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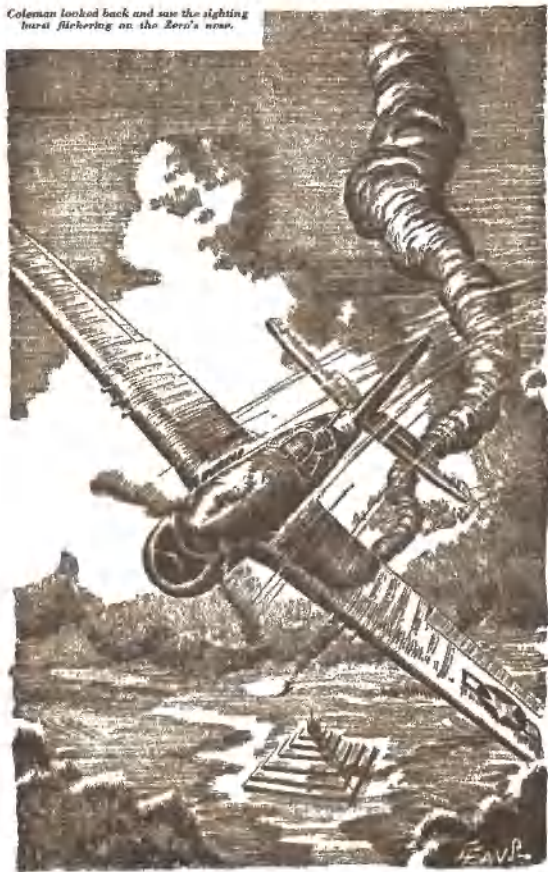
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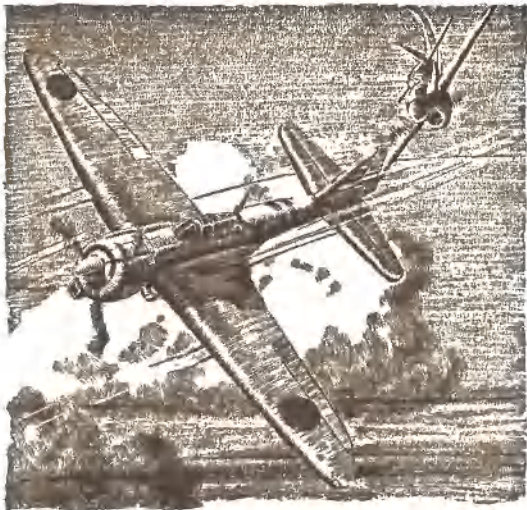
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BEWARE THE TIGER THAT FLIES!

By R. KEENE LEE

The Allies had gambled everything to meet the Jap drive in the north. At that tiny auxiliary field on the Shan Plateau, only a disgraced ex-Flying Tiger and a stolen P-40 barred the way of the Yellow Horde.

RANGOÓN waited for the Wind. Waited motionless in the heat that lay like fog. Along the river front the *kans* wailed tiredly to vacant floors, and on Dalhousie, the lights flared into an

empty night. From Shwe Dagon Pagoda to Monkey Point, from the Chinese Market to Kemendine, the city stirred fitfully and tried to sleep.

And on the Street of the Yellow Lotus

a man in khaki was the only living thing in sight.

In the darkness he was walking exactly down the center of the narrow, walled-in little thoroughfare. Once, as he passed through a faint bar of light shining from an upper window, the silver oak leaf dangling loosely from his collar gleamed dully, and the shadowed planes of his jaw sprang into prominence. But otherwise he was merely a thin, wraith-like figure that left a sharp odor of raw whiskey with its passing.

Behind him, two shadows disengaged themselves from the black rectangle of a doorway and silently followed the tall figure. In the East drunks, and especially drunks rich enough to afford whiskey, are the gifts of Buddha. But the prowlers of the night are patient and their sharp eyes had not missed the Army .45 slung low on the drunk's lean hips. They kept a discreet distance. They could wait until the tipsy stagger became a drunken lurch.

The tall man stalked on. His eyes had the frowning concentration of one who knows he is drunk but is determined not to show it, and he placed his feet precisely, using the swagger stick thonged to his right wrist as a balance. He hadn't yet reached the singing stage, but occasionally his wide mouth twisted in a silly grin and he seemed to be half-humming, half-talking to himself.

The two shadows kept their interval behind. And when he veaved to a stop, they, likewise, became motionless.

For a moment the drunk swayed in indecision. Then he staggered to a door set flush with the street and peered foolishly at the nearly illegible number scrawled there. Finally he appeared satisfied and began banging away with both fists. There came a faint click and the door swung open. He stumbled in.

Across the street, two shadows faded into another doorway, patient, waiting...

As the door closed behind him, Lt. Col. Richard Coleman shook himself slightly and refastened the oak leaf to his collar. Then he pushed aside the blackout curtains at the end of the vestibule and went into the brightly lighted room beyond.

The white-haired man at the table did not look up immediately. Coleman glanced around. The room was windowless and,

except for the table and a single extra chair, bare of furniture. A tiny electric fan only emphasized the heat. Coleman shifted uncomfortably and looked at the man again.

Physically, the famous General Gordon was a bit disappointing. He had expected a larger man. But the man at the table was almost scrawny, with white delicate wrists and a neat, undistinguished face. He looked up and Coleman saw his eyes.

They were large and dark, and shy. They looked at him without quite meeting his gaze. Coleman was embarrassed for the little man. Then, suddenly, he got the eerie feeling that those eyes were deliberately and courteously refraining from reading his mind. It was quite a shock.

"Sit down," the general said. His voice was completely expressionless without making any effort to be so.

Coleman took the chair uneasily, still looking at the dark eyes. For the first time in his thirty-two years, he felt completely out of his depth.

The general took his time studying the younger officer's smooth, rather boyish face. He glanced briefly at the thick mat of ribbons sewed over Coleman's shirt pocket. He looked at the swagger stick and the heavy silver chain on his right wrist. He nodded to himself and picked up a sheaf of papers from the table.

"The swagger stick is a nice touch," he said absently.

COLEMAN said nothing and the general began to read from the papers. "May 1—Lt. Col. Coleman spent evening in Charlie's Bar. Passed out 3 a.m. Rolled by two Chinese. May 19—Lt. Col. Coleman drunk in Strand Hotel bar. Started small riot. Taken out by M.P.'s." He turned to another sheet.

"May 25—Lt. Col. Coleman made the rounds in native quarter. Has widespread reputation as ladies' man. May 26—Lt. Col. Coleman in fight with enlisted man in Burma Club. Some publicity among civilians. May 30—Contacted Lt. Col. Coleman toward end of two-day drunk. He talks freely but says nothing."

The general dropped the papers back on the table. "Just a few picked at random," he said. "You've cut quite a swath these last two months."

Coleman nodded. "The whiskey was the toughest part. Olive oil helped some."

"Lose many friends."

Coleman shrugged.

"It's a tough racket. We had to make it look good."

"I think we did." Coleman smiled faintly. "Poor old Coleman—just another good man who stayed too long."

"I'm not so sure," the general mused. "Our friends are pretty sharp; they've been in the business a long time. However,"—he slapped both hands on the table—"it was the best we could do on short notice."

General Gordon pushed aside the mass of papers on his desk, unrolled a map and tacked it flat. He motioned for the other to join him.

"The 'inside poop' that will be circulated is that Lt. Col. Coleman had too much China and went off the beam. But, being the glamor boy of the Fourteenth Air Force and a personal friend of the Old Man, he was a little too hot to handle in the ordinary way. So they booted him upstairs and gave him command of a field somewhere. Just where, will be one of those vague things nobody can run down."

The general placed his finger on the map. "There is the location of your new command."

Coleman looked over the general's shoulder and saw a tiny X inked on a large blank expanse of the map of Burma.

"That's in the Shan Plateau, isn't it?" he asked.

"Exactly." The general looked up. "For the past two months we've had a small engineering outfit there building an air-strip. Ostensibly, the strip is to be an emergency field for our Rangoon-Chunking air express. Since it would have leaked out anyway through the native laborers, we are being quite open about it. It will be finished next week."

"What about the Japs? Won't they . . ."

"Bomb it? I think not. We won't use it as a regular stop—just an emergency field. It would hardly be worth the effort for our yellow friends to keep it out of commission."

Coleman looked puzzled. "What am I supposed to do there?"

The general turned back to the map again. "You know, of course, of the Jap

drive in north Burma." His finger made a small arc on the map.

"Well, recently we have received vague reports of Jap activity in this area—the Shan Plateau. Just what, if anything, they are doing there, we haven't been able to find out. That will be your job."

"The High Brass is not too worried about it. The topography is such that the Japs have little chance of bringing through much of a force. However, if they could . . ."

Coleman watched the general's finger trace a route across the bare plateau down into the Irrawaddy valley. Their eyes met and the tall colonel nodded.

"You see," the general said. "It occurred to me that the rewards of such an expedition would be very great indeed—much greater than any the drive in the north can gain."

HIS SLIM finger began pointing out various spots on the map. "The oil fields of the Irrawaddy delta; the Gokteik Bridge, controlling our only rail line to Chunking; the Burma Road; Rangoon, the second greatest seaport in the Orient. It's all there for the taking since practically our entire strength is concentrated to meet the drive in the north."

The general refolded the map and sat back. Coleman returned to his chair.

"Can you give me anything definite to work on?" he asked.

General Gordon fitted a cigarette into a small cane holder, lit it, and blew a short puff of smoke at the ceiling.

"No," he said. "That's what makes me suspicious. The Shan Plateau is more or less the lost world of Burma. Up until several years ago, its terrain shut it off from the rest of the country and, even today, nobody knows just what is there."

"The fact that we got even a rumor of Jap activity is suspicious enough. But when that activity is apparently harmless—well, that's like ringing the bells to an old fire horse. In our business nothing is ever exactly as it seems."

"That's all I can tell you. You'll have to use your own judgment."

Coleman nodded. "What force will I have at the field?"

"None." General Gordon smiled at the young officer's expression. "Surely," he

said, "an old Flying Tiger should know better than anyone else that the C.B.I. is the forgotten theater.

"No," he said, getting serious, "we have nothing to spare. We're even going to withdraw the engineers. All you'll have are a few enlisted specialists, one flight officer, and two P-40's, fitted as combination photo-fighters, that I managed to steal from the Fourteenth. You are completely on your own.

"However," he added, "There is a detachment of Kachin parachute troops, officered by OSS men, at Myapang. They have portable radio equipment and, in a great emergency, you can call on them for help."

Coleman grinned wryly. "Not much, is it?"

General Gordon looked at him for a long time before he spoke. "I ought to warn you," he said finally, "that this job is going to be a lot tougher than the anti-sabotage work you've been doing. Unless I miss my guess, this is the big time. You'll be up against top-notch intelligence agents—men who are both clever and subtle. My only advice is: be suspicious of everything, and don't relax."

The general half-opened a drawer of the table, then hesitated, looking squarely at the colonel. "Another thing, Coleman," he said. "Don't let your combat instincts get the better of you. Your job is to get out information, not run up your personal score."

He reached in the drawer and tossed a small pamphlet across the table. "That's the special code you'll contact me with. One piece of your equipment I can vouch for is the radio. Don't hesitate to use it."

Coleman got to his feet. "When shall I leave?" he asked.

"Tomorrow."

"Very well." He saluted and turned to go.

"Not that way," the general snapped, and as Coleman swung around puzzled, he added in a softer tone. "That drunken act of yours probably has half the thieves in Rangoon waiting for you to come out. Use this door." He nodded over his shoulder. "It's a closed alley that will bring you out four streets away."

"Thanks, I . . ."

"And here," General Gordon handed

him a cloth-bound book. "You might read this in your spare time."

Coleman glanced down at the title, *A History of Burma*, and then looked up, his mouth half-open with a question.

But the general was already completely engrossed in his papers.

II

A PINKISH-YELLOW sun, not yet clear of the horizon, sprayed its first thin light into the cold air above the Shan Plateau. Refracted by early-morning mists, the light fanned out in separate shafts, like the spokes of some aerial wagon wheel.

They made a perfect background for the tiny tan and green Zero that droned back and forth in the dawn sky.

The little fighter was flying a precise course. Two minutes south, a turn, then two minutes north again. Against the saffron radiance, her drab camouflage seemed to glow, and the canopy sparkled like a single dew-drop. Droning back and forth she looked like a lazy, shimmering dragonfly.

In the cockpit, her pilot seemed half-asleep. Now and then he looked at the compass, making slight corrections for drift. And occasionally he glanced over the side at the low overcast below. But there was no tenseness apparent in him. Once, as a brown terraced patch showed through a brief break in the clouds, his almond eyes widened. And again, when he caught a flash of the Salween River, there was that slow widening of the eyes. Otherwise he was expressionless.

At the south end of his run he slanted lazily into another slow turn. Halfway through, the engine sputtered, coughed once and quit. Almost negligently, he reached down and switched to a fresh tank. Then he leveled out and resumed the patrol. Back and forth, back and forth . . .

Lt. Col. Coleman stood at the edge of the ragged little flight strip staring fixedly at the sky through a pair of powerful binoculars. He lowered the binoculars and turned to the tanned, smoothly muscled sergeant beside him.

"Looks like that overcast will burn off within an hour, Mitch," he said.

The blond sergeant squinted aloft. "I'd say sooner than that, sir."

"The planes under cover?"

"Yes, sir."

"Everybody alerted?"

"Yes, sir."

Coleman turned to the three men who crouched anxiously over a twenty millimeter cannon set in a sandbagged pit nearby.

"If he dive-bombs or strafes, give him the works. Otherwise don't waste ammunition."

They nodded and the colonel was raising his glasses again when a stocky, wild-eyed kid with the blue-striped bar of a flight officer on his collar skidded up.

"Your plane's all warmed up, Colonel," he blurted. "I checked the guns myself."

Coleman put the binoculars to his eyes.

"Cut it off," he said.

"But, sir, aren't you going up aft . . .?"

"No." Dark red spots were visible on the colonel's smooth cheeks as he swept the glasses back and forth across the sky.

"You want me to . . .?"

"No."

"But if it's a Jap and he attacks . . ."

"Get in a slit trench."

Flight Officer Smith looked puzzled and a little hurt. Then the excitement came back into his eyes. He rushed off. Sergeant Mitchell saw the red spots in the colonel's jaws and looked back at the sky.

A fuzzy patch of blue showed through the low-hanging clouds and presently the sleek silhouette of a Zero came nosing down through the mists.

"There he is!" the sergeant shouted.

"I see him."

Through the glasses, Coleman saw the Zero clear the overcast and turn toward the field. In the pit the men smoothly cranked the gun around to meet it. The Zero began rocking its wings violently and, in a moment, its landing gear swung down and locked into place.

"Hold it, men," Coleman snapped. "Looks like he's going to land."

The little plane, still rocking its wings, circled the field once flying very slowly. Then it squared away in a landing pattern.

Coleman kept the glasses trained on the Jap fighter until he saw the flaps begin to come down. Then he let them drop on the leather thong around his neck and took out his .45.

"Get the jeep, Mitch," he ordered.

THE ZERO swung into the wind off the end of the short strip. The pilot dumped full flaps and cocked the trim fighter into a steep slip. Just off the ground, he snapped her straight with the runway. She ballooned once then settled on three points and began bumping along the rough ground.

Before the Zero reached the end of the runway, the jeep was racing along beside her. And, as she rolled to a stop, Coleman was out of his seat and onto the wing, .45 leveled.

The pilot slid back the canopy and looked from Coleman to the sergeant, who stood in the jeep with a tommy gun half raised. There were beads of sweat on the round yellow face, but when he spoke his voice was crisp and cheerful. "I say, you don't need all the artillery, y'know."

Coleman's jaw dropped at the sound of that clipped British accent but his eyes remained grim.

"Get out," he said. "And keep your hands in sight."

The slim little man with the moon face climbed slowly out and dropped to the ground. Coleman jumped off the wing beside him and searched him quickly. Then he stepped back.

"Okay," he said. "Who are you?"

The round face broke into a smile and the little pilot dressed in the ragged Jap uniform said:

"Captain Tok Wang, British Intelligence?"

"A Jap? In British Intelligence?"

Wang drew himself up. "I am a Burmese," he said quietly.

The man looked like a ragged rooster in the stiff pose but Coleman didn't smile. He kept watching the flat black eyes.

"Look the plane over, Mitch," he said. "It's too screwy to be a trick but there's no use taking chances."

The sergeant put down his machine gun, got out a box of tools and began loosening the inspection plates.

Coleman gestured with his pistol. "You won't mind, Captain," he said, "sitting on the wing while the sergeant makes his inspection."

"Not at all, Colonel," the little man smiled. "Understand perfectly."

When the Burmese had settled himself, back against the fuselage, short legs

stretched out along the wing, Coleman holstered his .45. He leaned negligently against the snout of one of the twenty millimeters jutting from the leading edge.

"Got any identification, Captain Wang?" he asked.

"Not with me." Wang brushed his uniform distastefully. "Been in the Jap army, y'know, for nearly six years."

Coleman considered a moment. "What are you doing here then?"

"Saw a chance to get information out. We moved up here two weeks ago from Manchuria. I heard about this strip, managed to steal a Zero, and here I am."

"So the Japs have an airfield, too . . ." The tall colonel seemed lost in thought. "How many planes?" he snapped abruptly.

Wang started. "No definite number," he replied. "They fly a few in and then fly them out. It's just a strip . . . like this."

"How many troops?"

"Three platoons."

"Only three?" Coleman's eyebrows went up. He started to speak again and saw that Mitchell was standing by the jeep trying to catch his eye. "Okay, Mitch?" he asked.

"Far as I could tell, sir. I looked her over good. Disconnected all the switches and even pried a few plates loose in the tail. Couldn't find a thing and," — he grinned — "didn't hear no ticking noises either."

Coleman's eyes flickered. "When we get back," he said, "get some of the boys and tow her to the north end of the strip and put her under cover."

He turned back to Wang. "Just what are the Japs doing on the Shan Plateau?" he asked.

"Nothing important that I could discover. All we ever did was scout the hills a couple of miles around the field."

Coleman's eyes got hard. "I don't think much of your information, Captain," he said flatly.

Wang's round face was puzzled. "I . . . I . . ."

"So you risked stealing a plane just to tell us the Japs are scouting the hills?" Coleman cut in sarcastically.

"Of course not."

"Well?" Coleman's voice did not soften. "What is your vital information?"

All expression faded from the Burmese' face and his black eyes locked with Coleman's gray ones.

"I'm sorry, Colonel," he said slowly, "but you haven't been properly identified either."

Coleman stared. When the statement finally sunk in he let out an explosive, "Well, I'll be damned," and broke out laughing.

"Okay, Captain," he said, shaking his head from side to side. "We'll go in and get each other identified right now."

THE SUN was well up and the radio tent glowed orange with the heat. A skinny corporal, stripped to the waist, was sweating over the dials, trying to contact Rangoon.

Coleman took off his shirt and wiped the perspiration from his neck and chest. Wang, watching the corporal at the radio, looked up, then took off the Jap uniform tunic.

"Doesn't help much, does it?" he said.

Coleman didn't answer. He picked up the sheet of paper that lay at the corporal's elbow and checked it in frowning concentration.

"We have your description," he mused, "and your code identification. But what's this?" He read the brief sentence aloud. "The elephant bells go tickety-tok-tok-tok."

Wang smiled. "The Japs might have extracted a code identification by torture," he said. "But they couldn't know that the other was required also. A double check, y'know."

Coleman tossed the paper back on the table.

"You might add this, too, Colonel," Wang said, turning around to exhibit a scar on his lower back. "Got it in a training accident and it's in my official records."

Coleman leaned over and wrote down: *Three inch knife scar over lower left kidney.*

"Got 'em, sir," the corporal broke in, as the wavering whine changed to the shrill stutter of code. "Is it okay to send this now?"

"Right," Coleman answered. "We'll be in my tent when you get an answer."

Outside, the shimmering midday heat had turned the clearing into an aching

splash of contrasting colors. Coleman put on a pair of sun glasses and gestured toward the strip.

"Not much for a first command, is it?" he said.

On one side of the strip were a half-dozen tents that housed the army personnel, and across from them on the edge of the forest were a long row of thatched native dwellings, looking like shaggy pup tents against the ground. At the south end of the strip, the camouflaged noses of two P-40's jutted from a dense clump of rhododendron.

Directly ahead of them, a withered native squatted before a charcoal furnace tempering a long knife.

"The local blacksmith," Coleman said. "Probably the most important man here. The strip was cleared entirely by native labor and he's the one that kept those big *daks* in cutting condition. I call him Mike."

The old man did not look up as they approached. He was intent on his work, viewing the knife from different angles. With each movement, his headress of dyed monkey fur, seed pearls and fiber tassels bobbed brilliantly in the sun. The round-faced boy who stood behind him pistoning the bamboo bellows stared at them solemnly.

"Hello, Mike," Coleman said.

The wrinkled old man glanced up momentarily, then returned his attention to the fire-blackened *dak*. . . .

"He's not very sociable," Coleman said.

"Let me try him," said Wang.

The Burmese rattled off a liquid stream of vowels. The old man put down the knife and looked up. His pouched eyes narrowed to slits and his mouth stretched wide over shriveled gums. He uttered a series of rapid gasps.

"He's actually laughing!" Coleman exclaimed, turning to Wang. "What the hell did you tell him?"

"Well," Wang smiled, "roughly, I told him he looked like he still had plenty of zing left for the girls."

COLEMAN'S tent was as bare as any of his men's. There was a net-covered cot, a board table and, in the corner, a battered footlocker piled high with soiled uniforms. He pulled up an extra orange crate for Wang and they sat down.

