp bodies and Travers drew a deep, incredulous breath of relief. He looked at the stairs. They had been shot away for a space of ten feet, leaving empty air between them and the platform. No one now would come up to investigate the ruins and find them one body short. Travers still lived and the Nazis did not know it.

## VI

QUIETLY, with no pretence at concealment, Travers went down the spiral staircase leading to the ground. For a full half hour he had waited, crouched in the cover of the treetop, before he had let the rope down in a long double strand that reached through the remnants of the platform to the top of the wrecked stairs. A quick slide and he was down it and had pulled it away. Around him the treetops tossed violently and he became aware that the wind was sweeping into something approaching a gale. The vast camouflage of the forest heaved and rippled like a sea. He marched on down the stairs, drawing his nerves together.

A broad-featured, scowling sergeant stood at the foot of the tree. "What are you doing on those stairs?" he barked.

"I went up to look at the damage," said



Travers, putting on a blank air. "It is terrible."

"You wooden-headed curiosity-seekers put your unwanted noses in everywhere!" snapped the sergeant. "For your curiosity you shall pay. Come with me, I am collecting a burial party. Colonel von Keck's orders." He led the way around the back of the headquarters building to where a group of sullen-looking privates stood with mattocks and spades. Under a blanket lay a loose heap. "The spy that was shot down," he said callously. "No military cemetery for him like the lookout guards. Get to work on the grave and keep busy until mess call. I am going for my coffee."

The sergeant stalked off and someone passed Travers a mattock. He plunged it into the needle-covered earth, thinking hard. For the moment he was safe. When this grisly job was over, he could slip away easily and try for escape. But, it came to him again, with what information in particular?

"Hal!" said one of the soldiers, sweating on a pick. "This is back-breaking work. Let us sing while we bury this *verdammte* spy and then the job will go more quickly." In a husky off key bass he began the Horst Wessel song, bellowing it out.

"Silence, *dummerkopf!*" shouted a voice from a window in the headquarters building, hardly ten yards away. Von Keck stood there in a rage. "Do you want to disturb the general? Bury that accursed spy's body and do it quietly!"

Travers had bent down the instant von Keck's voice sounded and when he sent a second glance at the window it was empty. It was the general's office, he realized, onto which the window gave and he could catch the low sound of conversation. He swung his mattock mechanically, driving it into the pine-needle floor. The hole opened slowly. Then the others straightened. Off in the forest somewhere a bugle was sounding, the welcome notes of mess call.

"Food," said one of the men. "It is about time."

The soldiers flung down their tools, grinning. Travers leaned on his mattock, straining his ears. In Lieutenant General von Carolz's office, only yards distant, the voices still went on. The window was open and a few quick steps would take him there.

"Are you coming to mess?" called a soldier from the burial party, now walking for the corner of the building.

"I have had mine," answered Travers. "I was just coming off guard duty when the Sergeant picked me up."

The men vanished around the building and Travers raced for it. Crouching under the window sill, he raised his head and looked in. Lieutenant General von Carolz and von Keck sat at the desk and on it the silver Luger lay once more. But there was also something Travers had not seen before, a big wooden model of an air transport. The general had his hand on its fuselage.

"Now you know, Colonel von Keck, what our aircraft factories have been busy with for the last months," he rumbled. "This newest and largest model of the Junkers air transport, holding eighty men. Our manufacturing facilities have been going into it almost exclusively. And now four thousand of these giant planes are assembled in this forest waiting for the take-off within forty-eight hours."

Colonel von Keck's eyes gleamed. "That means an air-borne force of three hundred thousand men," he said. "I am not in on all the secrets of the High Command, General, only some of them. Where does this force go? To our hard-pressed troops in Russia? For an unexpected invasion of England?"

"To Africa," boomed von Carolz. "To reinforce Rommel for his greatest thrust of all. The left prong of our gigantic pincers movement is in great difficulty in Russia. We must strike with the right prong, now in Tunis. That force—Allied or German—which receives the heaviest reinforcements and strikes first in Africa can drive the other into destruction. Such is the history of the whole seesaw war of the desert to date. We cannot afford to have Rommel smashed and driven out of Africa. That would lay open our weak and undefended side in Italy. So the High Command has decided to smash the British Eighth Army before it can smash us. Then on to Suez and the oil fields of Iran and Iraq!"

"A superb thrust!" exulted von Keck. "It may turn victory our way before the AEF can bring its strength to bear on the Continent or elsewhere."

"You are right, von Keck. We must press on in Africa before the AEF arrives in force. And we strike in Africa at once!"

GENERAL VON CAROLZ looked toward the window and Travers ducked. Outside the headquarters building in the forest the wind was reaching a whistling velocity that grew higher and higher in quick gusts.