The situation was ticklish. Technically the Burmese was an enemy prisoner, but Coleman found it hard to treat him as one. He couldn't imagine anyone trying to bluff an identification that could be so easily checked.

"If everything is okay," he said, "we'll fix you a tent this afternoon."

Wang nodded. There was an awkward pause.

"By the way," Coleman asked after they had smoked a while in silence, "where did you get that English accent?"

"University of Rangoon," the other answered. "Y'know English is the secondary language here in Burma. Many of our instructors were Oxford men."

Coleman looked at the tent top through a curl of cigarette smoke. "Six years, you said . . ." He counted back. "Then the British must have begun filtering agents into the Jap army soon after they attacked Manchukuo?"

"Right-o. That's one thing you have to hand Johnny Bull. Finest intelligence service in the world."

Again there was an awkward pause which neither of them made any attempt to break. They were still sitting there smoking two hours later when the corporal came in with a typewritten radio flimsy.

"There she is, sir," he grinned.

"Thanks, Daffron," Coleman said, taking the sheet. "You can go get chow."

Coleman decoded and read the report carefully. "I see you are one of their best agents," he said, handing the sheet to Wang. Wang smiled modestly and turned his attention to the paper. His eyebrows raised as he read the orders.

"So they are sending a courier for my information. I'm to . . ." He looked up. "Well, Colonel, I guess you've got an assistant."

"Welcome to the fold," Coleman smiled. "We may need an expert intelligence man."

He thought a moment. Then he asked: "Think you could fly a P-40, Wang? If possible, I'd like to get pictures of that Jap strip this afternoon."

"Don't see why not—used to fly British fighters. If you'll explain the gadgets, I think I'll be able to manage."

Coleman got up and pushed aside the tent flap. "Hey, Smitty!" he yelled.

A tousled head popped out of the next tent almost immediately.

"Bring your chute and come over here, will you."

Coleman ducked back inside the tent. "Smitty may look like a wild kid," he told the Burmese agent, "but he knows his stuff with airplanes."

"Yes, sir!" Smitty, parachute on his back, charged into the tent in time to hear the last part of Coleman's remark. He had an ear-to-ear grin spread below the droopy mustache he was valiantly trying to grow. "What's the orders, Colonel? We going after some Japs?"

"Nope." Coleman smiled in spite of himself. "I want you to check Captain Wang out in a P-40."

Smitty's face fell, but he brightened almost immediately. "Yes, sir!" he said again. And as the two headed for the flight strip, Smitty's voice, sounding very fatherly, floated back.

". . . and the main thing, Captain, is not to be nervous . . ."

THE SUN was past its zenith but the heat was still bright and smothering when Coleman slung his parachute on the wing of his P-40. Captain Wang walked over from the other plane where he had been waiting.

"How'd you like her?" Coleman asked.

"That bloody rudder has my left leg in knots. But she's a bit of all right."

Coleman laughed shortly. "You'll get used to it," he said and then to the sergeant who was climbing out of the cockpit: "She check okay, Mitch?"

The sergeant gave him a circled forefinger and thumb and hopped off the wing. Coleman swung into his chute and reached for the handgrip in the fuselage. Then, with one foot on the wing, he paused.

"I'll lead till we get close," he said over his shoulder, "then you pinpoint it for me. Keep an eye peeled while I'm making the camera runs. Okay?"

"Right-o."

He waited on the wing while Wang got into the other plane. He heard the Burmese', "Stand clear of the bloody airscrew!" Then the 40 kicked over.

Coleman climbed into the cockpit, checked the instruments briefly and, at a nod from Mitchell, flicked the energizer.

When the rotor whine built up, he glanced over the side and, getting another nod, engaged. The prop wound over slowly, white smoke choked out of the stacks and the engine caught. He let her idle while he adjusted his goggles, then he kicked her around onto the runway.

Looking back, he saw that Wang was taxiing up behind him. He released the brakes, let her roll for a moment, then gave her full throttle. Three-quarters way down the strip he pulled her off with his wheels coming up.

Coleman banked in a wide circle until Wang got on his wing. Then he straightened out on course. The sky was clear, the air smooth. He trimmed the little plane until he could almost fly hands-off.

Below, spreading as far as the eye could see, was the broad table of the Shan Plateau. The rolling hills bristled with oak, rhododendron, and sporadic pine. Here and there Coleman could see the tiny native *taung-yas*, looking like bald spots in the thick forests.

He glanced over his shoulder, saw that Wang was still in position and looked down again.

Ahead, off his left wing, gleamed an artificial lake. And presently he could distinguish the red-topped barracks of the abandoned British army post that lay on one side of it, and the furry brown umbrellas of a native village on the other. Far in the distance he could see the black line of the Salween gorge.

Coleman cleared the area above and behind him. There was nothing visible in the bright sky but he felt an unaccountable nervousness. The skin between his shoulder blades itched tantalizingly, and he twisted his back against the edge of the bucket seat as he reached for the mike button.

"Keep your eyes open, Wang," he said. "We don't want to get jumped flying this low."

The Burmese waved his hand in answer.

They were over the gorge now and the Salween looked like a tiny silver eel wriggling between the sheer cliffs. Coleman was just about to signal Wang to take the lead when a flash of movement in his rear-vision mirror caught his eye. To a man with combat-trained reactions that

was enough warning. He slammed the plane into a vicious skid and looked back in time to see a sparkling string of tracers fizzle past his right wing.

The Zero overran him and pulled out to the right in a steep climb. Coleman wrenched the Warhawk into a chandelle in hopes of getting in a snap shot. Then he spotted the second Jap fighter barreling in from the left.

He only had time to jam his stick forward before he saw flame jetting from the Zero's wings and he felt, rather than heard, the vibration as 7 point 7 slugs ripped into his fuselage. Then the sleek fighter zipped under him and tipped upward in the beginning of a loop.

Coleman made himself go limp for a second. Then he lifted the 40 after the streaking Jap.

HE KNEW he would have one shot at most, and he played his control surfaces carefully, feeling for a stall. Ahead the Zero was climbing effortlessly, riding almost straight up, and, as he watched, her pilot eased into a beautiful vertical roll.

"Pretty," he thought, "but a little silly at this point," and pulled the Warhawk's nose through that last thirty-degree arc by main strength. He waited until the red ring of his gunsight crept past the Jap's flashing prop. Then he clamped hard on the stick trigger.

Six red lines of tracers lanced toward the slim Zero and he saw them hit with an impact that visibly slewed the Jap's tail broadside through the air. The Zero snapped over and down in a wild spin. Coleman popped his own shuddering plane level.

Almost instantly he spotted the first Zero high above him, glittering in the sunlight like a lacquered sparrow. And, higher still, he saw the long snout of Wang's P-40. The Burmese had been caught flatfooted, too, and had grabbed for altitude while he could. Now he was in perfect position.

Keeping his eyes on the Zero, Coleman thumbed his mike button.

"There's one right below you, Wang," he called.

And as the Zero rolled over on her back and dropped toward his tail, he

heard Wang's, "Tally-ho!" ripple into his earphones, and the Burmese' fighter slid off on one wing after the Jap.

Coleman kept his plane flying level. There was a good chance that the first Zero had not spun all the way in but, for the present at least, it was out of the fight. If he could keep the other Zero from looking back Wang would have a setup shot.

Carefully he gauged the rate of closure of the two planes. The superior diving speed of the 40 was showing but he saw it was going to be a close thing.

The nose of the Zero was expanding rapidly and he could distinguish the muzzles of the four twenty millimeters in her wings. Sweat popped out on his forehead and his leg muscles jumped with the urge to slam rudder. But he held the 40 in that straight and level course.

"Get him, Wang," he heard himself whispering. "Get him. Get him."

Then, as a brief sighting burst flickered on the Jap's nose and he knew he could wait no longer, he saw thin streams of smoke trailing from the Warhawk's wings. The Jap abruptly broke off his pass.

Wang must have missed, for the Zero showed no ill effects as it rolled past Coleman in a diving turn. He jammed full power to the Warhawk and heeled over after it, firing from the steep bank. The thick rope of tracers crawled harmlessly past the Zero's nose, but the now completely confused Jap hauled his plane into a tight Immelmann, reversing his course.

Wang had pulled out of his dive when Coleman took over the attack. Now, as he saw the Jap start the Immelmann, he stood his 40 on its tail and rode it on up into a hammerhead stall. At the last minute he kicked it off on one wing and came hurtling down just as the Jap rolled out of the Immelmann.

WANG didn't miss this time and Coleman was close enough to see his tracers pass completely through the Zero's fuselage. The Jap took no evasive action whatever and Wang flattened out behind him, pulling faint streamers. His next burst sheared off almost half the Zero's right wing. It began to corkscrew dizzily.

Flame licked out along its belly and abruptly it ducked downward and splat-

tered itself against the side of a bare hill. A few tight spirals of smoke, dissipating rapidly, were the only signs of its passing.

In the excitement of watching Wang's kill, Coleman had forgotten the other Zero. Hastily he cleared the sky above and then looked down.

Wang had followed his Jap right down to the tree tops and when Coleman finally located him against the dark background, he also located the Zero. It was closing on Wang's tail.

"Heads up!" Coleman called into his throat mike. "One on your tail." Then he pushed over.

Wang kept his head. He had no room to dive away and a climb or a turn would have been pure suicide. All he could do was wait and hope he could time his skid a split second before the Jap fired.

His strained voice came over the radio. "I see him. Your show now, Colonel."

Coleman had dropped into the slot behind the Zero and with his added diving speed was closing the gap rapidly. He didn't think the Jap had seen him but he couldn't take the chance of overrunning. He reduced throttle slightly and re-trimmed, ready to break in either direction.

Through the gunsight, the Zero's tail appeared to be rushing toward him at fantastic speed, and he could make out the holes where his first burst had shot away the tail wheel. He waited until the tan wings extended over on either side of the bright ring. Then he carefully centered the pipper on the Jap's canopy and triggered his fifties. He was so close that he saw only a brief red tracer flash. The Zero's cockpit exploded in a thousand tiny diamonds.

The dead pilot's hand must have jerked the throttle back even as the slugs hit for the little fighter slowed perceptibly. She flew level for a moment and then, floating up into a stall, she slid rapidly backward and crashed tail first into the trees.

"Good show!" Wang's voice shouted.

Coleman flew up level with the Burmese and grinned. Wang grinned back and gave him a thumb-up signal.

"What now?" Wang radioed. Coleman looked around.

The fight had carried them well east of

the river and there was still no sign of an airfield. He checked his gas. Both gauges were getting low.

"Let's go home," he answered. Wang swung into place on his wing.

The sun, lowering on the blue hills in the distance, was beginning to wash the pebbled stratus with brilliant reds and yellows when Coleman and Wang set their planes down on the strip. Coleman taxied over to the rhododendrons and climbed out wearily.

"She'll need some patching, Mitch," he said to the waiting sergeant. "I caught some stuff in my fanny."

He turned around and saw Smitty running to meet him. The little flight officer was quivering with excitement. "Say, Colonel," he burst out, "whaddaya think . . .?"

"Not now, Smitty," Coleman interrupted. "I'm tired."

"But, sir, there's a . . ."

"It'll wait," Coleman snapped and pushed past. Smitty started to go after him, thought better of it, and trudged over to look at the bullet holes.

At the water bag Coleman doused his head, splashing his face and neck vigorously. He pulled a soiled towel off the tripod and was wiping his eyes as he ducked into the tent.

"Colonel Coleman, I presume," said an amused feminine voice.

III

COLEMAN pulled the towel down slowly. The girl was sitting there slim, cool and collected, not an eyelash out of place. She had smooth butter-colored hair, sultry brown eyes, and a lot of lipstick. She wore a white riding habit that, in spite of the heat, was as crisp as chilled celery. Her boots shone like the Stork Club bar. She looked like she was down to her last archduke and didn't know where the next yawn was coming from.

Hot, tired and worried as he was, Coleman was in no mood for smug females.

"Tell Selznick we don't want any," he said and walked over to the cot.

The girl was not in the least ruffled. She looked intently at the back of his neck, cocking her head from side to side like a curious bird. Then she took a small

camera out of the case beside her, sighted through the range finder, and adjusted the lens.

When Coleman finished hanging up his gun and turned around, she was ready for him. His mouth opened. She cried, "Hold it!" And the flash bulb exploded blindingly in his face.

"What the hell!" he roared, and jumped backward. The other orange crate caught him just below the knees. He teetered precariously, grabbed wildly at the cot, then crashed to the floor in a tangle of mosquito netting and broken slats.

Coleman looked at the girl. She looked at him. "My," she said, shaking her head sadly. "you *are* in a temper."

Coleman knew when he was licked. He got up in an icy silence, picked the mosquito net off his head and sat down on what remained of the orange crate.

"Now, Miss . . ."

"Frances Whiting," she said. "Although everyone calls me Fronnie."

"Well, Miss Whiting. May I ask how you got here?"

Her eyes examined him feature by feature, climbing slowly from his chin to his eyes. Her face showed equal parts of concentration and detachment. He waited. She kept on staring.

"The right one's glass," he said. "I didn't think you'd notice."

"What? Oh . . . By plane. An L . . . Five, I think they called it."

Coleman gritted his teeth. "And just why did you pick on us?"

"Oh, I'm supposed to interview you," she said absently. The range-finder look was beginning to come into her eyes again. "You know," she mused, "you look real cute with those little red spots." She fumbled for her camera.

"Miss Whiting," he said in a strained voice, "if you attempt to use that camera again I will be forced to wrap it around your pretty neck."

She let the camera slide back into the case. "But haven't you *heard* of me?" she asked in a hurt tone. "I've interviewed Marshal Stalin and . . . You *are* that wonderful man they call the Rangoon Rocket . . . that shot down all those nasty Japs?" She hesitated, then added: "Aren't you?"

Coleman tried once more. "This is a

military post in a combat zone, not a public relations office," he explained patiently. "I have neither the time nor . . ."

"Poo!" she said brightly. "I met the most wonderful man at a party and he said . . . But here." She handed Coleman a folded sheaf of papers.

He saw the official, *Memorandum To*: followed by his name and then read swiftly through the two paragraphs below it. The words, *Miss Whiting is to be accorded every courtesy and assistance . . .* sprang out at him and he dropped his eyes to the signature. The stars that went with it were in a class with the milky way.

Coleman handed back the orders. His voice was flat. "I'm a soldier," he said. "I follow orders. But I want you to understand that you are delaying important operations. If any loss of life results, you will be largely responsible."

He was not prepared for the expression he surprised in her eyes, nor for the flush that spread upward from her neck. Neither was in character. And suddenly he was sorry for what he had said. But there was no help for it now.

"I'll have a tent set up," he said gruffly and went out. He called Smitty over and gave him instructions. Then he added in a low voice: "And send the pilot of the L-5 over."

The girl didn't look at him when she went past. He sat at his table thinking of that slow flush and those hurt eyes until the sergeant came in.

"You sent for me, sir?"

"Who sent you on this flight, Sergeant?"

"General Cheney, sir. He brought Miss Whiting to the field himself."

"Very well." Coleman returned the soldier's salute.

After the sergeant had gone, Coleman sat for some minutes frowning at his fingernails. Finally he shrugged. He got out the code book and some paper and began laboriously to encode a message.

Check Frances Whiting, foreign correspondent and photographer . . .

COLEMAN stood outside the radio tent listening to Corporal Daffron flutter code into the transmitter. The sky was warm and dark, and a thin paring of moon glinted in the high mists. His eyes

felt hot under the lids. He wandered toward the flight strip.

For a week you play patty cake. You fly all day; you sweat all night. You take pictures of everything in sight, and, between cans of warm grapefruit juice, you put together a mosaic showing large blank patches of Burma cut into neat quadrangles. And for all the war you find, you might as well be scaling teak or looking for the Rajah's ruby mine.

Then one bright morning it's open house. You get a British agent from the east, you get a female photographer from the west, and you get two Zeroes down your neck. Things are moving. You think that maybe the general has not been blowing wind through his crusher after all. So you add up the score. And what do you get? Three platoons of Japs playing boy scout in the hills.

Coleman took a cigarette out of his shirt pocket. He put it between his teeth and held it there, not touching it with his lips.

But you like playing games in the dark. You like swinging at shadows. So you make confident motions and keep your face smooth, and the more your insides twist, the smoother you keep it. For you know that whether the man with the knife is Boris Karloff or the cook from Company B, he'll use it quickly, efficiently, and no hard feelings. Because that's the way the game is played.

Coleman pulled the cigarette out of his mouth. He looked at the end that had been between his teeth. The paper was smooth, undented. He snapped it away.

"I say, Colonel!"

Coleman turned slowly. "Yes?"

Wang's round face shone dimly. "I... I'm sorry about this afternoon," he said. "Damned silly of me to let us get bounced that way."

"Forget it. You can't see 'em all the time."

The silence hung there. Wang shifted his feet. "You don't happen to have a chess set about, do you?" he asked. His eyes flickered to Coleman's face and he went on hastily. "Not important. It's just that I'm feeling a bit edgy . . ."

"Would poker do?"

Wang brightened. "Right-o. Haven't had a go at it since my Varsity days. Jolly good game as I remember."

When they were seated across from each other in the tent, Coleman asked "What'll we play for?"

"Anything you say—as long as it's on credit. I'm flat y'know."

Coleman spilled a penny box of matches on the table and pushed half across to Wang. "Dollar a match," he said. "We pay off in Rangoon and winner buys the drinks."

Wang took the first few pots. In the yellow lantern light, Coleman's skin looked tight. His eyes were bloodshot. He played listlessly, scarcely glancing at the cards.

The Burmese squared the deck and began dealing. Coleman leaned forward.

"What the hell could those Japs be up to?"

Wang put down the deck and looked at the two vertical lines above Coleman's nose. He smiled.

"Relax, Colonel. It's a long war."

Coleman sat back. The frown smoothed. He looked at Wang, then looked down at his slim pile of matches. "And an expensive one," he grinned. "Your bet."

WANG had a king up. He shoved out a dollar. Coleman glanced at his hole card and saw he had queens back to back. He matched Wang's bet.

Wang's next card was a ten and Coleman got an eight. The Burmese lifted a corner of his hole card, then bet three dollars. Coleman smiled to himself at the giveaway and raised three. Wang hesitated a moment, then called.

The fourth throw showed an ace for Wang and a jack for Coleman. Wang bet six dollars. Coleman looked at him, a little surprised. The pulse in Wang's neck was pounding visibly. He raised, watching the other closely. Wang considered, looked in the hole again, and merely called. Coleman dropped his eyes.

The final round gave them both indifferent cards. Wang thought for a long time and finally bet a single dollar. Coleman went blandly into the come-on and pushed out a stiff raise. Wang tapped and Colecalled. The Burmese was expressionless when he turned over his ace. Coleman was also expressionless. But he was grinning inside.

He shook out more matches and they played on. Wang was good but he never

varied his tactics. He always used that double twist. When he had 'em he started, strong, made a false fade and then plunged at the end. Coleman played along, waiting for the right spot. It came on his deal.

He had an ace down and a jack up. Wang had a ten up. He bet and Wang upped it. That tell-tale pulse confirmed paired tens. Coleman called. The second round gave Wang a nine and Coleman paired his holed ace. He bet the size of the pot. Wang went through his peep routine and called.

Coleman turned an ace for Wang and an eight for himself. The Burmese fingered his chin and made a moderate bet. Coleman raised. Wang started to fold, hesitated, and finally called.

Wang's final card was an ace, for a pair showing. Coleman held his breath and turned up a second jack. With three aces showing on the board, the setup was perfect.

Wang made a stiff bet. Coleman laughed. "My aces and jacks beat your aces and nines. I raise."

"I don't bluff that easily, Colonel. Raise you."

"Hate to see you wasting your money. I'm forced to nudge that slightly." He shoved in his entire pile. Wang calmly matched the bet.

Coleman slowly rolled his ace. The little Burmese' face darkened. He slammed his hole ten on the table.

"Deebreeto!" he snarled under his breath.

Coleman looked at him, deadpanned.

Wang's face wrinkled. "Sorry," he smiled. "I would have . . . in fact I *did* bet my pile that you wouldn't have the last ace."

Coleman shrugged. "That's the way it . . . Yes, Corporal?"

The skinny Daffron was wearing his usual smile. "Another quick answer, Colonel," he said, handing over a flimsy.

"Thanks. That's all for tonight."

Coleman decoded and read the reply from General Gordon. "Our Miss Whiting is the genuine article," he said in a resigned tone and got up. "Let's call it a night, Wang."

"Right-o. See you in the morning."

Coleman took off his shirt and shoes,

put out the lantern, and lay down on the cot. He tried hard to think, but the face of Miss Fronnie Whiting kept swimming through the meshes of his mosquito net. He concentrated on seeing how long he could let the perspiration tickle his face before he wiped it off. Finally, he went to sleep.

AT BREAKFAST the next morning Miss Whiting showed no traces of her brief embarrassment. She was her usual screwball self. Coleman introduced her around, then retired into a glum silence with a cup of coffee.

Over greasy bacon, French toast and syrup, she regaled the men with stories of parties she had attended in various officers' clubs. She gave the subtle impression that officers as a class were pleasant but rather stupid, and the men were eating it up although they glanced at Coleman now and then to see how he was taking it.

It was Wang who injected the serious note. "When do we . . . er . . . complete that mission?" he asked.

"Ask Miss Whiting," Coleman shrugged. "It's her party today."

The slim girl caught the ball right in stride. "First, I want to go up for some aerial shots," she said briskly. "Then I'll want to interview you, Colonel, and then . . . Is something wrong, Colonel?"

"Oh, no . . . oh, no. Anything your little heart desires." He turned to the pilot of the L-5. "You'll have to stay close to the field, Sergeant. There are a few Japs around and . . ."

"Oh, I'll be alone," the girl interrupted. "I just adore flying. I'm good, too. Look!" She pulled a wrinkled pilot's license out of her purse.

Coleman ignored it. "I'm sure you are an excellent pilot, Miss Whiting," he said patiently. "But how can you expect to fly and take pictures at the same time?"

"I'll show you," she said. And grasping an imaginary stick with one hand, she began to fumble for the camera with the other.

"Never mind," Coleman said, getting up. "I'll be in my tent when you want me."

"I say, Colonel," Wang called after him. "I'd like more time in your P-40.

Perhaps I could go up and keep an eye on Miss Whiting."

Coleman turned back at the entrance. "Good idea, Wang." He started to say something else, then turned and walked out.

In his tent, he tried to read the *History of Burma* but the light buzzing of the L-5 broke in on his concentration, and he found himself starting at even the faintest change in the sound of the engine. When the two planes finally landed he was outside watching.

The interview was pure torture. By confining himself to answering yes and no and giving only facts and figures, he managed to hold his temper. But when she wanted him to put on his ribbons and get out the swagger stick for a picture, he balked. He left her waving the camera and protesting indignantly. He didn't see that her brown eyes were laughing.

After lunch, she decided to rest for a few hours. He bowed, poker-faced.

"Okay, Wang," he said. "Let's go up."

Smitty had been following them around like a silent puppy all morning. Now he edged up beside Coleman. "Can't I go this time, Colonel?" he asked.

Coleman looked at the eager face. "Sure, Smitty. I know about where the strip is now. We'll find it." Wang looked disappointed but said nothing.

They gathered their gear together and walked out to the end of the strip. Presently Sergeant Mitchell and Smitty's crew chief taxied out the rakish 40's.

Bending against the prop wash, Coleman struggled onto the wing and climbed into the cockpit. Mitch, standing on the other wing, leaned in and handed over the shoulder straps.

"I checked those bullet holes good," he yelled above the blast of the engine. "They didn't hit nothing vital." Coleman nodded and motioned him off.

Together the two fighters taxied onto the runway. Coleman watched the other check his mags, then he gradually opened the throttle. The two planes roared down the runway leaving twin trails of dust. Their tails lifted and abruptly they bounced into the air and banked on course, looking as though they were welded together.

COLEMAN picked up the red roofs of the old British post in the distance and changed course slightly. He throttled back to cruising, checked his instruments and leaned back in the seat. He glanced over at Smitty and nearly jumped through the side of the plane.

The eager little flight officer, trying to impress him, had the wing of his plane practically laying in Coleman's lap. Coleman grinned and waved him out.

"We're searching, Smitty," he said into the throat mike, "not flying a review. Stay out there where you can look around."

Smitty nodded and skipped his Warhawk out to the side.

Coleman was taking no chances on getting jumped again this trip. He kept his head swiveling, only glancing ahead occasionally to check his course. They had already crossed the Salween when the white flash off his right wing caught his eye. He snapped his head around and squinted.

It was evidently a building of some sort but, in the distance, it looked like a gleaming white bubble of foam poking out of the forest. Coleman checked his guns, then thumbed his mike button.

"I'm going to take a look, Smitty," he called. "Stay above me and keep an eye out for Japs." Smitty's, "Roger," was loud in his ears as he peeled off.

The 40 closed the distance quickly and Coleman saw that the foamy bubble was indeed a building—a temple constructed entirely of white tile. Six diminishing terraces rose from the square base, merging gracefully into a small dome. From the top of the dome a slender, mitre-like spire flashed goldenly in the sun. Coleman blinked and stared.

"Hey, Colonel!" Smitty's excited voice ripped into his headphones. "Look at that radar!"

Coleman had already seen the spidery grill hooked on top of the spire. And he had seen something else. From the top-most balcony of the glittering temple jutted the long barrels of six anti-aircraft cannon.

"That's the Nip headquarters we've been looking for!" Smitty's voice came again. "What're we waiting for?"

But Coleman was in no hurry. The

thing was too pat. You don't throw up that kind of architecture overnight, yet he had been in this same area yesterday and several times before without spotting anything.

"Hold it, Smitty," he snapped. "It won't run."

He reached down and switched his selector from guns to camera. Then, gritting his teeth, he ducked the little fighter down and started a level run over the temple. Nothing happened.

No tracers churned the air around him, no black puffs appeared in the sky, and he was unable to see any gunflash in the trees below. He made two level runs using his bottom camera. He made two banking runs using the side machines. He shot the temple from up sun and down sun to take full advantage of shadow interpretation. He saw not the slightest movement anywhere.

When he finally switched back his guns and pulled up on Smitty's wing, he breathed freely for the first time. Tempting the fire of six twenty-millimeters at close range is not calculated to induce the happy carefree spirit.

Across the ten feet of space that separated their two planes, Coleman could see the eager question on Smitty's face. He shook his head and heeled his ship over in a one-eighty.

COLEMAN'S face was grim as he hopped out of his plane. "Get the film out, Mitch," he snapped. "And make it fast." He lit a cigarette and began pacing up and down.

It's a grade B thriller. You pay your thirty cents just like the next guy, only you get in in the middle. A lot of characters you don't know are pulling stuff that makes no sense. You don't like it. Okay, you can leave. But suddenly you realize the whole thing's real. The theatre is dark and empty and it's *you* up there on the screen. And you know you damn well better start making some sense out of it.

He grabbed the film cans from Mitchell and headed for the photo shack. Smitty trotted at his heels, parachute banging the back of his legs.

"What's up, Colonel?" he asked, watching Coleman's face anxiously.

"Don't know yet, Smitty. But I'm be-

ginning to smell a very, very pungent odor."

Outside the wooden shack, a sour-faced soldier dressed only in a pair of sweaty shorts sprawled on a cot reading. He didn't look up when the two pilots approached.

"Get off it, Blue," Coleman said. "I'm in a hurry."

The big man tossed away his comic book and heaved to his feet. He grunted, shifted the dead cigar to the other corner of his mouth, and held out his hands for the film. After two years in the army he was still a civilian at heart, and he didn't care who knew it.

All three of them managed to squeeze into the tiny shack, and once inside his office, Blue came to life. In the dim light his thick, stained fingers moved swiftly, handling the film as though it were platinum foil.

Coleman shifted around carefully and managed to wipe the sweat off his face. Smitty coughed. They stood there, listening to the developing fluid slop against the side of the tank...

"Why didn't we strafe?" Smitty asked suddenly. "It's a damn cinch that's their headquarters."

"Go ahead, Smitty. Talk."

Smitty was self-conscious. "Well . . . Well, it stands to reason. It's perfect for radar . . . and radio, too. That temple is the highest point on the plateau. Hell, they could cover most of Burma from there."

"Sure. But if it's their headquarters, why hang out banners to tell us about it?"

Smitty was puzzled. "Gee, that is screwy, all right."

Coleman was silent for a moment. "Suppose it's not their headquarters," he said musingly. "Suppose they wanted us to blow the place to hell?"

"But why would they want that?"

Coleman started talking faster. "Think I'm beginning to get it," he said. "Maybe it's a propaganda stunt. Suppose they want to get the natives against us. Wouldn't tricking us into blasting a temple be a good way to do it?"

"Yeah . . ." Smitty's voice was doubtful. "Maybe you got the answer but it seems like a lotta dippy doo just to get

a place shot up." He scratched his head. "Say, Colonel. If that's all they wanted, why camouflage the joint in the first place? And why not give us a few squirts from those cannon to get us mad? That's what I'd a done."

The little flight officer scratched his head again, then looked slowly up, his eyes widening. "Say," he exclaimed, "now I'm really mixed up!"

Blue's raspy voice broke the silence. "Okay, Colonel. They're ready to look at." He snapped on an overhead light.

Coleman spread the shots on the table and slid the magnifying stand over them. He examined each one carefully before he got up.

"If you were mixed up before," he said slowly, "try this one for size. Both the guns and the radar were dummies. They're made of wood!"

IV

A HOT, airless twilight hung over the field when Coleman and Smitty came out of the photo shack. In the west a purple glow still lingered where the sun had disappeared but, along the strip, the gray shadows were fast blurring into night. Lights were winking on among the tents, and the native cook fires could be seen twinkling through the trees.

Coleman headed swiftly for his tent. "Get Wang and Miss Whiting," he said over his shoulder.

He hadn't gone fifty yards before he heard shouts behind him and Smitty and Wang came running up. They both started talking at once.

"Miss Whiting . . ." Smitty panted.

"I tried to find you . . ." Wang was breathless too.

"One at a time," Coleman snapped. "What about Miss Whiting?"

"She's gone!" Smitty blurted.

"Gone!" Coleman's mouth dropped open. "Where in hell could she . . . What happened, Wang?"

The Burmese had recovered his composure. "Soon after you took off, Colonel," he said quietly, "Miss Whiting decided she wanted to go up again. I had no reason to argue with her. You said this morning . . ." He shrugged eloquently.

"You mean she's still out!" Coleman

exploded. Wang nodded.

Coleman let out his breath slowly. "All right," he said. "There's nothing we can do tonight." He turned away.

"You wanted me, Colonel?" Wang called after him.

"Never mind. It can wait."

The rage didn't hit him until he ducked into his tent. Then it hit hard. That damn fool, flea-brained female . . . flitting around a war zone as though it was some pink tea party . . . Chucking old generals under the chin . . . Butting in . . . Chattering, poking around . . . She and that silly camera and pilot's license . . . He cursed under his breath and kicked savagely at the orange crate.

His eyes flicked restlessly across the table and stopped at the book. Slowly the rage drained out of him. He seemed to see two large eyes beneath a shock of white hair. He seemed to hear a low, expressionless voice . . .

Coleman sat down at the table and drew up pencil and paper. He closed his eyes and stared fixedly at a white wall. After a while, he took the wall away. He stared harder and tried to take the whiteness away. The whiteness wouldn't go away.

He sat up and printed the word, *Temple*, at the top of the paper. He wrote swiftly for several minutes. He read what he had written, then angrily crossed it out.

He got up and began to pace back and forth, shaking his head in irritation. There was something nudging his brain if he could only grasp it. One word . . . He got a cigarette out of his pocket, started to light it and abruptly threw it away. In one swift movement he was back at the table.

He opened the *History of Burma* to the index and ran his finger down the D column. He got only halfway down before he stopped. He turned quickly to the front of the book, read the two brief paragraphs and slammed the book shut.

COLEMAN got a fresh sheet of paper, put down the *Temple* heading and again wrote swiftly for several minutes. But this time when he re-read what he had written he crossed out nothing. There was an expression of frank

disbelief on his face as he crumpled the paper into a ball.

He strode out of the tent and stopped in the darkness breathing deeply.

You think about it a while—not really thinking, just letting it lie in your mind. You could frown. You could grit your teeth. You could walk around smashing your fist into your palm. But you don't try to fool yourself. You know what your duty is. You also know what you are going to do.

He went back to the table. He got out the code book and began encoding: *Commanding Officer, Myapang* . . . He worked steadily for a long time. When he finished, he called Smitty over and together they routed out Corporal Daffron and went to the radio tent.

Coleman handed the still half-asleep corporal three sheets of paper.

"Send these right away," he ordered, "and get an acknowledgment. Come on, Smitty."

They stopped at the two P-40's. "I want you to spend the rest of the night here," Coleman said tonelessly. "Don't let anybody touch them for any reason. Stay with the planes until I relieve you."

The little flight officer saw the expression on the colonel's face. He didn't ask any questions.

On his way back, Coleman stopped at the radio tent. "Get that acknowledgment, Corporal?"

"Yes, sir."

Coleman walked behind the bank of transmitters and receivers. "Do you have any extra tubes?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. In that box there."

Coleman pulled all the tubes out of the back of the radio, put them in the box and tucked it under his arm. "If anyone asks," he said, "the radio is busted and won't be fixed for a couple of days." He left the corporal staring wide-eyed.

Back in his tent, Coleman put the box of tubes into a larger cardboard box and scattered cans of grapefruit juice on top of it. He took out his code book, wrapped it in a square of waterproof silk, rolled it into a cylinder and slid it into his canteen. He filled the canteen with water and hung it on the tent pole. Then he went to bed.

For a long time he tossed restlessly, his

head filled with a huge, jumbled picture. He thought of white temples and P-40's; he thought of wooden guns and radio keys. He thought of Japs.

And, just before he went to sleep, he thought of the beautiful, empty face of a spoiled girl, and the one time her mask had slipped.

THE SKY was a lightening gray but the flight strip was still hazy with ground fog when Coleman and Wang got out to the two P-40's. Smitty, red-eyed and slack-jawed, gave him a wan smile from the cockpit.

"Nothing doing, Colonel," he yawned.

"Okay." Coleman's face was expressionless. "You'll have to sweat it out a while longer. Fill up on coffee."

Coleman shouldered into his chute and went over to the other P-40. He stopped by the wing and spoke to the Burmese in a low voice.

"Technically Smitty's in command. But he's young and inexperienced. I want you to keep an eye on things. I don't think I'll be gone long but something may break before I get back. Sound out the natives for rumors of Japs penetrating this far. You know what to do." Wang nodded, his face serious.

Coleman didn't waste time energizing. He kicked the engine over with the emergency switch, closed the coolant flaps and let her ride on out without a warmup. By the time he reached the end of the strip, the temperature needle was into the green line.

The fog was thinning. He gave the sky a quick estimate, poured on the coal and the little fighter started bumping down the runway. He barely waited to get flying speed before he pulled her off.

Coleman leveled out at fifteen hundred feet above the wispy scud. The ground was visible in large patches now, but he scarcely glanced at it. He heeled the 40 over until the compass needle read one-hundred degrees, then straightened her out on course for the temple.

He indulged in no last minute regrets. He had made his decision—he would stick by it. In the faint light, his face looked pasty and sick but the determined line of his mouth was unrelaxed.

By the time he passed the Salween

gorge, the ground haze had burnt off entirely. He peered ahead for the temple. In the distance it looked round and dark. As he watched, the first rays of the sun caught the tiny spire, sending out a golden flash.

Coleman nosed down until he was just off the trees and reduced his speed. He began watching below. The oak and pine were thin enough for him to see the ground and occasionally he skimmed over the pink line of a road. But mostly the harsh plain of woods, braken and rock was unbroken.

He looked up, watching the lines of the temple grow sharp and clear through his armor glass. When it was less than two miles away, he flipped on his gun switch and shoved the throttle all the way to the stop. The 40 leaped forward under the added power, and he roared over the temple clearing indicating nearly three hundred.

Everything was exactly as he had left it the day before. The dummy guns and radar were still in place and he caught no movement anywhere in the trees. He chopped throttle and flipped the plane into a tight chandelle to kill his speed. Then he dipped down and began circling slowly for a better look.

He had banked around the clearing twice before he spotted the plane drawn up under the trees. Fishtailing until he was just above stalling speed, he dipped dangerously low into the clearing. As far as he could tell the L-5 was undamaged.

His face was hard as he pulled up and leaned the Warhawk's wings into a homeward heading. The bank saved him. A smoky gush of tracers swished past his left wing and he looked up in time to see the slim belly of a Zero flash overhead and pull up into the sun.

FOR A moment the suddenness of the attack paralyzed him. Then ingrained combat instincts took over and he slapped throttle and prop pitch forward, clearing the sky with one quick glance.

A cold wind blew down the back of his neck. Sitting behind him, canopies glittering in the sun, were two more Zeros. As he watched, the one on the left slipped lazily over into the beginnings of a pass and Coleman felt panic nudg-

ing his muscles. Caught low, with no room to maneuver, he was neatly boxed.

For a brief instant, he cursed himself for letting the sight of that L-5 put him to sleep. Then he felt the familiar cold anger of combat rising through him and he became oddly relaxed. All thoughts save those of the immediate fight were washed from his mind. He sat there, fingering the controls nervously, watching that deadly Jap fighter hurtle in toward his tail.

The fight yesterday had tuned his reactions. He was confident he could hold his own as long as they attacked him singly. But if all three came in a coordinated attack . . . He shrugged and held steadily to a homeward course.

The Zero was in range now and Coleman saw its leading edges blossom flame. He racked the 40 hard left. There was the brief rattle of 7 point 7 slugs and he felt the controls twitch under his hands with the blast. Then the Jap past him.

Coleman snapped the Warhawk over in a vertical reversement and hauled up the nose to meet the third Zero.

The Jap was evidently surprised by the sudden maneuver, for he held his fire a split second too long. Coleman's gunsight limned the Zero's spinner. He triggered his six fifties. The two lines of tracers—American and Jap—crossed, and Coleman ducked involuntarily, slamming the 40's nose downward. He felt the plane slew around in the air as the Jap's burst caught his wing. He slapped her into a bank and straightened out on his original course.

Ahead of him the Jap had pulled up slowly. Although it showed no fire or smoke, the little Zero seemed to be struggling for every foot of altitude.

"I got him," Coleman thought exultantly. "He'll never make it."

And as he watched, the Jap fighter seemed to give up. It shuddered and abruptly snapped off into a spin. The pilot didn't have enough room either to pull out or jump. He went in with the plane.

Coleman anxiously scanned the sky for the two remaining enemy planes. The bright blue dome appeared to be clear. Then, squinting against the glare, he caught a tiny sparkle of movement high in the sun. The two Zeros, line abreast,

were slanting down in almost vertical dives.

Quickly he estimated his chances. Trying to climb with both of them above him would be foolhardy; he would only kill his speed. And running away was out of the question. With their added dive speed they could easily catch him.

He lowered the 40's nose until he was skimming the top of the trees. He looked up again, estimating the Zeroes' rate of closure. Then, touching the rudders lightly, he skidded the lean fighter toward the Japs. He nodded unconsciously when he saw them steepen their dives.

The trap was too simple to work, but at least it would give him a little time. He was almost directly under them now, and so low that they would be forced to shoot at extreme range in order to make good their pullouts. And there was always a faint chance that one or both would be so absorbed in the target that he would start his pullout too late and mush on into the ground.

Through the top of his canopy he watched the darting streaks grow into round blunt noses. He nudged the rudder again.

"Keep coming, boys," he muttered. "Keep coming."

THE JAPS didn't fall for it. They both fired a spiteful burst which Coleman ignored, and began to flatten out. Coleman straightened his skid and tried to push an extra inch of mercury out of the Warhawk as he beat for home.

The Japs wouldn't buy that either. They banked off to the right at the end of their dives, and swept out in front of him.

For the first time since the fight started Coleman felt a tiny prickle of fear. If he kept on his course, those two Zeroes would meet him head on with a distinct altitude advantage. And, while he knew he might get one with a jump-up stall at the last minute, it would leave him a sitting duck for the other. He cursed again and laid the 40 around in a ninety-degree turn.

Off his left wing, the Zeroes swept over in graceful sliding banks and came curving in at eight o'clock. They flew beautiful formation, and in the steep banks, the lower Zero's hatch was almost against the belly of the upper.

Coleman's tight lips crooked. "Hold that for a second longer," he thought, "and at least only one of you will get a shot." He chopped his throttle all the way off and waited.

The speeding Japs saw they were overrunning and began to pull in tighter. Two thick condensation streamers snaked off the top Jap's wing-tips. The bottom Jap, forced to play his ship in the turn, was unable to hold formation and flipped out to the right.

As he did so, Coleman jammed full right rudder and hauled his plane into a rough barrel roll. The lead Jap fired, rolling on a point, but he caught the 40 going away and his crazy, shotgun pattern of tracers drilled nothing but air.

Coleman froze the Warhawk halfway through the roll, and looked for the second Jap. He saw him off to the right but, as he pulled in trying to bring his guns to bear, the Zero porpoised up three-hundred feet and sat there. What little speed he'd had was killed in the roll. There was nothing for Coleman to do but level off.

He looked out to the left. The first Jap had taken his cue from the second and now he, too, sat above Coleman's tail. Both enemy planes had cut their speed to match the 40's and they held their positions.

Coleman dashed the sweat from his forehead with a greasy hand and glanced down. The blurred brown and green carpet flashed by, so close he could almost touch it, and ahead he saw the temple gleaming whitely in the sun. The Japs had turned him around and were herding him back.

He twisted his neck again and looked up. The Japs had him in that box again and this time they would probably work together. Even as he thought, they began edging in.

Coleman forced himself to think rationally. There was no escape from this trap and he knew it. But he had a rugged ship and plenty of armor plate. He would fight as long as the little 40 could stay in the air.

He watched the Japs peel into their passes, twisting his head from side to side, trying to track both of them. He saw that the one on his left would get into range first and he waited until the

Jap was fully committed to his dive. Then he turned into him.

In the mirror he saw the other Zero break off its pass and slide onto his tail. He gritted his teeth and locked through his ringsight. The first Jap had no stomach for a head-on run against six fifty calibers and was trying to reverse his bank. The pressure of the dive had jammed his controls, and he seemed to be doing a very sloppy slow roll.

Coleman munched the Warhawk at near stalling speed and saw the glowing ring sweep across the Zero's pale belly. He clamped on the stick trigger and as his tracers arced out he felt the 40 lurch under him and there was a loud explosion behind his head. Coleman glimpsed part of a wing tear off the Zero in front before he slammed his plane into a rough slip.

The Zero behind him, seemingly flying sideways, flashed across his tail still firing. But Coleman's slip had thrown him off and the sparkling tracers curved by twenty yards to the left.

Coleman felt the back of his head gingerly, then looked at his hand. There was no blood on his fingers. He tested his controls; he checked the instruments. Everything looked okay.

Above him both the Zeroes were rolling off the top of their climbs for another pass. The one with the missing wingtip was on his right now and apparently as full of fight as ever. He came blasting down and Coleman hauled the 40's nose to meet him. He knew the Jap was leery of head-on passes. And, with part of his wing gone, he wouldn't risk horsing the Zero around too roughly. Coleman was right.