"Listen to that wind, von Keck. It is as well that we clear the transports out of here soon to pick up the troops. This is a region noted for the suddenness and fierceness of its autumn gales and when the Engineers Corps cut the trees out of the forest to make the transport parks the idiots created a perfect wind tunnel. The wind roars through the clefts in the hills and straight through the forest. We may have to anchor the transports at any time. The meteorological bureau predicts a vicious gale."

"If a fire ever came—" began von Keck. "I dread to think what might happen. Yes, what is it, Major Enheim?"

A flyer had entered and drawn himself up before the desk, extending a paper. "The full report on our casualties in men and planes in the action against the spy. Also my daily report on the fighter park strength and equipment. May I return to my plane which I left on the runway outside, *Excellenz?* The wind is rising and I wish to go back to the park before it becomes too violent."

"Wait a moment," said von Carolz. "I am not satisfied with your report of yesterday. I will go over both of them with you in a few minutes."

"*Jawohl, Excellenz,*" said the major and sat down by the wall. Travers stiffened under the window. He had the precious information now. He had it all and the glow of triumph filled him.

"You there, you soldier, skulking under the window!" crashed a belligerent voice. "What are you doing, eavesdropping on the general?"

Travers whirled. He stood almost face to face with the sergeant of the burial party, returned without warning. Behind him there came a sudden movement and von Keck was in the window, only feet away,

and there was no further hope of concealment.

"The spy! It is the spy!" shouted von Keck. "Shoot him, sergeant!"

The non-com's eyes bulged from his head and his hand flashed to his side, yanking out his pistol. Up came the heavy mattock still in Travers' grip and crashed on the sergeant's helmet. He fell like a poled ox and Travers was racing for the corner of the building.

"*Verdammt trickster!*" howled von Keck leaning from the window. The silver Luger, seized from the table, was in his hand. It crashed and the bullet whipped over Travers' shoulder. Again and again the silver weapon exploded and slugs rushed past. "Cut him off at the front!" yelled von Keck furiously as Travers rounded the angle of the building out of range.

Travers pounded on, tearing for the runway in front of him. He burst out of the woods onto its smooth expanse, his own captured pistol out. There stood the major's Focke-Wulf, shaking in the rising wind with a headquarters crew holding onto its wings to keep it from moving. Straight for them Travers charged while bedlam broke out in the building to his rear. His Luger roared and a crewman reeled back, clutching his shoulder. He fired again and the Nazis broke and fled.

In a bound he was on the wing, another heave and he was into the cockpit turning on the power. The still warm motor roared into power just as von Keck plunged out of the headquarters door, firing. A machine gun opened from one of the windows and its sleet went over Travers' head. The crate began to move and Travers opened the throttle.

A glance behind him showed von Keck flinging his leg over the saddle of a courier's motorcycle that stood by the headquarters entrance. Faster and faster moved the Focke-Wulf, its engine increasing in power, while shots thudded into it from a building gone mad. A score of men were shooting from the windows and bullets ploughed into the Focke-Wulf's fuselage. "We're off!" grated Travers, opening the throttle full.

The plane rushed along the runway toward the end of the camouflage netting a mile away where he could take off with clear air overhead. To the rear thundered

von Keck on the cycle, pushing it for all it was worth over the concrete. Startled faces looked out from the woods on either side of the runway; the firing fell off behind. But the warning by phone and radio would be out ahead of him, Travers knew. The Focke-Wulf streaked on in its taxi, the camouflage broke away overhead and gently he drew back on the stick.

To the side he saw more Focke-Wulfs and MEs on the fighter park's tarmac being rolled out to shoot him down. He whipped past them, rising, and tore for the north, for altitude above the cleft that gave entrance to the valley. His face wore a grim and desperate look. He knew the thing he meant to do, the mad chance he meant to take. Roaring, the force of the wind above the treetops caught him, buffeting the plane he rode from side to side. Was this the vicious gale, the terrific blow the weather experts had predicted for the wind tunnel that was Base X? If it was, he might be flung here and there until his wings fell off.

Up he drove the Focke-Wulf in as steep a zoom as he dared, fighting the impact of the wind. The map of the northern end of the forest was limned indelibly on his brain. The fighter-park, the cleft and . . .

The great fuel tank, jammed with thousands of gallons of high octane gasoline. At five thousand feet he rode, swinging around in a swift bank and facing south. He saw his target a mile away, the spreading bulk of the tank under its netting of camouflage. He saw also the winged shapes that rose to meet him from the fighter park, placing themselves in his path. There were four of them and there would be more.

**T**RAVERS jockeyed his wind-pitched crate to and fro until directly in front of him the camouflage of the tank showed. Then he tilted the nose of the Focke-Wulf downward and dove with his throttle out.

Screaming, howling, the interceptor tore down a slant of space and into his ring-sight, tiny still, came the tank. He braced himself in the cockpit, seeing the uprush of the black-crossed wings. And then flame spewed at him and bullets hissed in streams over and under his wings. Jaw set, eyes flaring, he held his desperate course.

"The wing guns only!" he told himself grimly. "Save the cannon!"

He jammed trigger and a Focke-Wulf rushing up at him took his blast full and disintegrated. A second Focke-Wulf, firing with everything it had, jumped past him, almost scraping his wings, and he had a glimpse of von Keck's infuriated face back of the controls. In a backward glance he saw von Keck come out of his zoom, and thunder on his tail. The other F-Ws had passed him on the way up and turned. They too were diving on his rudder.

Then Travers' eyes were glued to the front, glued on the shape of the gas tank that seemed to rise to meet him. Mechanically his mind repeated the firepower of his Focke-Wulf's guns: four 20 mm. cannon, firing incendiary explosive shells. Against the utter fury of that cone of fire, launched and held in a single converging point, no gasoline tank armor could stand.

"Now!" he cried and let the whole salvo of the cannon go.

Ahead of him, focussing full on the tank, that gigantic firepower hit. Its smoking tracer shells cut through the metal in a plunging storm. With his breath cut off by the speed of his dive and his eyes starting from his head, he yanked the stick back and the whole world went black. Somewhere he was spinning, tossed like a chip in an angry sea, somewhere the din of hell erupted, the flames of hell seared through his blindness.

Slowly his vision cleared and he found he was still zooming upward into the cloudy skies. He rode a lurching, drunken crate that shook and shivered but still held together. Desperately he mauled at the controls and got it out on an even keel. It was incredible but he still lived. Wreckage drifted about him, even at that height, and something that had once been silver but now was half-blackened fell on his wing with a thud and dropped off. It was the last of the silver Luger, hurled into the upper altitudes when the gasoline tank went off. There were no signs of von Keck and the other Focke-Wulf pilots who had been diving on his tail, nor would there ever be any.

He looked down upon a sea of flame and smoke that ran for miles.

Blazing treetops and treetrunks had been flung for incredible distances, setting new

fires. The miles of camouflage netting were ablaze as the galelike wind that had been predicted, rising higher every instant, hurled the flames along in a resistless tide.

Through the gigantic wind tunnel that the cutting down of the trees had made, a holocaust roared. Down there the giant armada of transport planes, the ships that were to carry the reinforcements of troops and tanks to Rommel in Africa, were being utterly destroyed. Base X was doomed. It was disappearing before his eyes in waves of flame. That would roll on until the entire forest and all in it were charred ruins. Travers drew a long, deep sigh of relief and relaxed in the cockpit. His hand, drawing back on the stick, sent the Focke-Wulf into a zoom for the tranquil heights and the run back to England.

## VII

**"AND** so," finished Travers, "that's how it happened." He was back once more in the sand-bagged room of the Air Ministry "shadow office," facing Air Chief of Staff Scott, Vice Marshal Benton-Kimberly and Major General Conover.

"You've done it, Travers!" exclaimed Scott. "That finishes von Carolz's transportation. He's the commander of the Reich's air-borne infantry, if you care to know. Now Hitler can't reinforce Rommel in Africa and the Eighth Army's drive will go on just as fast as we can get our heavy and medium bombers to Egypt. And with a stop-off at Gibraltar's air field and Malta, that won't take many hours.

"So it was giant air-transport the German factories were concentrating on! We hadn't suspected that."

"Yes, Rommel is through in Egypt." Major General Conover laughed, a deep, contagious note in his voice. His eyes had a curiously humorous look in them. "Rommel, ha, ha, ha! How about what we're all thinking of, gentlemen, but never mention, besides Rommel in Egypt? I guess this pilot here has done a bigger job than he even dreams of. Travers!"

"Sir?"

"You're finished with the American Bombing Command base. I'm snatching you as my aide from now on. You've earned it. I'm going out with the new

offensive and you're coming with me. All Yanks together."

Travers' face shone and his voice was threaded with excitement. "To Egypt, sir? Right away?"

"Not to Egypt. And not right away. Scott!" Major General Conover grinned. "After what Travers has done he has a right to know what's coming, I think. Now that he is officially my aide he can be declared in on the hush-hush job that has been cooking for months. The R-C plan, and by R-C you know the two eminent gentlemen I mean. Is Travers in on it?"

Scott smiled and so did Vice Marshal Benton-Kimberly. "As your aide Lieutenant Travers has every right to know," said Scott.