As soon as he was headed in the Jap's general direction, he tripped out a burst. The Jap took one look at it and broke off without firing a shot. He pulled out gingerly and began to climb.

COLEMAN immediately flipped the 40 back toward the other Zero. He got halfway around and saw that he wouldn't make it. The Zero was close—in perfect firing position. Coleman saw the orange lancets spurt from its wings and twitched the Warhawk's tail to meet them. He took the full burst on his armor

plate and felt as if someone had hit him in the back with a hammer. If the Jap had had armor-piercing shells . . .

He turned his head frantically as the Zero ducked under him and pulled away to the side, looping for a tail position. He was just in time to see the second Zero sliding by on the end of a cone of tracers.

This time he had no chance to turn his armor plate. Most of the burst was high but a corner of it caught him. He felt a sharp sting in his shoulder and he was flung half-around in the cockpit. He straightened up, feeling numb. In front of him a piece of the cowlung stood up crookedly; its little camlocks hung loose, shimmying in the slipstream.

The fight began to verge on the nightmarish. He didn't know how long he sat there staring at the shimmying camlocks. But he had a vague impression that the Zeroes were doing lazy eights across his tail, and he felt the plane shudder time after time as they scored hits.

When he finally snapped out of it and began to fight back, he was a little crazy. He didn't think; he just fought. In that tumbling cage of sky and earth he was a wild man—turning, twisting, firing at the dancing camouflaged slivers, and taking everything they could throw in return. He sat there, teeth set, lips drawn back, and defied them to knock him down.

And suddenly he was blind. That woke him up. He shook his head and looked for the instrument panel. It was right in front of him. The black stuff that completely covered the canopy was oil.

He tried to peer through it and although the wind was rapidly whipping it into foamy streaks, all he could see outside was a grayish haze.

He rolled back the canopy and saw the ground tilting almost overhead. Quickly he flipped the 40 level and looked for a clear spot. There was no fire yet but she was liable to go up any minute.

A network of tracers knitting the air on both sides of his cockpit, reminded Coleman of the Zeroes. He began jinking the plane wildly while he searched the ground below for a clearing. A glance at the temperature gauge showed the needle against the peg.

"The hell with it!" he muttered. "We're

going down, clearing or no clearing."

He cut the gun and slanted the Warhawk downward. Oblivious of the Zeroes' firing behind him, he stuck his head out the side of the cockpit. There below . . . damn if it didn't look like camouflage netting. He stuck his head out the other side. Stretching ahead, its outlines barely visible beneath the heavy netting, was a flight strip. The Jap field!

He cut the switches as he hit the netting, and then he was skimming along a few feet above the ground. He took another quick peep out the side and saw that he would run out of runway long before he ran out of speed. He aimed the 40's nose between two big trees at the end of the strip.

He waited until he was almost there. Then he ducked in and braced himself for the shock.

The little plane slowed suddenly and there sounded a soft "thug" as the wings sheared off. Abruptly it was sliding along, belly on the ground. The nose dug in and Coleman felt himself tilting over. There was a loud popping in his head and everything dissolved in a cosmic gush of oil.

A WAVERING white sheet floated before Coleman's eyes. He tried to raise his left hand to rub them and a jagged streak of pain ripped down his side. He closed his eyes tightly, breathing heavily, and waited for the pain to subside. When he opened them again he could make out tan streaks in the sheet.

Gradually his eyes focused. He saw that he was looking at a plaster ceiling, sweating in the heat. The streaks were water stains. He turned his head, letting his gaze slide down the wall. He looked into the face of Frances Whiting.

She looked different standing there in soiled whites. The fancy hairdo was down and there was no makeup on her face. She was no longer a spoiled girl. She was a calm, mature woman.

Coleman wasted no time asking where he was or how he got there. One question was uppermost in his mind. He asked it in a harsh, croaking voice:

"Why did you . . ." The cold look in her eyes jolted him and he trailed off. Abruptly he became aware of a third per-

son in the room. He slowly rolled his head to the other side.

The fat Jap in the major's uniform said: "Are ready to talk now, Colonel Coleman?"

Coleman's eyes were hard. "What do you think?"

The Jap shrugged and bobbed his shaven head several times. "Makes no difference," he said in a syrupy voice. "Some do, some do not. Not important."

Coleman looked skeptical. "What, no torture routine?"

"Oh, no. We know everysing. No torture. But fine celemony. Velly fine welcome for Yankee."

Coleman stared. The Jap major grinned and fished a bottle of *sake* out of his pocket. He took a long drink, wiped his mouth and chuckled. "Fine celemony," he repeated. "You see." Then he turned and waddled out the door.

After the door closed, Coleman tried to raise himself. The pain made him groan but he bit his lips and pushed up into a sitting position.

"That's a neat shoulder you have there," the girl said. "Clean hole all the way through."

Coleman waited until his head cleared before he looked at her again. He saw that the coldness was gone from her face.

"What the hell are you trying to pull?" he asked.

"I was trying to photograph the temple."

"Didn't I tell you to stay close to the field."

"Yes, but . . ."

"They haven't harmed you, have they?" She shook her head.

He looked at her, the dark spots beginning to show in his jaws. "Damn it!" he exploded. "Didn't you have any better sense than to land?"

Fronnie looked confused. "I . . . I know it sounds silly," she stammered, "but . . . well, I ran out of gas."

Coleman drew in a deep breath. A frown on the girl's face turned him around. The Jap was coming through the door.

He stared from the girl to Coleman. Their faces were blank. "Celemony ready now," he said in a high voice. "You come."

Fronnie helped Coleman to his feet. He had an ugly bruise on his forehead, and he held her arm tightly while the room rolled around him.

The Jap watched with bright, bird-like eyes and when he saw Coleman shake his head and release the girl, he opened the door.

"Come, please," he said again.

He led them down a short flight of steps, through another door and into a huge vault-like room. Coleman looked around.

The walls were of pale blue marble, and, around them at measured intervals, shallow niches portrayed scenes from the life of Buddha. Giant electric chandeliers, looking out of place with the ancient architecture, hung over the center of the room, and, above them, two concentric galleries disappeared upward into the darkness. They were inside the temple.

The Jap major motioned them toward the center of the block, where an elaborately costumed figure wearing a high carved mask sat on a dias. In front of the dias, jutting from the smooth floor, was a sharpened bamboo stake about six inches in diameter.

Coleman stopped in front of the dias. He looked at the stake. He looked at the grotesque mask.

"Good afternoon, Wang," he said calmly.

V

THE FIGURE on the dias stiffened. Then slowly the hands came up, lifted off the mask and set it down beside the throne-like chair. The Burmese' round face was bland.

"Then you weren't fooled after all?"

Coleman's voice was flat. "How did you get here?"

Wang shrugged. "The P-40. How else?" His almond eyes watched Coleman's face closely. He saw the jaw muscles ridge and the lips whiten. "Yes," he said. "Flight Officer Smith is dead."

Coleman stood very still. He felt the blood pulsing in his fingertips. He felt his skin go hot and prickly. In his mind he spelled out the word, *Time*, over and over. And finally he was cold and hard and calm.

Wang had a faint smile on his face. He was enjoying himself.

"I'm curious, old boy," he said. "How did you get on to it?"

"The temple set-up," Coleman heard himself say in a light voice. "It was too fancy. Took me a while to get on the right track but, once I did, the rest was easy."

"At first, I could think of only two reasons for rigging the temple with dummy guns and radar. Then I asked myself: If I wanted to work a headquarters out in the open, what would I do? The answer was: expose it in such a way that the enemy were convinced it was innocent. Which is exactly what had been done."

He saw he had Wang's complete attention. He kept going.

"There was a joker in that, though. In order to insure against impulsive bombing, the Japs had to know *who* would discover the temple first. And to know that, they had to have an agent in the enemy camp."

"Once I got that far, everything pointed to you. Your poker game gave you away. A double twist with the cards, a double twist with the temple, even a double twist with your first appearance."

"You flew in practically screaming, 'Jap'. Then came your British identification. And in the end you turn out to be Jap after all." Coleman stared straight at the smiling Burmese. "Only not a real Jap. Just a mongrel Jap."

He saw his shot hit home. Wang's face got dark; his lips pulled in against his teeth. Coleman's voice was taunting.

"Why don't you say, 'Deebrecto!'"

Wang got himself in hand. "You don't miss a thing, do you?" he said softly.

"I looked it up later. The books say a guy named diBrito was the first governor of Burma."

Wang's smile was oily. "Perhaps the books also say what happened to him?"

Coleman turned and glanced at the bamboo stake. "You mean that, I suppose."

Wang nodded. "Just that."

Coleman shrugged. "What's the difference. You go out one way or another. It's all the same in the end." A corner of his mouth lifted mockingly. "You got me, but you lose the blue chips. I've photo-

graphed this terrain. Hell! Three planes and an M.P. could hold off the whole Jap army!"

Wang appeared not to notice the American's words. His face had gotten a rapt indrawn look. His voice was dreamy.

"Asia," he murmured, "must be re-born. Burma must regain her birthright. Her sons must lift their heads again and look on the brightness of the day. Only then will the fields bloom anew and the hills shine in splendor. When the land has been washed clean . . ." His face contorted suddenly. "The white man," he spat, "must be destroyed! The Yellow Races must rise like a mighty wave and wipe him from the face of the earth!"

His voice clicked off and his eyes opened wide. He looked confused for a moment. Then the smile came back to his face.

"We have no need of troops," he said, just as though there had been no break. "A few leaders, yes. Dropped by parachute. But no troops, no machines."

He leaned over in the chair and his voice sounded as though he were lecturing to a child.

"Suppose we say the heart of Burma is a fortress with the Shan Plateau its impassable walls. To hurl troops against this is, as you say, foolish. But suppose this fortress is filled with explosive. Then, you see, the situation is quite different. Then, all that is necessary is that a bit of fuse and a detonator be inserted through the tiniest of cracks. Pouf! The fortress is gone."

WANG paused, watching the American's face. When Coleman gave no answer, he sighed and leaned back.

"So you see," he continued, "the manner of your death is important. At present our native 'explosive' is comparatively inert. They need to be reminded of their history. They need to have their warrior spirit re-kindled. Above all, they need symbols of power.

"That will be your honored role today—to give them a symbol of power. I have chiefs from all the Shan States waiting outside. I think they will be much impressed to know that the white man of the twentieth century can be treated the same as the white man of the seventeenth."

Coleman's face showed nothing but he knew only too well how sound the Jap plan was. "You'll never get away with it," he snapped. But it sounded lame even to him, and Wang contemptuously turned to the girl.

"And what part did Miss Whiting have in all this?" he asked.

"None!" Coleman answering quickly. "Miss Whiting knew nothing."

Wang's smile was gloating. "I wonder," he mused. "What about it, Miss Whiting?"

Fronnie's face was pale but she met Wang's gaze steadily. "Colonel Coleman said you won't get away with this. You won't."

"Oh? And why not?"

"Because I left a note before I took off."

Wang looked skeptical. "Just what did you say in this world-shaking note?" he grinned.

"Not much," Fronnie said, "but enough to put them on the right track. I said it was you who suggested I photograph a temple that no one else had even mentioned. I also said that while we were flying I saw you using your radio. Yet I heard nothing over my set, which was turned to the same frequency. I suggested that it was possible you were communicating with the enemy."

"Ah," Wang breathed, "a woman with brains. Fortunately we planned to destroy the field anyway to cover my disappearance." He stared admiringly at the girl. "Have no fear, Miss Whiting. The stake is for the colonel alone. Of course this will cut short a promising journalistic career, but then a woman of beauty has no need of a career"—he smiled—"has she?"

Coleman leaped forward but the two Jap guards who had silently moved up on either side, dragged him back. One unslung an American sub-machine gun from his shoulder and leaned the muzzle against Coleman's stomach. The other laid down his bayoneted rifle and lashed Coleman's hands tightly behind his back.

"Enough of this talk," Wang ordered. He donned the mask again. "Let them come in."

Jap sentries pushed open the massive portals and a crowd of natives surged in.

They were wiry, fierce looking men and they shuffled into the huge room with an odd dignity. Beneath the crossbows they carried on their shoulders, Coleman could see a blue flagree of tattooing on their chests, and the scarlet and green of their sarong-like *aingyis* stood out brightly against the pale walls. They squatted silently before the stake.

Wang stood up and began to speak in Burmese. Even though he couldn't understand the words, Coleman could feel the fire and rhythm in the voice. He watched the natives begin to stir under its spell.

Wang was obviously a fanatic, but he had brains and the gift of oratory. The three together were a dangerous combination. If only . . . Coleman closed his eyes, listening. It sounded like it, all right. He made a quick decision.

So the natives needed a symbol, did they. Well, he would give them one they would never forget. He hoped they would understand the words, but his actions should be enough.

As Wang paused for breath, Coleman sprang forward in front of the chiefs. "You have been deceived!" he cried. "Your leader is false, and false leaders must be destroyed! I call down the warriors of destruction"—he flung his head back dramatically—"from the skies!"

At that moment, a mighty roar that shook the building to its foundations swelled overhead, and a frantic Jap lieutenant burst into the room.

"Paratroops!" he screamed.

INSTANTLY the great room was in an uproar. The natives scrambled to their feet and surged toward the doors, jabbering wildly. The Jap guards gaped at the confused commands of their officers. And through it all rang Wang's hysterical voice.

"Attack! Attack!"

Coleman ran toward the girl but she needed no cue. The moment the planes sounded she had snatched the *sake* bottle from the drunk major and laid it neatly against the back of one guard's shaven head.

Now she grabbed the rifle from the falling Jap's hands and began sawing at Coleman's bonds. He watched the back of the other guard tensely. The man was

still stunned with shock, but soon he would recover and they had to be ready when he did.

"Hurry!" he hissed out of the corner of his mouth. The girl redoubled her efforts.

Just as the guard whirled, he felt the ropes snap and he charged forward. The guard quickly brought up his machine gun but Coleman dived under it, smashing into the puttee-wrapped legs. They both went down fighting wildly.

Coleman grabbed a handful of the Jap's tunic. He jerked and swung his right at the same time. It glanced off the squirming soldier's jaw. The Jap was hurt but he managed to free the gun. Coleman heard a dim 'crack' and red streaks exploded across his vision. He felt the Jap struggle free and lashed out blindly with both feet.

The Jap took the blow in the stomach. Air whooshed out of his lungs in one convulsive breath and his eyes got glassy. He tumbled backward and lay still.

Coleman struggled to his feet, shaking his head doggedly. He could see only dimly but he grabbed up the tommy gun and hurried the girl away from the center of the room.

The noise of battle was drifting in from outside and they could hear the harsh American voices above the shrill chatter of the Japs. A machine gun ripped briefly through the cacaphony followed by a sporadic clatter of rifle fire.

Inside the temple, the press of natives trying to get out had run into a backwash of natives trying to get back in. Frantic Jap officers scurried among them trying to organize some semblance of a defense. The room echoed a piercing mixture of Burmese and Japanese.

Coleman looked around for Wang. The Burmese was dancing a hysterical jig in front of the chair, waving his arms in their direction and shouting orders. Coleman saw a Jap lieutenant gather a squad of soldiers and start pushing quickly through the crowd toward them.

"This way," he snapped and ran along the wall.

The jam of natives at the front doors had finally broken and the little men surged back into the room like a frightened herd of cattle. Before the two run-

ning figures could reach the next door, they were caught in the mob.

The natives were not consciously trying to stop them but the mere press of bodies was enough. With one hand Coleman pulled the girl along behind him, with the other he jabbed the gun at a succession of brown faces. There was no room to swing, but slowly he was punching a path through.

Behind them, the Jap officer paused momentarily and fired two quick shots. Coleman flinched and ducked low into the crowd as the bullets whined past his head. Fronnie ducked low also and they struggled ahead with only the wavering of native heads marking their passage.

They broke out of the crowd on the opposite side of the room. To their left was a small doorway and there was a larger one farther to the right. Coleman looked around hurriedly.

The Japs had beat their way through to the wall and as he looked, they came dashing around from the right. Coleman had no choice. He pushed the girl into the nearest doorway.

THE NARROW corridor was dark and seemed to be merely a space between walls, paralleling the central chamber. Coleman looked up. Fifteen feet above their heads was a rough stone ceiling.

"That must be the floor of the second tier," he snapped. "Let's see if we can find some stairs."

They set out at a run down the corridor. Around the first corner they saw a railless stone stairway curving upward to the left. As they reached the first step, the sound of voices coming rapidly from behind stopped them.

"Under here," Coleman whispered and pushed the girl behind the stairs.

Almost immediately, heavy boots pounded past and, from their hiding place, they saw the Jap officer and the squad of soldiers run off down the corridor.

Coleman whirled the girl out of the dark well and up the stairs. At the top was a closed door. He pulled it open and jumped through, tommy gun at the ready. They were on the lower gallery overlooking the central room.

He didn't stop to look but, as he and Fronnie raced along the carved stone rail-

ing, he got a quick flash of Kachin paratroopers spearheading into the mob, using bayonet and grenade with terrific efficiency. The sound was deafening and, through thickening cordite fumes, the lights cast a weird yellow glow over the scene.

They plunged into the nearest doorway and kept on through the first two rooms without stopping. The third room had a window. Coleman glanced out, then hurried the girl through a door on their right.

"We've reached the outside rooms," he said hoarsely. "Our only chance is to work up to the dome."

They passed through two more rooms without seeing a stairway and, as Coleman slammed open the next door, he skidded to a stop. Across the room three Japs were busily firing a light machine gun set up in the window. The nearest one whirled at the sound and clawed for his pistol.

Coleman fired from the hip. The heavy .45 slugs slammed into the Jap's left side, turning him half around. He tried to get the pistol up, but it was too heavy. A gush of blood knocked it from his hand.

Behind him, the other two had no chance to move. Coleman fired one more burst, letting the buck of the gun swivel it the necessary six inches. Both Japs leaned quietly down over the window ledge, their mouths still open in surprise.

Coleman ran over and snatched up a tommy gun that lay on the floor beside the Japs.

"May need it," he panted, "before we're through. Think you can carry it?"

Fronnie's face was white and she carefully kept her eyes away from the mess on the floor. But she took the gun and managed a wan smile.

"Lead on, MacDuff."

BOTH of them were beginning to feel the strain of the terrific pace. And Coleman didn't want to barge in on any more surprise parties. But, behind them, they could hear the muffled sound of slamming doors. They hurried on.

Beyond the first door they tried, they saw a stairway. Coleman swiftly led the way into the room above and moved to the next door.

"I think we've got it licked now," he whispered.

But instead of another room, the door

opened onto a corridor similar to the one below. "We'll work around to the right," he said and Fronnie nodded wearily.

They had gone only fifty paces when a shrill cry ripped out behind them and a bullet ricocheted off the wall. Coleman didn't look around. He ducked low, gave the girl a push, and sprinted for the turning that loomed ahead.

He slid around the corner and dropped to one knee. He peered back. The squad of Japs came running at full speed down the corridor. He took careful aim and squeezed out a short burst. The lieutenant's face seemed to blur suddenly and he pitched forward, skidding along the floor with the momentum of his run.

The other Japs went flat to either side of the corridor and began creeping forward. Coleman turned his head back to the girl.

"See if you can find some stairs," he whispered. "I'll hold them off here."

She faded back and he inched an eye around the edge of the wall. The Japs were still coming but they were being very careful. He drew back, switched the selector on the machine gun to single fire, and eased it around the corner. He saw the gleam of a bayonet and aimed two feet behind it. His bullet showered sparks off the stone and the corridor echoed deafeningly with the Japs' answering volley.

He waited, listening to them sliding along the floor. Finally he took another look. They were getting closer and he could make out a shoulder jutting from beneath a slight overhang in the wall. He fired again and heard a sharp grunt. The hit man began to moan.

For a while there was no other sound. Then he heard the sibilant whispers as the Japs held a council of war. Presently there came a flurry of shots which soon settled into a steady, monotonous fire.

The bullets whicked harmlessly past, occasionally spattering stone from the corner. But they were keeping him pinned down.

"You boys are due for a surprise," he thought grimly and switched the tommy back to automatic fire.

He heard the scraping as they got to their feet. Carefully, he put the gun against the floor and slipped the muzzle around the corner. He swept the corridor, skipping the slugs off the concrete. He got

screams this time. But the rifle fire only increased.

As he drew the gun back he heard steps behind him and Fronnie touched him on the shoulder.

"I found them," she whispered.

Coleman stood up and stretched the gun as high as he could reach. He pushed it beyond the corner, pointed it downward and squeezed off another burst. Then he followed Fronnie to the stairs.

They went up swiftly. Coleman paused at the top only long enough to make sure the Japs weren't too close behind. Then they ran on, working higher and higher into the temple.

When Coleman decided they had lost the pursuers they stopped to rest. He set the gun down and checked the bandage on his shoulder. Fronnie slid down against the wall, too tired to speak.

"I didn't count the floors," Coleman gasped between breaths. "But we should be near the top." Fronnie nodded. And, after a minute, when he asked: "Think you can make it?" she nodded again.

HE HELPED her up. It didn't take them long to go through the few remaining rooms. It was Fronnie who found the ladder in the corner.

Coleman went over and peered up the short length. "I think this is it," he said.

They went up slowly, resting frequently against the rungs, and when they finally climbed out on the balcony at the base of the dome they just lay there, looking at the sky.

Coleman was the first to get up. He stared down at the girl's drawn face anxiously. "You're not going to faint, are you?"

She smiled. "I'll be all right—just need some air."

He went to the railing and looked over. The wrinkled white circles of parachutes were everywhere, spotting the ground and trees where the jumpers had landed.

The OSS men had evidently sent most of their force into the temple. Around the front of the building they had established merely a loose covering perimeter with light machine guns set up in the edge of the forest, cross-firing the open space. Only occasionally could any movement be seen.