Major General Conover turned to Travers. "The British Eighth Army, now heavily outnumbering Rommel, attacking from the East, and the American Expeditionary Force, supported by the British, will drive from the west, catching Rommel in a terrific pincers. Yes, Travers, the AEF is on the move at last, from Britain and from America, in a push that we hope will give the Allies the whole Mediterranean and open up the soft underside of the Axis in Italy, France and the Balkans for an offensive, at last, against Germany.

"Do you realize what happened there in the forest at Base X? Virtually the entire reserve air transport force of Nazidom was destroyed. They won't have enough air transports left to go around. It's not only that Rommel should perish because he can't be reinforced, but the Nazis can't get enough troops to North Africa to oppose us in real strength for a long time, certainly not in the earlier stages. The AEF, backed by the British and the Royal Navy, will take over Africa, that's all. Your funny business there with the gas tank not only lets the British Eighth Army drive through on Rommel but it gives the AEF a clear field to grab a lot of Africa."

Travers stared at the major general, his brain whirling.

"Here," grinned Major General Conover and a filled glass was thrust into his hand. "Knock off this highball, Travers. We can't afford to have you faint of shock. We'll need you again. With the AEF in Africa."



(Continued from other side)

any one of his victims up—as they'll be cutting me in the next half hour—and you'll find nothing. And by the way, Mr. Colt—*YOU are on his list!*"

Thus spoke Jeremy Taylor, in the death house, to Inspector Thatcher Colt, the man who sent him there.

Immediately after Taylor's execution, the hunt started for the mystery killer. Months went by. Then one day the warden burst into Colt's office, panting that he had found a clew—and then slumped dead at Colt's feet!

Like a pistol shot, two men hopped a cab to the address the warden had given. And shortly, in strutted an oily-looking charlatan in elegant white gloves—a treacherous note of sympathy in his voice—announcing that one of the detectives sent to fetch him had been strangely stricken in the cab on the way to Headquarters, and lay on a slab in Bellevue that very minute!

The man fairly exuded death at every pore—yet they could pin nothing on him! And Colt seemed to be next in his line of victims.

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# The Shudders

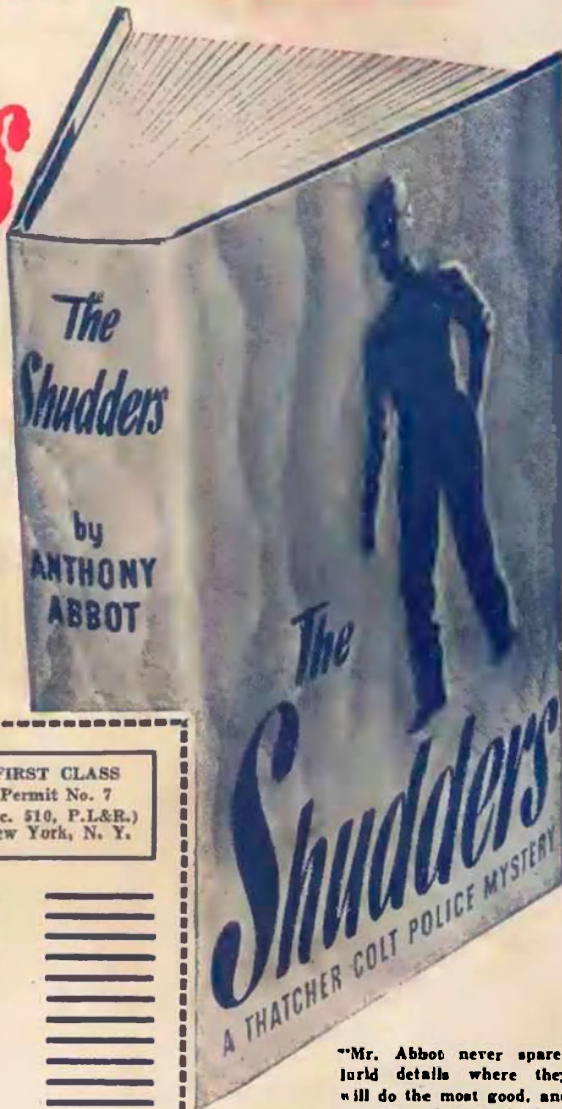
**WHO WAS HE—**  
*this fiend who killed for the sheer sport of killing?*

"**HE** stole Marcella Kingsley from me—the only thing I have loved in this life. She is in another man's arms tonight—and I only minutes from the electric chair!

"I want Marcella punished, Mr. Colt. I want revenge. For this man is much more a criminal than I am. His crimes are murder. Murder for sport. Murder upon murder upon murder!

"My little murder was the bungled plot of an amateur. But *this* man has a way of murdering that is new. He scorns knife or gun or poison . . . and no fancy death rays, either. Just a little trick, as commonplace as it is deadly, *And it leaves no trace.* Cut

**Continued on other side**



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