Coleman heard a step behind him and

found Fronnie at his elbow. "Feel better?" he asked.

"I'm fine now."

"Looks like it's about over," he said. "What Japs are left are holed up inside and the boys are down there cleaning 'em up."

He walked around to the other side of the dome. "See..." he began and stiffened. A tiny costumed figure darted from the base of the temple, running awkwardly in the heavy robes. Before Coleman could get the tommy, the figure was swallowed in the trees.

"Wang!" All the ease faded from his body in that one word. His face smoothed into a grim, purposeful mask.

"I don't think there's much danger," he snapped. "But if they come, they have to come up the ladder." He handed her the fresh tommy gun. "Think you can handle it."

"Don't worry about me." And she charged the gun, switched the selector to automatic fire, and thumbed off the safety with a familiarity that might have made him wonder if he had been less intent. But he was already climbing through the trapdoor.

"Dick..." He froze and looked back. That flush was rising in her neck, and in her eyes he saw an expression he had seen there once before. "...take care of yourself," she finished lamely.

The glance held. For a long moment neither of them moved. Coleman said, "Yes," very distinctly. Then with a flip of his hand he was gone.

VI

AT THE bottom of the ladder, Coleman paused to orient himself and check the drum on the tommy gun. Then he began to make his way swiftly but quietly downward.

The sounds of the fight below came to him only faintly at first, with weird trailing echoes, as though from the bottom of a well. But as he passed floor after floor, they grew sharper.

He slowed his pace. The last thing he wanted right now was to get into any fights. With each second that passed, his chances of catching Wang grew slimmer. He kept to the darker rooms, only darting

into the outside rooms for quick glances through the windows to make certain he was staying at the rear of the temple.

He was lucky. By ducking under the stairs at each landing until he was sure the immediate vicinity was safe, he managed to reach the ground floor without being challenged by either Americans or Japs. After a quick search he found an outside door. He stepped through into the bright sunlight.

The line of trees across the clearing looked completely different viewed on a level. He moved out from the wall, sighted an imaginary line from his former position on the dome, then ran across the clearing.

The forest was not nearly as thick as a jungle but the going was still slow. Rough braken grew knee high and it was choked with branches from the trees. He slung the machine gun over his shoulder and fought his way forward, heedless of the vines that slapped at his face or the hidden roots that frequently tripped him. Once he paused, slapping at the bush gnats that swarmed around his head, and got a bearing on the temple dome. Then he plunged on.

In his haste he crashed completely across it and into the trees on the other side before he noticed the tiny foot trail. He stopped and looked back. The temple dome was no longer visible through the trees. He shrugged. The trail was well beaten down so the Japs must have used it for some purpose. He unslung the tommy gun.

Suddenly he noticed that the air had gotten strangely still and heavy. As he wiped the streaming perspiration from his face, a cold breeze sprang up and shadow spread swiftly across the forest. He looked up.

The bright sky had turned an angry copper-shot green, and long black cloud streamers snaked across it, as from some gigantic smudge pot beyond the horizon. All around him he could feel the forest bristle.

He set out at a run up the trail. These pre-monsoon thunderstorms came up swiftly. And the open forest was no place to be caught when one hit.

He had covered perhaps a hundred yards when, through the whistling of the wind, he heard the sputter of an airplane engine. Coleman increased his speed. The Jap

strip! Of course—it must be fairly close or they couldn't have carried him to the temple so quickly.

By the time he burst out onto the edge of the strip, the wind had gotten stronger. A little Zero, shivering against its force, slewed around at the end of the runway. He took careful aim and fired a long burst. But even as he pressed the trigger, he knew the range was too great.

The Jap plane crept forward, barely moving against the wind. Before she was a quarter way down the strip she was airborne, rising almost straight up.

Coleman ran across the field, fighting the wind with every step. There were no other planes in sight, and he began ranging along the edge of the forest looking for revetments. Rounding a corner of the first one, he almost ran over two Jap soldiers who squatted beside an engine stand packing a tool chest. He hopped back, half off balance, and fired from the hip. Neither Jap even got fully turned around.

COLEMAN peered cautiously around the edge of the revetment to see if the shots had attracted any attention. But no one showed up. Then, as he ran for the next revetment, he saw it. Back in the trees, its sharp nose shrouded with camouflage netting, stood the P-40 Wang had flown in.

He gave her a quick inspection as he tore off the netting. He tossed the tommy into the underbrush and scrambled into the cockpit. The prop tripped over on the first try and after two white-smoked coughs, the Allison buzzed into life. He edged her out carefully, watching the wings-tips on either side.

On the field, the wind was now shifting around the clock and Coleman fought the jerking rudders constantly, trying to keep her taxiing straight. Time and again sudden gusts would knock the tail wheel into full swivel and the 40 would spin wildly before he could kick it back into line. The little fighter looked like a drunken fly as it made its erratic way to the runway.

Coleman knew it was useless but he waited until the wind was down the runway before he gave her the gun. He was just beginning to get up speed and was congratulating himself on his luck, when the wind shifted again. It hit him broad-

side, tipping the right wing up. He jammed rudder and blasted the throttle and managed to right her. But from then on, it was touch and go.

The speeding fighter careened wildly from side to side, running on first one wheel and then the other. Coleman played her skillfully, letting her run with the wind and hooking her with the rudder just enough to keep on hard ground. And finally she got flying speed, caught a gust on the nose, and jumped off.

At fifteen hundred feet he leveled off on a three-sixty heading. Wang's only hope of escape lay in reaching the Jap lines to the north, and Coleman was certain he would make the try. He stared ahead.

From the ground up, the sky was a black, lightning-shot wall. Coleman smiled grimly to himself. If that wall didn't turn the Burmese back, at least it would slow him up. That was all he asked—just one crack at the Zero.

So far, the game was a stand-off. They had broken up the tribes' first organized meeting, and the chiefs had undoubtedly lost faith in a leader who ran out on a fight. But all that could be very temporary. None of the natives had seen Wang's face, and, as long as he was alive, the whole business could easily start anew.

The scene in the temple came back to him. He heard again a fiery impassioned voice. He saw an eager audience stirring under its lash... Coleman's lips tightened. As a figurehead, the Burmese was unique—and irreplaceable. Get Wang, he told himself, and you kill the Jap chances in south Burma.

He peered intently through the armor glass. The towering thunderheads of the squall line stretched solidly across his course as far as the eye could reach. He searched the sky slowly. Finally he saw the tiny tan dot moving against the dark background.

The air was getting rougher as he approached the front and he tightened his safety belt as he lifted the Warhawk into a shallow, high-speed climb. Ahead, the Zero had turned parallel to the storm and was flying back and forth looking for a hole. Coleman flipped up the gun switch and checked his fifties with a short burst. He bent over to tune down the gunsight and felt pain in his shoulder. He glanced



Coleman saw the canopy flutter off, saw a figure climb erect in the cockpit.

down. His left side was wet with blood.

Quickly he tore the rubber padding off the gunsight and pressed it over the loosened bandage. Then he adjusted his Sutton harness to hold it in place. The pad didn't stop the bleeding entirely but it slowed it.

The Zero had quit flying back and forth and was now headed out on a ninety-degree course. Coleman swung in behind it, still gaining altitude. He never expected to get all the way in without being discovered hut, as the 40 cut down the distance between the two planes, he could see Wang's head turned sideways in the cockpit. The Burmese was still looking for a hole in the front.

Coleman pushed over, and the Warhawk, released from the climbing strain, hurtled down toward the Zero. Through his gunsight he watched the Jap plane blossom into detail.

HE HEARD his fifties chutter and... The plane ran into a rubber wall. Rain spattered briefly across the canopy, a wisp of cloud licked past the nose, and

2—Wing—Winter

the little fighter skittered wildly to the right. Coleman recovered automatically, watching the smoky red lines lash futilely over the Zero's cockpit. The Jap fighter heeled up and around in a tight chandelle.

Coleman had time for one bitter curse at whatever storm gods had thrown the burst wild. Then he was bending the Warhawk hard around to meet the Zero.

Wang was no slouch at either flying or fighting, and now he had the advantage of superior maneuverability and climb. He let the Zero float at the top of the chandelle until he had sized up the situation. Then he ducked out and came slicing in at the Warhawk.

Coleman, caught in the turn, watched the Zero's nose ease sideways as the Burmese set his lead. Quickly he pulled in tighter. The little plane shuddered and he felt the stick jumping as she got ready to snap, but he held her there. The Zero's wings jetted crimson and, through the top of the canopy, Coleman watched the tracers whip toward him. At the last minute they broke in a gentle curve and drilled past the nose.

Wang swept past his tail and flipped the

Zero into a steep climb. Coleman righted the 40 and turned back, trying to get under him.

"Here we go again," he thought wryly. "Coleman on the dodge."

Above him, Wang rolled over on his back looking for the Warhawk. Coleman watched closely as the Zero's nose dropped toward him. He waited until it had built up speed and then, as he had done to the two Japs that morning, he edged his plane farther under the diving Burmese.

But Wang was sharper than those two pilots had been. He didn't bother to shoot; he merely hauled the Zero from the dive into a steep bank and began flying around the Warhawk, getting lower with each circle.

Anytime now, Wang would cut out of that circle. And Coleman knew he would just have to take it and hope for the best. Unless... He decided to gamble.

He shoved the prop into full low pitch and waited until the Zero slid out in front. Then he stood the 40 on its nose, walking the rudders to hold it up. For a brief second the glowing ring of the gunsight wavered in front of the Jap. Coleman cut loose his guns. Tracers sparkled brightly through the gray air and he saw the Zero's wing shredding metal. Then his struggling 40 bucked off into a spin.

Coleman didn't let her wind up. As soon as the nose got down he slapped her with rudder and a little aileron and caught her after only a turn and a half. He eased her out in a long, whistling dive and looked up for the Zero. The sky was empty.

He shook his head to ease the strain on his neck muscles and looked up again, climbing the Warhawk on a zigzag course. That damn Zero should be burning after the burst she took in the wing. But nowhere could he see a sign of smoke.

He glanced over the side to orient himself. The squall line had been moving steadily south, driving the two planes before it. Through the haze, Coleman could see the temple far off to the right.

A sudden premonition of danger jerked him upright. But before he could turn his head, the 40 jumped with the impact of a twenty-millimeter burst and the wind screamed deafeningly through the top of the shattered canopy. Coleman kicked the little fighter into a skid, and a second burst

smoked by his head as he looked back.

He got a quick flash of Wang's face hunched intently behind the gunsight. Then the Zero heeled over and swept away, her high wing trailing steel threads where his slugs had hit.

Coleman peeled off after her but almost immediately the Zero reversed her bank and sliced upward in a graceful aileron roll. He turned back wearily, maneuvering to get under again.

The violent action of the past few seconds had pulled loose the shoulder strap. Under his shirt he could feel the warm blood against his skin. He fixed the rubber pad back in place and flexed his fingers, testing his strength. Then he looked out to the side, estimating the course of the storm.

It was still travelling south, and suddenly he became very calm. He knew the loss of blood would eventually slow his reactions enough so that he could no longer evade Wang's attacks. But if he could only last long enough the storm would finish what he couldn't. It would hold Wang near the strip and, when his gas gave out, the paratroopers would take care of the rest.

Coleman settled himself for the next pass.

BUT THE Burmese had also taken time out for orientation. As Coleman watched, the Zero turned and headed straight for the storm. Coleman jerked erect. Nobody would be fool enough to try flying an unstable fighter through that stuff. He climbed the 40 up after it.

The Zero kept to its course and Coleman set himself for the break. Wang would have to turn and when he did, Coleman would have a clear shot. He didn't intend to miss this time.

Then, as he stared in disbelief, the little Jap fighter disappeared into the solid black wall.

Coleman shook his head. He had flown instruments before and he knew how deadly a thunderstorm could be. Still, there was a faint chance that Wang would make it through. That was a chance he couldn't take.

Grimly he set his flight indicator and gyro compass. Then he reduced speed and headed into the stuff.

Everything was immediately blacked out and rain whipped through the top of the canopy in stinging needles. Coleman hunched over and concentrated on his instruments.

The altimeter wound up crazily as he hit an updraft and he instinctively pushed forward on the stick to prevent a stall. A downdraft caught him and the plane dropped out from under him. He caught himself fighting the controls.

"Take it easy," he told himself. "You know better than this."

But the light plane was being flung crazily around the sky and the crash of thunder sounded loud even above his engine noise. The wings crackled eerily under the drumming rain. He began to get confused.

He forced himself not to look out but the instrument readings made the urge almost irresistible. At below cruising speed he saw he was gaining five thousand feet a minute, and the needle on his turn and bank indicator was a blur of motion. He shook his head fiercely and concentrated on the artificial horizon.

The plane was flying in a left bank. He straightened it up as a streak of lightning ripped across the nose. For a moment he was blinded. Panic hit him. He had long ago lost all flying "feel" and now he couldn't tell whether the ship was diving, climbing or still flying level.

He put his face up close to the panel. Gradually the luminous wings of the flight indicator showed through. He was in a diving spiral. Frantically he pulled out.

All around him there was a dull scarlet glow. The wings crawled with flickering tongues of electricity. The prop disc was garlanded with sparkling flame. For just a second he took his eyes off the instruments, afraid the plane was on fire. When he looked back he had vertigo.

The flight indicator showed a left bank, but he was certain the plane was in a right bank. Deliberately, he made himself level the indicator and bit his lips as he felt himself go head down. He quickly rolled the plunging plane back to the original indication.

The airspeed began to build up. The nose dropped below the horizon. He pulled back on the stick but the speed only increased. Suddenly he realized that he ac-

tually was on his back, diving straight in.

In a cold sweat, he rolled the plane over and eased up the elevators. The airspeed gradually fell off; the little 40 was level again. But *he* was still flying on his back!

Things began to get unreal. The turbulence, the lightning glare, the thunder shocks, were beginning to get him. His eyes ached with the strain of watching the dancing instruments; his head felt swollen with blood from flying upside down. He became unable to interpret what the instruments showed.

The miniature plane on the artificial horizon dipped its wings and he couldn't tell whether the bank was right or left. The airspeed fell off and he couldn't remember whether that meant a climb or a dive.

"No use bucking it any longer," he muttered and reached for the hatch release. The little fighter burst out of the dark.

Coleman looked out, then hastily went on instruments again. He was still not in the clear, but he was through the center of the storm. The clouds were lighter, the turbulence less severe. With renewed confidence, he righted the plane.

HE HAD been able to keep an approximate northerly course through the worst of the storm. He should hit clear weather soon. The rain was merely a light spray on his neck now and, although the plane raced in and out of dark spots, the visibility began to increase.

Coleman was reaching for the throttle to increase his speed when, off his left wing, he glimpsed a swirl of motion. He turned his eyes in time to see Wang's Zero plunge into a cloud. The Burmese had gotten through, too!

He quickly set a course to intercept. It was ticklish work switching on and off instruments but Coleman was no longer concerned with how he flew. He had to get that Zero.

The Warhawk's prop churned into another clear space. Without aiming, Coleman fired at the speeding Jap plane. His tracers fizzed luminously through the moisture-laden air, and he laid the little 40 over and knifed into the cloud. He saw a dim shape ahead and fired again. The shadow jumped abruptly upward and flashed into another cloud. Coleman bored in after it.

The light space on the other side of the cloud held no shadow and Coleman turned swiftly north again. If they broke into the open, he had to be ahead of the Zero.

Bright, sparkling ribbons floated through the mist past him. For a moment he just stared at them. Then he woke up. Wang's tracers! He snapped the Warhawk hard over and tried to see through the gray vapor. A shadow rushed by, just missing him. He turned again, following the roiling suction trail.

The shadow seemed to slide sideways. He eased the Warhawk into a shallow chandelle, eyes flicking to the instruments, not daring to be too violent. He caught another glimpse of the Zero below. He held his fire, waiting for a clear spot.

In that brief break in the clouds, Wang saw him also. He reversed his turn suddenly and darted around a tall black cumulus that jutted through the mists. Coleman hung on grimly.

It was like fighting in a dark room full of furniture. But the instrument flying cut down the Zero's maneuverability edge and Coleman was able to stay with him.

They lanced through that gray, fleecy world like two ghostly torpedoes. And the dark cumulus were everywhere, slapping the little planes with quick jolts of rain and turbulence. Coleman began to get dizzy with the abrupt color changes. But that elusive shadow was still there in his armor glass.

"If I go in," he told himself grimly, "at least he goes in first."

He finally got the break he had been waiting for. The air ahead cleared slightly, and he could see the Zero plainly as Wang desperately laid it up in a pivot turn. But Coleman had started his bank as soon as he saw light wisping through his prop. He had the lead he needed.

The two planes were so close together that there was no appearance of firing. Coleman pressed his trigger and the six lines of tracers were there, fixed between the two planes, as though he had suddenly clicked on a searchlight. The full burst caught the Zero behind its spinner. He saw her stagger. Then she fell off into a cloud.

He dipped the 40 in behind her and, for a second, everything was dark. Then the

inside of the huge cumulus flared redly, as though a giant forge were being pumped below. He slid lower, following that ghastly crimson flare. Abruptly he broke out contact.

The sky was sparkingly clear, and the plateau below looked fresh and clean. Wang's Zero was a miniature plane at the end of a long, twisting rope of smoke. Coleman closed the distance rapidly. He saw the glitter as the canopy fluttered off; he saw the wiry figure climb half-erect in the cockpit; then, as he bent coldly to the gunsight, there came a searing flash. When the spots faded from his eyes, there was nothing in sight but odd bits of wreckage floating downward.

Coleman closed his eyes. It was over and he felt very, very drowsy. The blood was squeezing out of his shoulder in big, soothing bubbles. His head was full of cool, whispering air... With an effort he shook himself out of the comfortable daze and turned the Warhawk south.

The storm was still travelling steadily. He weaved back and forth behind it until the temple poked wetly from the mists. Then he dipped down and flew low over the dome. When he turned back for the second run a tiny figure stood on the balcony. A handkerchief waved.

That was all he wanted to know. He banked around for the strip and set the battered fighter in a landing glide.

A WARM, pulsing twilight was settling over Rangoon as the *jinricksha* stopped in front of a dingy Chinese drug-store. Coleman helped Fronnie out and looked curiously at the faded characters on the windows.

"The General's moved again," he said, leading the girl through the open doorway.

An ancient Chinese with a wispy beard bowed them between cluttered showcases of stuffed fowls, dried lizards and tiger skulls, through a curtained doorway, and into the room that was General Gordon's latest headquarters.

It was much the same as his last one. Instead of a table, the slight, white-haired man sat behind an elaborately carved desk. But the same little fan was there and, seemingly, the same high stacks of official papers.

The general motioned them into chairs.

"I have both your reports here," he said in that soft, expressionless voice. "This won't take long."

He picked several sheets of paper off the desk. "You raised the question in your report, Coleman, as to whether the Wang you knew was the original English agent or whether he was an impostor. We finally managed to trace him back. He was *the* Captain Wang all right, but the Japs put one over on our British friends. Wang was their agent before he ever joined the colonial troops."

Coleman nodded. "There's another thing I'd like to know, if you don't mind, General. Why did you send Miss Whiting up without informing me?"

General Gordon looked at him steadily. "It's never a bad idea to have two agents working independently of each other. Wang's arrival was too much of a coincidence to suit me, so I sent Miss Whiting. She's an expert at spotting phonies."

Coleman said nothing. Fronnie shifted uncomfortably in her chair. The general dropped Coleman's report and his voice became brisk.

"I have only one question," he said. "Why did you leave the field when you had a suspected enemy agent there?"

"I was looking for Miss Whiting... I — I didn't know who she was then, and..." For a moment Coleman looked confused. Then his voice hardened. "I did what I thought best," he said. "At that time, there was no actual evidence

against Wang and no indication that he knew I suspected him. I was certain that Myapang would send the parachute troops both to the field and the temple as soon as they got my radiogram. So, under the circumstances..." He shrugged and trailed off.

The general searched each of their faces carefully before he spoke. "You realize, of course, that neither of you is of any further value to me?" He held up a hand as Coleman started to protest. "There's no censure involved; just common sense. Once an agent begins to let emotion overrule his reason, he becomes dangerous both to himself and to the Service." He stood up.

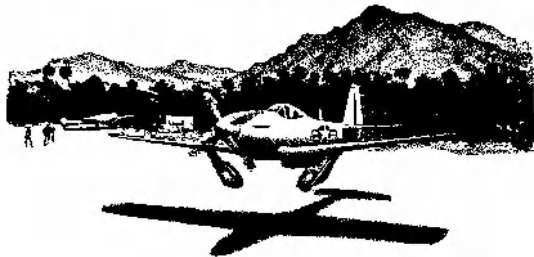
"I've gotten you a thirty-day leave, Coleman," he said. "Here are the orders. Miss Whiting, you, of course, are a civilian and free to do as you choose. If you need any help, let me know."

He shook hands with both of them. Then, as they turned to leave, he opened a drawer of the desk.

"Oh, Coleman," he said, handing him a book. "You might read this in your spare time."

Fronnie peeked around his shoulder and bit her tongue on what started to be a giggle. Coleman glanced down at the title, *Problems and Adjustments of Married Life*, then looked up, the dark spots flaring in his jaws.

But the general was already completely engrossed in his papers.



GRANNY WAS A SLUGGER —

By LYNDON RIPLEY

What could a hotshot fighter pilot do with an old Smithsonian turtle like the PBY-5A? When the Zeroes struck, Lt. Speed Foster found out.

LIEUTENANT (jg) Jeff Foster—Speed Foster, our new C.O.—eyed his assignment with disgust. It was plain to see he was mad at the war and everything pertaining thereto.

He swore at the bright February sunshine that played on the riffling waters of San Diego Bay. He swore at the balmy California breeze that quartered in across Point Loma, that fluttered the flag on Consolidated's outfitting dock. He swore at himself for letting a Saipan sawbones send him to Navy Hospital for a petty checkup on malaria.

Most of all he swore at our amphibian patrol bomber, a Navy PBY-5A, calling her an antiquated, pixilated Granny. His squinting blue eyes smoked over the fat, chunky body, the twin Wasps, the high, square-ended wings. Sourly he took us in—his crew now—as we carefully loaded her.

"Holy Hellcat!" he muttered. "Back to a doddering old grandmother right when jet propulsion's being born!"

"Don't be too hasty wit' the old girl," drawled a short, husky ensign who had come out on the planks. The tall lieutenant turned quickly.

"Blacky La Marche!" he exclaimed. "What in blazes you doing here?"

"Gettin' a break, same's you," La Marche breezed, swarthy jowls grinning. "My leg's okay now. How's the jungle temperature?"

"Good as ever—always was," Foster fumed. "It's been a low-down, rotten break, Blacky. I was railroaded to the hospital so they could shove me into this—this—" He jerked his head in our direction, choking on consonants. Long fingers trembled through the grey spot in his fine brown hair.

"That ain't the way I heerd it," countered Blacky. "Those piano wires you got

for nerves needed some laxing anyway." "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. Just take it easy, Speed old boy. Somethin' besides fever got you this berth. Your record's too good for shelvin'."

"But on a belly coaster intended to haul tourists around Long Beach!"

"The Navy adopted 'em," La Marche insisted gaily, "an' the Navy's good. That duck's a solid chunk of workmanship. Amphibians like her are ridin' the long ocean patrols from Maine to Texas, from Puget Sound to Baja California."

"How poetic. I suppose you'd just love to be boss grandson to Granny?"

"No, pal—no." La Marche scratched his boil-scarred neck. "My future's assured. I'm ridin' a rocket, the soul of the artill'ry wit'out the body."

"You mean to say, you fog-horned Florida ape, that you're getting a turbo-jet? And here I taught you everything you know?"

"You directed my asteroid yearnin's, Handsome," rasped La Marche, "but there the parallelogram ends. Your goose there ain't so bad except that anything usin' props is obsolete. Lookit that baby on the tarmac, my new sky streak. Ain't she a darb?" He pointed pridefully at a dove-grey aerodynamic dream nearby.

Foster's icy eyes took in the elongated egg with knifeblade wings, the two small prop-less cocoons for engines. His gaze lingered on the quartet of assault rockets cradled near the muzzles of the .50-calibers on each leading edge. It was one of those hush-hush jobs, fresh out of Engineering and out of this world. It was something that rats would hear *after* it passed, not before. That meant speed faster than sound but nobody was giving figures.

"Don't say it, Speed," La Marche cautioned, black eyes grinning up. "I know you put in for one of these sweethearts,



The second ton dropped not a dozen feet from the sub's hull.

and those big shots over there directin' my monkeys on the *gung ho* might get the wrong impression of my Pacific pal with all the ribbons."

Foster choked. His ordinarily pleasant weathered face went bright strawberry hue. "Ah—ungh," he finally managed.

"Not so loud. There's a little secret about it," counseled this La Marche, evidently an old buddy from the Islands. "It's like golf—don't press your shots, kid. Now me, I do the job as it comes an' don't worry. I lean backward, in fact—disinterestedly efficient. When you pester H.Q. they get stubborn."

"You mean a bunch of co-op grandfathers who dote on Grannys," Foster corrected acidly.

"That's only your present viewpoint, chum. Well, I gotta go. Give my regards to Dot, that Oregon bride of yours. An' remember, Speed, every ship has a purpose or we wouldn't be flyin' 'em. See you in Tokyo!"

We got busy as our C.O. spun on his heel. "Holy Hellcat—no!" he snapped over his shoulder. "Not in this pot-bellied pelican you won't!"

YOU never can tell about a war. We were assigned to the Southern California coast. Then inside of a week, after Germany went pfft, we were winched aboard a ship bound for the Pacific show. Granny, as we began calling the ship too, out of deference, was to aid in rescue and sub work, so we understood. You know how the Navy grapevine works.

Our Old Man, as we called Foster now, though not to his face, being twenty-four and holding orders, was fighting his slow burn. Since I was Chief and bow gunner, I got closer to him than anyone else. He proved to be a good egg with a legit beef. Forty-four missions with strato crates and carrier stuff. And because of a spot of fever, he'd been given—well, we could see his point.

Like a good C.O., Foster got thoroughly acquainted with his solid ship, though we could see it wasn't to his liking. He inspected her spaciousness, saw we could do housekeeping and sleep half a dozen men. This meant size of a town apartment, fair game for trained air and sub-sea crews who were anything but friendly.

To help compensate for slowness, a lot of fancy gadgets were fitted into her— heavy machine guns, bombsight, radios, phones, rafts, depth bombs—even retractable wheels. In tropical downpours she leaked like a sieve but she kept on singing. Her Wasps could really warble.

And she had something else, something few other amphibious relatives had been endowed with. They were jatos, the name derived from "jet-assisted take-offs." They were horizontal steel bottles with rear nozzles, a couple locked to each side of the fat tail, aft of the machine gun blisters. Electrically fired in emergency, they gave Granny a kick in the pants equal to the thrust of an extra engine. They were expendable and easily replaceable, using a solid propellant.

Maybe Foster thought of it. He was riding rockets after all...

Well, one day early in April we were operating off an island southeast of the Emperor's rat nest. It was U.S. held and our advance Base—that's as specific as I can make it right now. The boys had just finished lunch of ham and eggs, hot off the electric grill aft of the radioman's station.

I was piloting the big Catalina at close to a hundred knots, on patrol. A couple thousand feet down the Pacific was polished sapphire and brass under the hot sun. Fluffy white clouds floated past like pillows on an assembly line. I was making a wide sweep with the glasses and spotted a freighter plowing south. Chuck, our radioman, reported her to Base. We were told to let 'er ride. She was a Chink.

A few minutes later I saw something else. A dark speck about three miles away...

I MADE a few routine moves. The siren wailed. The engines raised their pitch a couple keys. The crew hurried to stations and clapped on headphones.

Foster dropped his doodling at the navigator's board behind my seat and casually took over. I crawled into the plastic bubble behind the bow gun.

The Old Man shoved forward on the yoke and we lowered from cloud to cloud, finally entering a long streamer. We were closing in, keeping out of sight. I could see that our rawhide C.O., built like a

boxer, knew his way around. He had a sweet touch on the controls.

Near our objective he gave Granny a little powder on her pug nose. We went creaking down toward the sun-wash on the mirroring blue. As we came out of the mist I felt rather than saw all the guys relax. It was only six airmen on a life raft.

Due to smooth swells, Foster made an easy landing. It was something he seldom did when the seas were rolling. He maneuvered until we could reach the sun-baked and blistered fliers.

"Hop aboard the Coronado ferry, lads," he quipped.

"If you want a slug, there's hot jamoke on yonder plate."

"Just where did this goon come from?" asked a tow-headed sergeant with a wide grin, pouring from the anchored jerko. "Last time I saw one of these ilky bilkies was at Miami."

"We're something out of the dear dead past," the Old Man said dryly.

"You're telling me! Now that our Fort's gone, we'll get a new turbo job that—"

I nudged the fuzzy-faced squarehead and he shut up. He'd missed seeing the withering glance and set jaw in the pilot's seat.

I just mention this because it was characteristic of our first jobs. After shuttling the pickups we resumed patrol as usual. Most combat craft and the Navy were keeping the Nips occupied up front and we only mopped the edges and kept notes. Rather Foster did.

Every day he put down cryptic remarks, writing in vinegar and gall, as it were, in the black log book. He noted the sun, moon, clouds, wind, weather in general. More than once he mentioned briefly how we tossed out a two or five-man raft, watching it inflate itself with the attached carbon dioxide bottle on the way down. He recorded how we lashed standard rations between Mae Wests, circled, then dropped the grub, mostly to carrier based chums who got into trouble. We made no kiss-offs when our boats were around to take floaters aboard.

It was all school bus stuff.

"Ed," the Old Man confided to me one balmy morning, "I think I'm getting ulcers."

"You, sir?" I said, surprised. "Why you look the picture of health."

"The negative, you mean," he said sourly. "All this roving detail is well and good but I'm used to action. I haven't had a fever shiver in days."

I was using the binoculars at the time. I squinted through for a second check, then handed them across. "If it's action you want, sir, it looks like the Fates oblige. There's a shadow down there and I don't think it's a whale..."

THE SEA that day was fairly smooth. A northerly breeze was romping over the low swells, making etchings of white on indigo. From above we could see the lacy effect linking the cloud shadows together like a patchwork quilt. But in one greenblue shallower spot I made out a darker cigar shape that had no reason for being there:

Again the siren wailed. With easy grace Foster took over and souped the Wasps. The yoke went forward and we dove for the surfaced sub. We knew it now for what it was because little brown ants were sunning themselves on deck under some fluttering clothes.

"Stand by, lads," rasped the Old Man over the intercom. "Larry, get back to your waist gun after the depth bombs tumble. Now, Granny, rustle your bustle."

It takes a good twenty-five to thirty seconds for a tin fish to crash dive. A fast plane can easily connect. But Granny! Why the old girl had to strain every corset stay to even get to the wash before the U-boat submerged too deep for bombs.

I'll say this—Granny tried. She creaked and cracked and groaned. It was like riding inside a runaway box car going three times as fast as it was meant to travel.

Three Osakas, sun-bathing on deck, scrambled up and dove for the tarp-covered deck gun. They yanked off the cover and started heaving steel. I opened up with the bow chaser. Stinging smoke got in my eyes and drifted back through the Catalina.

The Old Man kept Granny dead on, regardless of the hole that suddenly bloomed in the fuselage just over his head.

"Of all the nerve!" he said savagely, as if to himself. "Come on you Smithsonian turtle, get the lead out!"

It must have been something like one

of our Oerlikon 20-mm. ainti-aircraft cannon the sub had mounted but of course it wasn't an Oery. Those Nips on deck were good, even though the U-boat started to submerge. They were gone goslings either way. Something ripped back of me and I heard somebody curse.

"Chuck," snapped Foster, "help Larry. I think he's hit!"

No doubt about it. Those Moto Sans making such a heroic stand for immortality below, were members of Tokyo's Honorable Special Attack Corps that we had heard about. As we came bumbling in, they were likely thinking of that song about cherry blossoms and lovely butterflies.

Right then somebody nipped a couple of the buds. I think I helped. The third Nip was wrenching frantically at the gun when the Old Man yanked back on the yoke and Chuck cut the ash cans free.

Granny shuddered and screamed as we came out of the dive only a few hundred feet up. Two thousand horses started tugging us skyward again, away from the dull boom and twin geysers.

"Baby! We handed him a sweet one, sir!" yelled MacDonald, the machinist's mate, over the phone.

"Hope so, Mac, hope so," Foster said, his lean cheeks flushed. "But not so fast, lad. That slant eye still has plenty of *Yamato Damashi*."

THE brown rat was shooting at us with a side arm, no doubt a Nambu, and shaking an angry fist. The sub was listing to port. As we hovered, there was a thudding explosion and the black bow rose clear. Then it slid back and yellow foam bubbled up in the sunlight.

I cut loose and the fist stopped shaking. In a matter of seconds the tin fish was gone and the remaining Jap with it.

"Well, that's that," the Old Man grated. "Chuck, report to Base about our kill. This kind of stuff is more like it.

Our radioman transmitted the message. In a matter of minutes he had an answer. It was something he didn't expect, for he turned with the freckles standing out on his blanched face like push pins on a map.

"For the love of Mike, sir! He—he's laughing at us!" he exclaimed. "The officer says, 'Bring in the Cap'n's cap or the periscope'."

"Now, Chuck, for cripes' sake...huhh?" Foster jerked around.

There was a bleat from the crew but Foster shut them up. "Go ahead, Ed," he said. "Cut our hearts out."

"We might as well see the facts as they are, sir. In Combined Operations at Base they'll list this as a 'probable' even if we are dead sure. Subs sometimes pump out oil to fool you.

"But look where the cans landed!" raved Larry, favoring a bloody left hand. "Less than twenty feet away from the hull!"

"Of course we got her," I assured everybody, "but can we prove it? No."

"Holy Hellcat!" roared the Old Man. "What *do* they want for proof? Are they so fuddy duddy that they think we're going to haul the stinking thing way back to Base and plop it in their laps?"

"No, sir. It only seems they don't want us to be too optimistic."

Foster was perspiring heavily. The scar on his right cheek rode like a white crescent moon on a lavender, leathery skin.

"Ain't that sweet!" he snapped. "I've been waiting for this. Ed, take over while I bawl the living Yehudi out of dear old Base."

"If I may say so, sir..." I began, then thought it best to lay off. There were some things you couldn't say to your Old Man.

There were also some things you shouldn't mention to the tough babies at Operations, especially Commander Steel. He didn't welcome forceful suggestions from combat fatigued fliers.

Chuck and MacDonald were tense, in back of me. I pricked up my ears. Somebody was going to get knocked for a loop, even if it was by remote control...

AS THE result of Lieutenant Foster's unfortunate conversation with Base, all of us became Dog House inmates. To top the disgrace, we were promptly transferred to the area off Kyushu. At the time this was a hotbed of Yank carrier-based raids, Jap sub attacks and Kamikaze high-jinks.

The crew became resentful. It hadn't been any of our business but we had to suffer along with the Old Man. And while hauling chums from the drink is hard

work, it brings no credit. Other guys got the ribbons and newspaper fla fla.

I'm sure Foster knew how his crew felt for he tried to be considerate and helpful. In fact he told us one afternoon how sorry he was about it all. But the damage had been done.

Chuck, for one, found it hard to hide his resentment. For four days he held up the radio message that said the Old Man's wife was seriously ill. He gave it to Foster at one of the worst times, a day when he had a mild throwback of fever and was trembling like a strut in prop wash.

I knew how the Old Man felt about his bride of a year, but he didn't say much. He began to grow more quiet and thoughtful and lost weight. There was a hurt look in his eyes.

That's the way things were jelled when, one Friday noon, Base gave us a curt buzz.

"Carrier craft need your assistance in 46ZA area at once," Chuck wrote out. "Other patrol ships converging. This is emergency. Acknowledge."

Our radioman grudgingly complied. We tore out of there on angry Wasps. Foster was in sort of a stunned sweat, and he pushed Granny until she groaned.

It was a bad day for emergencies, too. We headed into scattered heavy clouds, showers under many of them. The sea was choppy and frothy under a stiff breeze. In this kind of weather no landings were possible. That is, if we were going to stay with the ship or vice versa.

Foster was at the controls. He peered and circled as we entered a squally downpour. Sure enough, six airmen were floating in the foamy, rain-stuccoed waves.

"Throw those kids the AR-10 Rescue Assembly," Foster said nervously. "We can't stop here now."

"Yes, sir!" Mac said and obliged.

This Assembly was seldom used but now it looked as though a couple of Helldiver outfits would make it welcome. It was two shipwreck kits, a rolled-up rubber raft, outboard motor and fuel, all strung together on a line. The raft would hold ten men.

"Sub to starboard!" I yelled, from where I sat in the nose. "It's getting ready to pick off our airmen, sir!"

"And flying fish making at you, so help me!" Chuck shouted with evident relish.

His pointed face grimaced and small, tawny eyes held an evil glitter.

Perhaps he had forgotten to say "sir." And perhaps he had never seen a real *cypselurus heterurus* before. I had, having once written a theme on the subject. These on the wing weren't fish. Air and water-borne Nips were after our chums for sure.

As if by magic a row of holes appeared in Granny's port wing near the motor nacelle. Three vindictive monkeys were at us and gone before I could say "sprooodle noodle."

"They're those new crates—Tojos!" the Old Man shouted. "Get at 'em, lads. Mac, when I yell, drop a couple of cans. Be ready to install new jato cartridges. Hot Hellcat! This is something like it!"

IN A spark-plugged second Foster was a changed man. Apparently for the moment he completely forgot his fever, disgust, wife and the fact that Granny was practically a housing unit. He did things I would never have attempted, even with an empty ship and a clear sea. And they came so fast that I too forgot that the Catalina wasn't a fighter. I was stuck out in front, in a transparent wart on a chin, and had to take it anyway.

Foster stroked the yoke and we zooped for the broaching sub. Several small Nips started to claw out of the dripping tower. I opened up. Heavy .50-caliber bullets hit the slatted deck, made a line to the superstructure and went right down the hatch.

At that nobody came up to man the deck gun. It just stood there in the thinning downpour, silent under its tarp. The rats kept in their hole.

"Hey, Chuck!" the Old Man yelled. "Drop a note in a floater to those fliers in the raft. Tell 'em to rush the sub pronto, get the periscope and Captain's cap, then clear out. They've got gats. We'll cover 'em. Hurry!"

Chuck nodded sullenly as Granny lurched. Something ripped across the floor under my feet. There was a burst of flame back of the waist blisters. Mac swore, darted for a fire extinguisher.

Again Granny side-slipped and shuddered, just in time to avoid a Flying Coffin, for now I could tell what they were. These Tojos were Divine Wind

boys who deliberately crashed their planes in suicidal attacks on their targets. Unknowingly, we had horned into a nest of fanatics, ready and eager to commit *jibaku*, which is Jap for self-explosion.

Granny became filled with acrid smoke and Foster coughed. The nose blister became hot, almost stifling. I tasted powder and dope smoke and felt groggy. Another Tojo cut across in front of my face, so close I saw the flash of black, beady eyes. Granny careened in the wash of the propeller.

"Damn it, Chuck, get that message out!" the Old Man roared. "Mac, see what in hell's the matter!"

The rain cloud had moved over. A Tojo now came out of the sun like a sliver of light. I pressed the button, my gun dead on. Larry's heavy duty was chattering, too.

Granny lurched and ducked. A Tojo wing tip hit between our Wasps and sheered clean. Daylight came through our ceiling. The light Jap fighter went spinning down and plummeted into the sea.

I saw another high-tailing for the guys who were in the raft, paddling frantically toward the sub. I peppered the ozone in front of the Tojo. Its gun flashes quit and it zooped on beyond the U-boat to pancake into the water.

FOSTER swore. I jerked around. His forehead was beaded with sweat and his thin lower lip was clamped down with white upper teeth. A red stain on the shoulder of his jacket was spreading. "Now!" he rasped out the side of his mouth and pushed a dash button.

There was a heavy swooshing sound behind us. Hissing backfires of smoke streamed out from each side of Granny's plump hull. We zoomed at the third Tojo so fast that I looked back to see if the crew was still with us. Jatos gave Granny the pep of a high school girl.

Maybe the third Moto San saw us coming. Anyway he did a back-breaking one-eighty vertical turn. I got him in the gun sights early and raked his belly. He went on up to stall, then came down like a dead rocket. Our abrupt coming ended as suddenly as it had begun.

"Mac—new jatos quick!" gasped the Old Man weakly.

"Easy does it," I said. "Looks like the boys have your periscope."

Human atoms had crawled up and were firing from the conning tower with rifles. Two of the fliers in the raft collapsed. Foster put Granny into a steep dive. We screeched down, pouring steel. As we circled and climbed, the Nips came up again.

"All set, sir!" Mac cried. "New jatos ready and clamped down!"

We came in low and double fast, like a Superfort in strato making vapor streaks. Instead we left loud hissing double plumes and two high-powered eggs. One landed wide of the target, the other cleared the sub by barely a dozen feet.

We hung on, watching. The U-boat careened drunkenly and half a dozen rats spilled out. The tin fish settled back only to be stricken by an explosion inside the hull. Slowly it ripped apart in the middle. The black slimy bow and stern poked above water, forming a V. Gradually both went under and an oil slick began spreading.

"Good work, Mac." Foster said weakly.

I eased in beside the Old Man and took over, feeling faint myself. "Mac," I called, wiping blood out of an eye, "more jatos on the double. I'm going to chance it and pick up those water-soaked pigeons."

IT WAS a hot morning. Mac, Larry and I, bandaged for cuts and gouges, were perspiring inside our gauze. We were fit enough, considering, as we visited Foster in Base Hospital. I gave him the news I'd received earlier, that his wife was recovering nicely. A smile came into his eyes. It mattered more to him, I could see, than all our recently received "tokens of appreciation" put together.

We had been chewing the fat only ten minutes or so when two young officers strode into the ward. One was a young auburn-haired, apple-cheeked Commander, the other a Lieutenant, a little older, taller and darker. The younger of the two approached us.

"Gentlemen, as you were," he said in a clipped but friendly voice. "I have a duty to perform and this time it is a pleasant one. I am Commander Steel."

Foster rolled surprised blue eyes and grinned. "Holy Hellcat!" he exclaimed. "I thought you were a pock-marked old walrus who bit and then explained I Wasn't

his name Steel, sir?"

The Commander laughed.

"No, Lieutenant. That must have been Captain Beale, here on inspection during my short absence.

"Lieutenant Turcot here will remain and secure what facts are necessary to complete our records. All of you are receiving a month's leave, to return to San Diego and thence to your homes. You will be re-assigned with higher ratings when you report for duty. Lieutenant Foster will personally check up on the situation in Oregon and take, if he wishes, three months leave. Is that satisfactory?"

"Is it!" Our Old Man smiled widely.

"Sir, it's wonderful but . . ." He groped for words.

"But what?"

"Oh, it really isn't important, I guess," Foster resumed lamely, long fingers plucking at the sheet. "Only if it's the same to you, sir, I'd like to continue as CO of Granny—pardon, sir—our PBY-5A."

Commander Steel laughed and nodded understanding. "Once upon a time I was in a spot similar to yours, but a crackup stopped me and put a silver plate on my skull. But let's get back to you. I understand that you wanted a new turbo or jet

plane. We arranged for your transfer to one after Ensign La Marche explained about you and we checked the records for . . ."

Foster sat up in bed, his shoulder swathed in bandages. He made a wry face, shoved aside Lieutenant Turcot's restraining hand.

"Blacky La Marche? Here? How in the devil did he get to Base? And why . . ."

"Easy, Lieutenant," warned the Commander pleasantly, handing the clip board to his assistant and turning toward the door. "You have three days to visit with your friend before he leaves. Would you like to have him come over in a few minutes and explain?"

"Holy Hellcat—yes!" shouted Speed Foster. "Tell him I don't want no damned jet plane. I'll take Granny, sir."

"Well, think it over," urged the Base Officer. "Plenty of time to decide. As I recall, Ensign La Marche told me that your amphibian was a swell old lugger. You picked him up with those Helldivers, you know."

Foster smiled oddly. "Blacky—Ensign La Marche, sir—is sometimes given to understatement. For the record I'd like to correct his mistake. Cross out that 'lugger.' Holy Hellcat! Granny was a slugger!"





The Hellcat closed swiftly on the plummeting Jap.

THE RADAR GHOSTS

By JOE JAMES

South of Okinawa, the flat-top, *Majuro*, raced into a Kamikaze death trap. Jig Warner, alone, could save her—and he was aloft in a crippled Hellcat with empty guns.

SIX HELLCATS, etched against the gray of dawn, roared up San Francisco Bay in tight formation, banked gracefully over the Golden Gate, and headed out to sea.

In the lead Hellcat, Lt. J. W. Warner twisted in his seat to watch the fading California coastline blend with the gray dawn. As the husky gray-eyed fighter pilot watched Uncle Sam's country drop be-

hind, a slow smile broke his serious gaze. Warner reached for his mike, jabbed the VHF button.

"Take a good look boys," he called to the Hellcats stacked above him. "Kiss that Golden Gate good-bye!"

Lt. Jim Pierce, glued in No. 2 position, chuckled: "I hear you talkin', boy! A lotta Zeroes gotta be blasted and a lotta ack-ack is gonna get waded through before we see that ol' Golden Gate again!"

Warner glanced up at Jim, riding just off his wing tip, and nodded. This was the second tour for Jim, too, and like Warner, Pierce had rather expected a State-side tour instead of a hasty return to battle. But the orders at Norfolk meant business. Six veteran pilots were to speed across the country and join a brand-new Essex-class carrier, the USS *Majuro*, off the California coast. Six fighter pilots were needed to fill the *Majuro's* complement and, for reasons not disclosed, green boys wouldn't do.

"Where the *Majuro* is going," the Captain had said, "she'll need the very best fighter men she can get. I'm sorry you boys can't get a tour of instructing—I know you deserve it—but I don't write the orders. I just pass 'em on!"

Warner stretched lazily, reached for a cigarette. He gave the Hellcat a touch of forward tab and let her fly hands-off while he lit his cigarette. Suddenly a streak of white caught his eye. He leaned forward, squinted at the broad expanse of Pacific, and then let out a yell: "There she blows! There's the old girl dead ahead!"

Six thousand feet below steamed the USS *Majuro*. Cutting the calm Pacific at thirty knots, she trailed a ribbon of white across the placid swells.

"There's our new home, men," Warner chuckled, switching his VHF transmitter to the *Majuro's* frequency. "Flight three-four leader to base. Over."

Crystal clear flashed the Air Officer's answer: "Roger three-four leader. Stand by to land aboard!"

A bull horn boomed on the speeding carrier: "Man your stations. Prepare to land planes!" Men raced to positions, the carrier swung gracefully into the wind, and a red baker flag snapped to the yard-arm. On the bridge, a blinker flashed the signal to come aboard.

Warner swung his tight little formation upwind at three hundred feet. Six Hellcats, flying as one, roared over the racing carrier. As the bow passed below, Warner glanced at Pierce, patted his head as a signal for Pierce to take the lead, rocked his wings, peeled off, and streaked for the carrier.

BANKING down wind, he eased back power, pulled up the nose. As the speed dropped, he dumped his wheels. Behind him, his fighter mates peeled off in graceful arcs, timing their break-up to get a good landing interval. Warner's gray eyes swept the long flight deck, spotted the Landing Signal Officer on the fan tail.

Veteran carrier pilot that he was, Warner felt like a green Ensign as he swung into the groove. A thirty-day furlough in the States, with travel time, can foul up even a hot carrier pilot. "Gotta make this one good," Warner told himself. "They'll be watching to see what kind of Dilberts are coming aboard. Gotta make this one good!"

Instinctively Warner found himself obeying the LSO's paddles. They flashed upward—paused. Warner chopped a little power, relaxed his back pressure on the stick. The broad fan-tail loomed dead ahead. The LSO dropped his paddles, stopped them waist-high.

In the groove. Warner felt a surge of the old confidence. He was doing okay. Still on the ball! As the LSO beckoned, he smoothly eased back the throttle. Suddenly the LSO slashed both paddles across his chest. Warner took the cut, chopped the throttle, brought the stick back in his lap. The fighter unloaded, snaked the arresting gear, and skidded to a stop. Not bad at all! With a little practice he should . . .

"Up that hook!" impatiently signalled the flight deck officer, slamming a thumb against a down-turned palm. "Up that hook! What're yuh gonna do, sit there all day?"

Warner flipped up his tail hook, shoved the throttle full forward to get across the now-lowered barrier, and chopped the mixture control. The prop snapped to a stop.

"Sir, the Air Officer wants to see you

on the bridge," a plane handler yelled as Warner bounded to the deck.

"Roger." Warner sprinted for the island. As he hurried up the ladder, he removed his helmet, ran a broad hand through matted black hair that was normally curly. His gaze travelled upward, took in the massive island and the huge radar antenna that slowly scanned the horizon. Where the mighty *Majuro* was going, those slowly-revolving webs of steel could easily be the difference between life and death.

Jig Warner remembered well the nerve-wracking pitch-black nights off the Marshalls and Marianna Islands when Jap torpedo bombers stalked the battle fleet like prowling beasts. Only all-seeing radar held them at bay. Now the battle line was moving closer to Japan and Kamikaze pilots, eager to blast themselves to a glorious hereafter, would wait for low ceilings or night to strike. Then only radar could spot them and send fighters speeding to head them off. As he reached the bridge, Warner spotted the air officer.

"Lt. J. W. Warner, three-four leader, reporting for duty, Sir."

THE Air Officer, a three-striper, turned to acknowledge Warner's salute. "Glad to have you aboard, Lieutenant. I'm Commander Corby. By the way, meet your fighter skipper for this cruise, Lt. Commander John Adams."

A slim khaki-clad figure, wearing shiny gold oak leaves, turned and looked Warner over in surprise. "Well, Jig Williams Warner!" boomed Adams in surprise. "Last I heard you were in the Mariannas!"

"That's right," grinned Warner. "But I did a Stateside furlough since then."

"Commander Corby, it sure is good to have Jig with us," Adams exclaimed. "As a fighter pilot, he's one of the best! Course the small fact that I was his primary instructor had nothing to do with it."

"I'll vouch for the last part," Warner nodded. "All he did was wring me out. I never saw the ground right-side-up until I got into basic training! And in addition, you tacked this 'Jig William' monicker on me—because you couldn't remember 'J. W.'—and now everybody calls me that!"

"Now, now—that's gratitude for you," frowned Adams. "I work myself to a frazzle to get this guy through. Framed his check rides so he wouldn't wash out, and now he gives me lip!"

"You framed my check rides all right!" Warner laughed. "But fate was kind and I got my wings anyway!"

"Yeah, the Navy slips up now and then," admitted Adams, with a sly wink at Commander Corby. "Now I guess you want to know what we have on the fire?"

"I sure do!" exclaimed Warner. "We were ordered right out to the West Coast from Norfolk. Told to pick the *Majuro* up off Alameda. What's all the rush and why did they have to have second-tour fighter men?"

Commander Corby eyed Warner in quiet thought. "I think we can tell you this much," he said slowly, "not *where* we're going—although it's the biggest show the Pacific has seen—but *what* we're going to deliver. This is top secret information. I trust you will bear that in mind. But the *Majuro* has been selected to rush the first factory output of radio proximity fuses to the task force scheduled to cover the next big invasion!" Warner whistled in surprise.

"That's right," Corby continued. "So you see why we're carrying only veteran pilots. This cargo has got to go through. Kamikazes have been tearing hell outta our task force ships—this shell oughta stop 'em cold."

"A radio proximity fuse?" Warner exclaimed in amazement. "How does it operate?"

"I'm no technician," Corby smiled, "but I can tell you this. A tiny transmitter and receiver are carried in the nose of the five-inch shell. The transmitter sends out a signal which, when it strikes an on-coming plane, bounces back to the receiver. At the proper moment—blooie!"

"That does away with setting time fuses," Adams explained. "It'll knock down Kamikazes like flies!"

"Remember, it's top secret stuff," Corby said crisply. "After we pass Hawaii, I'm going to tell the men. If the Japs get word about our cargo, they'll do everything to stop us. I want every man on his toes. Excuse me, gentlemen, I'm due at Air Plot."

ADAMS and Warner snapped salutes and turned to leave the bridge. "Come on down to the ward room and meet the boys," Adams suggested, "we've got a top-notch bunch of men!"

A card game was going full blast as the two fighter pilots entered. Adams cleared his throat: "Men, meet a new division leader—Lt. J. W. Warner, better known as Jig William Warner, Market Street Casanova, and high-point man in the Marianna Turkey Shoot."

"Welcome aboard!" boomed a handsome, beetle-browed Senior Lieutenant, shoving out a huge hand. "Reckon I oughta be the first—I brought you aboard!"

"And so he did," Adams laughed. "Jig, meet Bob Dingowski, best damn signal officer in this part of the Pacific!"

"Don't feed me that stuff!" grunted Dingowski. "Jig, I'm the *only* signal officer on board. We pick up two more LSO's in Honolulu."

"I was really glad to see you there when I came in," Jig admitted.

"Thanks," Dingowski grinned.

Adams, whom everyone knew thought Dingowski was wonderful, chuckled. "Come on Jig, meet some of the better class boys. This is Stan Davis. Stan, meet . . ."

Jig turned, and his smile froze. Davis, a tall well-knit Lt. (jg), kept his hand at his side. "We've had that questionable pleasure," he frowned. "In fact, we ran into each other before—I took the rap!"

Jig felt every eye in the room on him. Under Davis' cold stare, words failed to come. "I—I'm sorry," he mumbled. "Darn sorry it happened, Stan."

"Skip it, skip it," growled Davis, sweeping the circle of pilots with one of those listen-to-this-guy looks. "I suppose it was six other people who ran into me. And don't think I can forget it. How could I? The Navy washed me out of flying—just when I was gonna get my wings—and they stuck me in radar and now I sit down in my fighter director hole and tell jerks like you where the 'bogies' are. And I've got as much right as you to be up there flying. *Probably* more!"

"Davis, you're doing extremely important work," Adams interrupted.

"Where the hell would we be, when the Kamikaze boys come callin', without a fighter director? Especially when the ceiling is on the deck."

Davis' face hardened. "What if my job is important," he glared. "It's damn monotonous! And if this character hadn't run a prop through my tail, I'd be blastin' Japs instead of sittin' in my hole and tellin' someone else where they are!" With an icy stare at Jig, Davis strode from the wardroom.

The pilots watched Jig, waiting for an explanation. Somehow, he could find nothing to say. Adams broke the dead silence: "I didn't know you knew Stan," he exclaimed. "Sorry you boys don't get along. He's our fighter director and a darn good one—you'll have to work together, especially on Combat Air Patrol. The safety of the ship and every man aboard depends on that!"

"I'll do what he tells me," Jig declared. "But I hate like the devil to see him hate my guts—especially when neither of us is to blame for what happened."

"Pardon me for sticking my nose in," exclaimed a dive-bomber pilot. "But what'd you do, try to kill Davis?"

Jig shook his head. "Nothing like that. We collided on our last gunnery hop before graduation at Corpus Christi. The Admiral's Board washed out Davis; they let me finish. He blames me for his rough luck." Jig excused himself and went to his quarters.

IN HIS tiny cabin, Jig slipped out of his flight gear and walked to the cabin's one tiny porthole. The Pacific was crystal-smooth. A late moon pushed through low stratus clouds. The great carrier, mighty engines throbbing, steamed steadily westward.

Warner thought of the days ahead, of gruelling fighter sweeps, night carrier landings, and blazing sky battles. A strange depression came over him. In the sky he could hold his own, but Stan Davis was a different matter. Davis held him personally responsible for smashing his flying career. Nothing Jig could say or do would change that. Still thinking about Stan Davis, Jig doused his light and climbed into his bunk. Sleep was slow in coming, and for a long time he lay there

listening to the steady drum of the engines.

The *Majuro* touched Hawaii, picked up two sleek escort destroyers, and steamed past Kaneohe and Molokai toward the battle zone. Past Midway she steamed, past Guam, Tinian, and Saipan. As the Mariannas dropped behind Jig could feel nerves tighten and almost see the tension mounting. Battle stations at dawn became a regular thing and each sunrise found Jig and his fighter division sweeping far ahead of the racing carrier.

At a pre-dawn briefing, Commander Corby told a dead serious group of pilots the same news he had given Jig and Adams off Alameda. Every man in the room had flown through anti-aircraft fire and every one quickly grasped what a shell such as the radio proximity missile would mean.

Turning to the map on the bulkhead, Corby ran his pointer past Guam, across Iwo Jima, and jabbed the dark mass that was Okinawa. "Right about here we'll meet the biggest fleet this world has ever seen. The Jap's will throw everything they have at us—this will be a show-down for them—but we think the radio proximity fuse is the answer to Kamikazes. It's up to us to get it there in time for the invasion of Okinawa—scheduled for Easter Sunday!"

The room stilled. Easter Sunday! What a way to spend a holiday! And Okinawa! Many had said that strange, mysterious island could never be taken.

Corby broke the silence. "I know every one of you will be more alert and fight harder than ever now that you know our mission. You're on a great ship, a ship picked because she could deliver this new weapon faster than any other ship afloat. And remember too, the ships and men these shells will save. Used with radar, the radio proximity fuse will stop the Kamikazes. Do you agree with me, Davis?"

Stan Davis, standing near the door, cleared his throat. "Yes, sir, I believe it will do it," he said confidently. "And with your permission, Sir, I'd like to warn every pilot to check—and double-check—his IFF set before every take-off. That tiny radar set in your plane is the only thing that makes you look any different

from a Jap on our radar scopes. Remember that. Don't dope off—our gunners will shoot first and repent later."

"They certainly will," nodded Corby. "IFF—identify friend or foe—is just about the best life insurance you have. The weatherman predicts stinky weather—Kamikaze weather—and when that ceiling comes down our gunners get awful trigger-happy. So heads up men. That's all, gentlemen."

The ready room was a hubbub of chatter, Okinawa! Radar shells! Invasion—four days away! The loud-speaker interrupted the discussion: "Combat Air Patrol pilots man your planes. Dive bombers and torpedo bombers stand by. Warner's division will fly sector sweep, take off last. Man your planes."

Jig walked over to Davis. "Good morning, Stan," he smiled. "Thanks for the tip on IFF—I'll watch it."

"You'd better," muttered David coldly. "We don't want to shoot down any Hellcat by mistake—even if you're in it!"

TAKE-OFF was routine. Pierce slid into position off Jig's wing tip and the other fighter boys slowly drifted over into loose echelon. Jig switched to his auxiliary tank, loosened his chute harness, and settled down for the four-hour grind. Low scud clouds moved in below, and over the VHF radio he could hear Davis issuing directions to the Combat Air Patrol that rode high above the *Majuro*:

"Brownie Five from Sandy. Circle at Blue Altitude. Stand by for instructions."

"Roger from Brownie Five."

Jig turned down the volume. Brownie Five would be Adams, Combat Patrol leader for this period. Sandy was the *Majuro's* call and Blue altitude would be 10,000 feet.

Jig stretched lazily in his seat. What a heck of a way to fight the war. Low scud blanketed the water from view. A lot of good this sweep would do. Carefully Jig flew his heading, watched clock and plotting board. At 0730 he cocked his head, jerked a thumb to indicate a left echelon. As one plane, five Hellcats slid over his tail into left echelon. Jig rolled into a right bank, stopped his turn on 360 degrees. For another hour they droned ahead.

Breaks began to appear in the scud below. Eagerly Jig swept the open spots for ships. On they flew, and as the time neared for the turn-back toward the *Ma-juro*, Jig carefully checked his navigation. He still had three hours of gasoline at normal cruise. Strictly routine. He shrugged. Above him, the other fighters scissored lazily back and forth. Jig signalled for a right turn and gently eased the Hellcat around. Just as he rolled out of his bank, the radio crackled:

"Hello, Sandy Base. This is Booger Leader. Spotted three wallowers. Sector William, Sector William. Escorted by two cans. Also a transport, three-stacker . . . course 320, speed 14 . . . Over!"

The other search group, led by Bob Roberts, had spotted three Jap oilers, two destroyers, and a transport! Eagerly Jig checked his plotting board. He was just entering Sector William, thirty-five miles from the carrier!

"Booger Leader this is Sandy," the radio crackled. "Roger on your message and position. Execute attack. Verify. Over."

"Sandy, this is Booger. Wilco. Executing attack. Out!"

Then silence. Jig twisted in his seat, saw Pierce's broad grin. Action at last! Below, the scud was thinning. Jig shoved his stick quickly back and forth. The signal brought the scissoring fighters quickly down into tight formation. Then Jig spotted the Japs!

Ten thousand feet below six ships, like frightened water bugs, twisted to escape plummeting Helldivers. Racing destroyers belched sheets of flame as dive-bombers, like angry bees, swarmed at the twisting ships. An oiler blew up in a swirl of smoke and fire. Taking in the show, Jig banked gently, saw a Helldiver streak for the fat transport, saw tracers reach for the plunging plane and sear it. The stricken Helldiver faltered, burst into flame, heeled over in a death dive. Jig saw a burst of white. A parachute, pitifully small against the swirl of battle, swung once and slammed into the sea.

JIG snapped into action. He'd seen one buddy strafed off Guam. That wouldn't happen again if he could help it. Rocking his wings, he charged his guns, then

dumped the Hellcat straight down. The Hellcat came down from 10,000 feet like a ton of lead. Doing well over four hundred miles an hour, Jig plugged in his rockets, flipped the arming switch.

Below him, the Jap destroyer, a low-slung Terutsuki, was heeled over in a racing turn toward the blob of white that was a parachute. Just as Jig was getting the Terutsuki set in his sights, every gun on the can let go. They had him spotted.

Slamming his rudders from side to side, Jig stuck in his dive, calmly gauged the distance to the sea that rushed toward him. Ignoring the fire that ripped around him, Jig slowly pressed the stick back, brought the nose up, up, up . . . For a split second the Terutsuki was dead in his sights. Now! As he released his rockets, a ten-ton truck slammed into the Hellcat. There was a blinding explosion. The Hellcat staggered violently.

Frantically Jig slammed the throttle forward, booted rudder to keep the Hellcat level, and fought to keep control. He was too busy to even look at his target. Either a rocket had misfired or the Terutsuki had scored a hit!

Slowly the Hellcat picked up speed, the controls became more solid. The engine still purred smoothly. She would still fly! Jig rolled into a turn, spotted his target.

Bow low in the water, the Terutsuki still surged ahead. Smoke rolled from her forward turrets and she listed heavily to port. Poised for a split-second above the scene of battle, Jig took in the entire picture in one sweeping glance. Two oilers lay dead in the water and a third was going down at the stern. The other destroyer, an ancient Fubuki, limped away while three Hellcats angrily strafed her decks. From the corner of his eye, Jig saw a Hellcat plunging toward him, banked sharply to pull in on its wing, and together the two Hellcats dove to deliver the *coup de grace* on the stricken Terutsuki.

The Terutsuki heeled over clumsily and, still fighting, sent up a sheet of flame to meet them. Together the two Hellcats plunged in and, as the range closed, twelve fifties slammed into the destroyer's stern. Jig saw the other Hellcat get it. One second it was ahead of him, the next it cartwheeled in a burst of flame. Cursing, he

sent his guns sweeping down the destroyer deck, saw them tear into the single funnel.

In a terrific mushroom of steam, the boilers let go. A column of steam tossed the speeding Hellicat violently. His heart sick, Jig kicked the Hellicat around, swept back toward the blazing Terutsuki. Her guns were silent now. She was sinking fast. Flame geysered from stern to stern. In a mighty rush of steam, she heeled over and went down like a rock.

Frantically Jig swept around the boiling spot. He saw no welcome dye-marker, not even a trace of the stricken Hellicat. Who had it been. Pierce? Clark? One of his buddies was gone. One had died in a burst of flame. Angrily Jig swung away from the terrible scene, headed for the spot the 'chute had gone in.

THE Helldiver pilot, balanced in his tiny rubber boat, waved gaily as the Hellicat raced toward him over the swells. Seeing he was okay, Jig rocked his wings and stood the Hellicat on its tail.

"Hello Sandy Base, Hello Sandy Base," he called as he climbed in great sweeping turns so his four remaining wingmen could join up. "Hello Sandy Base. This is Seven Brownie. Over."

"Seven Brownie, this is Sandy. Return to Base. Return to Base immediately."

"Roger from Seven Brownie," Jig snapped. "Covering Section William. Three oilers sinking, one transport dead in water, scratch two destroyers. One dive-bomber down. One of my wingmen missing. Over."

"Roger," acknowledged the *Majuro*. "Dispatching rescue plane. Return immediately to Base!"

When they spotted the *Majuro* Jig and his mates learned why the order was so urgent. Smoke welled from the huge deck and the great carrier listed drunkenly. She had been hit—and hit hard. Somehow, from somewhere, a Kamikaze has smashed into her bow.

But the mighty carrier was still under way and, like the gallant fighting lady that she was, the *Majuro* swung into the wind and flashed the signal to come aboard.

Already Jig knew Ted Clark was his missing wingman. Sadly he remembered Clark had a wife, and a new kid. What would he write her; what could he say?

As division leader, that was his job. Clark had been a great buddy, a wonderful pilot . . . one minute he was there, guns blazing, the next he was gone in a blast of flame.

Suddenly Jig realized he felt no tell-tale drag. The gear wasn't going down! Quickly he checked his selector handle . . . still no gear.

"Seven Brownie, Seven Brownie. You need a wheel . . . you need a wheel," the Air Officer called from the smoking *Majuro*. "Take a wave-off until we get the other planes down . . . then we'll take you aboard."

Stunned, Jig put on the power, banked sharply to the left, and deck-high roared past the great carrier. The Terutsuki's hit had blasted his landing gear, probably smashed his flaps! A crash landing loomed ahead.

Both destroyers were pulled in close to the *Majuro* fighting the fire. He couldn't make a water landing, for no destroyer would be free to pick him up. Cursing his luck, Jig swung back down-wind. The other planes were down now and the deck was cleared for him. It would just his luck, after all he'd been through in battle, to knock himself off on this crash landing. A fine way to get it. Not in a roaring sky battle, not over the target, but on the deck of a crippled carrier!

Then he spotted Dingowski, good old Dingowski, beckoning from the fan-tail. With smoke welling around him, Dingowski crouched low on the wind-swept deck and worked Jig around the groove. With one wheel dangling limply and no flaps to slow him down, Jig put everything on Dingowski's coaxing paddles. He forgot airspeed, feel, everything but those paddles. And Dingowski, with the calm confidence of a man who knows he's good, kept the Hellicat just above stalling speed, brought the crippled flapless plane staggering over the fan-tail. Cut!

She dropped like a ton of bricks, hooked the arresting gear squarely. A wing dropped, and the prop slammed into the deck.

THE deck had never felt so good. Weak-kneed, his heart pounding, Jig paused to look for Dingowski. Already the big fellow was crouched low bringing

another plane around the groove. Pivoting, Jig turned and raced for Air Plot. He knew his report was wanted. As he sprinted up the ladder to the bridge, Jig saw firefighters were already bringing flames under control. The *Majuro* was slowly easing back to even keel. She was still a fighting ship!

"Where the hell have you been?" roared Commander Corby. "You were due back an hour ago. You see that hole in the bow? If we'd had a few more fighters upstairs, that Zeke wouldn't have sneaked through!"

Warner was stunned. "Sir, we hit Sector William just as the divebomber boys started their attack and . . ."

"And you had to get in it!" Corby snorted. "You had to bust in there just when we needed every fighter here. You know what we're carrying! You know we must get through! And you—you tie up six badly needed planes and lose one damn good pilot strafing ships I assigned to somebody else. I ought to court martial you! I think I . . ."

"Sir, don't be too hard on Warner," a quiet voice said. "I don't believe one fighter would make any difference—or even six for that matter. That Zeke simply got through our radar. We failed to pick him up in the soup. How he got through I don't know but Warner's boys wouldn't have helped."

Corby's anger was stilled. "I'm sorry, Warner," he told Jig softly. "Guess almost losing the *Majuro* kinda made me blow my top. But you should have been back on schedule." He turned to Davis. "Now, Davis, what's wrong in radar plot. Why the hell wasn't that combat air patrol put on this Kamikaze before he got within ten miles, much less before he slammed into the ship?"

Davis was frankly puzzled. "Sir, we don't know," he said quietly. "We can't figure it out. Only friendly planes were showing on the scopes. Then—blooie! Frankly, in radar plot we thought a torpedo had struck us. Never realized a Jap had sneaked through."

Corby's face was ashen gray. "Davis, the Japs know *what* we're carrying and *where* we're headed. Intelligence has tipped us off on that. They'll do everything they can to stop us. Either we break this

'phantom stuff or they'll get us. Now get the hell down there and find out how that little Son of Heaven got by our radar. If you don't, they'll sink us as sure as hell!"

Davis saluted, turned to descend the ladder. Jig leaped forward, fell in step. "Thanks, Stan," he said gratefully.

"Forget it, Warner," Davis growled. "I didn't do it for you—I wouldn't care if they grounded you so long you forgot you ever had wings. But this thing wasn't your fault. Letting that Jap through was my department. And I'm plenty damn worried."

"I'm grateful anyway," Jig said evenly. "Can I do anything to help on this thing?"

"No thanks," Davis muttered. "I'll work it out if it kills me—with no help from you. Just fly your airplanes and keep your IFF on. I'll sweat this end!"

JIG watched Davis bound down the ladder to radar plot. A sly smile touched his lips. Davis was a regular guy after all. Much as he hated Jig, he wouldn't let him take the rap. That took a real man.

Up on the bow, emergency crews were welding new plates on the flight deck. Sailors jockeyed the flame-scared Zeke carcass to the deck edge and prepared to heave it into the sea. Jig quickened his stride.

"Hold it a minute, men!" he yelled. "Mind if I get a Jap souvenir?"

The sailors stared in amazement. Here they fight like demons to keep the *Majuro* afloat and this character wants souvenirs!

"My orders are to get this thing over the side," the Chief in charge growled.

Warner nodded. "Sure, Chief. But I'd like to take a quick look to see if I can spot a clue on how this Kamikaze got through our radar screen. If we don't find out how he did it, they'll blast us out of the water!"

The still-smoldering cockpit was a mass of charred molten metal. The explosion had literally blown the pilot to bits. Pushing aside twisted wiring and bits of the instrument panel, Jig found the radio panel. He wanted to examine the entire section but, as he pulled, only one corner ripped away in his hand.

Suddenly General Quarters sounded! The carrier was under attack!

"Git that wreckage off the deck!" roared the Chief.

The *Majuro's* guns, pointing straight up, unleashed a hail of shrapnel. Out of the overcast hurtled a round-bellied twin-engined Jap Betty. Warner hurled himself to the deck and, hypnotized, watched the Betty streak toward the carrier.

Just as Jig braced for the impact, a 20 millimeter caught the Betty head-on. She twisted, burst into flame, and missed the *Majuro's* stern by inches. A geyser of flame shot above the deck.

"Ready pilots, man your planes! Stand-by pilots report to ready room on the double!"

Jig leaped to his feet. The charred fragment was still clutched in his hand. He spun, gauged the distance to the edge of the flight deck, drew back his hand to hurl it into the sea. But he paused with hand up-raised. Why throw it away? This was the first bit of a Jap plane he ever had his hands on. True, he had six to his credit, but never had he taken a souvenir. Shrugging, he shoved the charred bit of radio panel in his pocket, turned, and sprinted for the ready room.

"We're doubling the Combat Air Patrol," Commander Corby explained. "It's going to be hard on you, men, but it's our only hope until we find out how these Japs are getting through our radar."

Pilots exchanged knowing glances. Things were going to be tough.

"We're doing everything we can to break this thing," Corby continued. "But we're faced with more bad weather and we're getting close to our rendezvous point. Needless to say, the Japs know where we are and what we're carrying. I'm asking you gentlemen to stop 'em. That's all."

JIG was assigned to the second CAP shift. He had an hour to kill. Why not drop down to radar plot and see how the stuff works? Perhaps it would give him some clue; perhaps something people who knew a lot more about it had overlooked. Davis would probably throw him out, but it was worth a try.

Luckily for Jig, Davis was off duty when he approached radar plot. There, deep in the bowels of the mighty carrier, was located the heart of the ship's radar system. Here the fighter director, with his assist-

ants, directed the combat air patrol. A young Lt. (jg) was on duty.

"Mind if I watch you operate and sorta get the 'word' on how this works?" Jig asked.

"Not at all," smiled the officer, extending his hand. "My names Carney. What can we do for you?"

"Well, I spend all my time upstairs doing what you boys tell me," Jig grinned. "I thought I'd like to see how this end operates."

Carney nodded. "Here are our radar scopes," he pointed; "This is where we can see every plane in a thirty-mile area. Look on this, scope, and you'll see twelve tiny "blips" of light." Jig looked, and saw twelve pin points moving slowly across the scope.

"Those are twelve Hell-cats," Carney explained. "We know they are 'friendlies' because the Iff sets they carry give their 'blips' a special shape. Watching them, I can direct them wherever I wish, and, should I spot a 'bogey', all I have to do is direct my Hellcats to a position that will put them above the 'bogey'."

"And if they still can't see the Jap?"

Carney smiled. "If they can't, I can. So I just talk them right on down until they get on the Jap's tail. Fact is, with a little luck down here, we could put our Hellcats on a 'bogey' and shoot it down without the pilot ever actually seeing the Jap!"

Jig whistled in surprise. Then his tone became serious. "Is there any chance of this radar actually missing a Jap?" he asked. "Could one sneak through without being detected?"

"Now you've got me," Carney muttered. "Actually, I don't see how. Any plane in the air *has* to make a blip. Could be they somehow managed to sneak in behind our planes, using better radar or some new device!"

Jig watched the twelve blips moving across the scope face. The Hellcats were now almost thirty-five miles out and Jig watched as they split up into groups of three. It was time for one group to start back for the carrier and time for Jig to get his three-plane group in the air. Thanking Carney, he turned and raced up the ladder.

Pierce and Jones were waiting in their

planes. Jig raced over his check-off list, kicked the engine over, and checked his engine instruments. The ceiling was right down on the water. Escort destroyers, riding a few hundred yards astern, were hardly visible. Jig wanted that engine to keep running, because he knew he'd be on instruments right after take-off.

"Launch CAP replacement," the bull horn boomed.

QUICKLY Jig raced over his check-off list again as he swung into position. Full flaps, pitch full low, mixture rich, gas on main tank, head and oil temperatures okay. He shoved on power, toed his brakes. The Hellcat trembled. Down flashed the flight deck officer's flag! Jig released his brakes and the Hellcat shot forward.

He banked to clear the deck of propwash, pulled up his wheels, and rolled into a turn that hugged the wave tops. That would give Pierce and Jones a chance to join up before they got in the soup.

"Brownie Seven, Brownie Seven, this is Sandy, over."

Davis was calling him. Jig acknowledged.

"Brownie Seven, This is Sandy. Check your IFF. Then climb heading one-nine-zero to blue altitude."

Watching Pierce and Jones slide into position, Jig dropped a gloved hand to his radio panel, fumbled for the IFF switch. Suddenly his jaw dropped! No, it couldn't be! Frantically he fumbled in his pocket for the charred bit of panel he'd pulled from the Jap Kamikaze.

For a moment he stared in stunned silence. This was it! He had it! The fragment was identical with his IFF switch box. The Jap had been carrying an American IFF set! No wonder radar hadn't spotted them. With IFF, the Japs passed as friendly planes—sneaked in with returning Hellcats and then hurled themselves at the *Majuro* from the low clouds! His heart hammering, Jig jabbed his mike button:

"Sandy from Brownie Seven. Vital information relating safety all concerned. Request you notify..."

"Brownie Seven, cease transmission!" snapped Davis. "You have your orders—get off the air!"

Jig cursed. Get off the air! When he had the very information that would stop

the Kamikazes! He angrily jabbed his mike button a second time: "Sandy, this is Brownie Seven. Advise Skipper Japs are using..."

"Climb to Blue altitude *immediately*" the radio crackled. "Cease all transmitting!"

Angrily Jig shoved the throttle forward and, with Pierce and Jones stuck at his wing-tips, zoomed into the leaden clouds. Thick clouds closed in and rain pounded on the windshield. Jig went on instruments, never glancing right or left and his wingmen, watching only Jig's Hellcat, climbed with him.

They broke out into bright sunlight at 10,000 feet. Clouds stretched for miles like billowy cotton.

"Brownie Seven, Brownie Seven," the radio blared. "Three bogies two thousand feet below you. Following three of our planes toward carrier. Heading is zero two zero. Over."

"Roger from Brownie Seven," Jig snapped. So Davis had finally picked up three Kamikazes. Perhaps the Japs had run out of IFF sets! If they had, his information could wait. Charging his guns, Jig shoved the nose over and, with his wingmen riding close, plunged into the clouds.

At nine thousand, Jig leveled off. His wingmen were two shadows in the driving rain.

"Hold present altitude," Davis called. "Turn to three-sixty!"

JIG obeyed, checking his guns to be sure the master switch was on, charging handles set.

"Bogies breaking away." Davis suddenly called. "They're turning away from the Hellcats they've been following. Brownie Seven, take heading of West. Don't let 'em get away. Range is now two thousand yards."

So the Japs were turning tail! Angrily Jig slammed the Hellcat over to a heading of two-seventy—and then a terrible thought hit him. The Japs were pulling a fast one! That was it, they were pulling a "quarterback sneak!" Three Japs, without IFF sets, were pulling away to draw the air cover, three others, carrying stolen sets, were hurtling toward the *Majuro*.

"Sandy from Brownie Seven," Jig yelled. "Three Japs using our..."

"Range is now one thousand yards,"

Davis snapped. "Get off the air, Warner!"

Jig groaned. Somewhere below, in the driving rain, three Japs would just be passing, headed for the *Majuro*. He was helpless to stop them. Even if he broke away from the formation, he could never find the Japs in blinding rain. While he and his two wingmen flew the wrong way, after the three decoys, three Kamikazes, loaded with death, would drop from the low clouds and smash the *Majuro*. And if the *Majuro* went down, a lot of men who shouldn't have to die would get theirs off Okinawa. Angrily Jig reached for his microphone; he'd try Davis one more time.

Even as he gripped the mike, Jig let it drop. He would gamble everything on one mad chance. He reached for the mixture control; snapped it back to idle cut-off. The Hellcat coughed once and quit cold. Jig slammed the stick forward to keep his airspeed and dropped like a rock from the formation.

Pierce, riding on Jig Warner's wing, felt his heart stop when Jig's engine quit. As Warner dropped away in the driving rain, Pierce grabbed his mike: "Hello Sandy from Brownie Six. Warner's in trouble. Engine's cutting out. Going down eight miles southwest your position. Over."

"Roger," Davis called from the carrier, "Hello Warner, Hello Warner! Give me a call!"

Warner eased the mixture control forward slowly, flipped on his booster pump. The Pratt & Whitney caught with a roar. Warner, a grin on his lips, answered Davis' frantic call: "Roger, Sandy. This is Brownie Seven."

"Are you getting any power?" Davis yelled.

"Getting some power," Jig called. "Give me a heading to take me back to the carrier."

"Roger," Davis radioed, "Three friendly planes passing your position. If you have power, follow them. Heading is nine-zero. They're a thousand feet below you. Over."

"Wilco," shouted Jig, slamming the stick forward. The Hellcat, its engine wide open, hurtled downward. Jig's fingers tensed on the stick, his thumb crept to the fire button, caressed it patiently. Switches were on, his fifties were ready to fire.

"Brownie Seven, how're you doing?" Davis called.

"Not so good," Jig called, straining his eyes to see through sheets of rain. "Still getting power, but I see no 'friendlies'. You sure they're up here?"

Davis' voice was sarcastic. "Just don't accidentally trip your guns, Warner," he called mockingly. "If you did, you'd blow 'em out of the sky!"

THROUGH swirling rain, Jig suddenly saw three speeding shapes, recognized the tell-tale lines of three long-nosed Bakas, Jap jet-propelled Kamikazes.

"Roger!" Jig shouted, his heart hammering, "Have your *friendlies* in sight—in fact, *dead* in my sights. Now listen closely. . . ." His thumb closed on the fire-button, six fifties roared, and a hail of lead slammed into the tail-end Baka.

The Baka simply blew up. With one brilliant burst of flame, her warhead let go and Jig, twisting to miss flying debris, gave the Hellcat everything she had to close on the other two Japs.

"Warner, what the hell are you doing?" yelled Davis frantically. "You shot down one of your own men!"

"He's got no business in a Baka Bomb!" chuckled Jig. "You can splash one Baka, Davis," and even as he said it the two remaining Japs were lost in a deluge of rain.

It was now or never. "Stan, listen to me," Jig called frantically. "These 'friendly' planes of yours are Japs! *Japs* using our IFF equipment, correct frequency and everything! Stan, for heavens sake put me on 'em!"

And Davis, his voice suddenly warm and eager, was talking; talking calmly and distinctly: "Hold your altitude, Jig. . . turn to zero nine five. . . hold it. . . hold it. . . Now back to zero nine zero. . . you're on their tail. . . range is one thousand yards. . . give her water injection if she'll take it. . ."

His heart racing, Jig slammed the throttle against the stop, flipped the water injection switch. The Hellcat leaped ahead with blistering speed.

Davis was talking rapidly now, excitedly: "Turn to eight-five. . . hold it. . . back to nine zero. . . range is 500 yards. . . get ready, Jig. . . get ready. . ."

"Tallyho!" yelled Jig as two speeding shadows appeared directly ahead in the driving rain. Slamming his rudder, he

kicked the nose over, bracketed a Baka dead in his sight, pressed his firebutton.

The Baka staggered. Tracers ripped into her wing, crept toward the engine. Jaws clenched, Jig grimly hosed that Baka with everything he had. A wing let go, ripped like paper from the smoking fuselage, and the Jap dropped in a wild spin.

"Splash two!" Jig roared.

"Good boy!" shouted Davis, "Get that other one, Get him, Jig! You're getting close to the carrier. . . we'll have to blast him if you don't. . . get him Jig!"

"Closing the range," Jig called crisply, "if I don't get him, let us both have it, Stan." Nothing happened! His guns were jammed!

Frantically he re-charged, hit the fire button. Again nothing happened.

JIG could see the back of the Jap's head bent in concentration. Crammed with 2000 pounds of T.N.T., the Baka would blow the Yank carrier out of the water. It would be a glorious death, the Jap pilot was thinking. But he hadn't reckoned on Jig Warner.

Straining to get more speed out of the Hellcat, Warner crept closer and closer to the racing Jap. As he gradually closed the distance, Warner suddenly saw a break in the heavy clouds. Almost directly below was the *Majuro's* broad flight deck.

The Jap saw it too. Rolling, he threw the Baka into a vertical dive and hurtled toward the mighty carrier. Jig rolled with him, slammed the stick forward, felt the seat drop out from under him as the Hellcat closed on the Jap. Every gun on the carrier was firing now, and explosions bucketed the two speeding planes. On they dove, miraculously unscathed.

Swiftly the Hellcat closed on the plummeting Jap. Hard right rudder skidded the bright arc of the prop over and under the Jap's belly. Now! Jig slammed the stick back in his lap. Like a mighty buzz saw the steel propeller literally ripped the Baka's tail from the fuselage. She staggered, spun wildly, and went out of control. Wrestling with his crippled Hellcat, Jig watched the Jap drop like a leaden thing and crash far astern of the great carrier.

The Hellcat shuddered and stalled. In

his excitement, Jig had completely forgotten his plane. Now he saw his prop was crumpled and flailing like a windmill. As the nose dropped with a sickening shudder, Jig slid back his canopy, wrenched loose his safety belt, and hurled himself from the cockpit.

Almost as he cleared the cockpit, Jig yanked the rip chord. A sheet of green sea rushed toward him. He was a scant five hundred feet— if his chute was a slow-opener he was a goner. For one split second it looked like curtains. A hundred feet above the water the chute cracked open, slowed his hurtling body, and swung once before Jig slammed into the sea.

A sleek escort destroyer raced alongside.

"Say, he looks big enough to keep!" shouted the DE's skipper as Jig was pulled aboard. Jig smiled weakly and leaned against a bulkhead to get his breath. He still clutched his rip cord in his clenched fist and his breath came in hard gasps.

"Feel okay?" the skipper asked.

"Sure, I'm all right," Jig gasped.

"Okay, we'll have you back on the *Majuro* in no time," grinned the skipper. At his command, the DE closed on the towering *Majuro*.

"Aho, the bridge!" the skipper called. "Ready to put aboard one web-footed flyin' fool. Respectfully request usual fee!"

"Roger!" Commander Corby's voice boomed. "Lower away, men!"

From the *Majuro's* side descended a five-gallon container of ice cream. "Up you go!" shouted the DE skipper.

As Jig hit the deck, Stan Davis stepped forward, stuck out his hand.

Jig grasped the proffered hand. "Stan, does this mean you're forgiving me for whackin' off your tail at Corpus Christi?"

"Hardly," Stan grinned. "This is for saving my stubborn neck. Any guy who can run his prop through a Jap's tail, with two DE's and a carrier shooting their wad at him— well, that guy can handle an airplane. In fact, that guy was *born* to handle an airplane. I reckon that Corpus Christi deal was a whole lot of Davis and very little Warner— if any!"

"Hear! Hear!" laughed Lt. Commander Adams. "Whatever happened at Corpus, that little collision you guys had saved the old *Majuro's* cookies today!"

BORNEO BOMBSHELL

By DON MIX

Balikpapan! The payoff mission for that veteran Liberator crew. And riding the tail was a Sud Sack new guy who couldn't even operate the turret.

IT WOULD have never happened if McCarty hadn't tried to prove that those Aussies can't match drink for drink with a Brooklyn mick. But any-

how when we arrived back in the squadron after that Sydney rest leave, Mac, who has modestly admitted to being the best damn tail gunner in the Thirteenth



Two Zekes come tearing in. I start shooting.

Air Force, turns up with a hangover of major league proportions.

The flight surgeon trots out some of his weirdest looking pills but after we have been back in the outfit for a week, McCarty is still laying in his sack looking as beat-up as a pair of sox after a trip to the GI laundry.

The hot latrine rumor around the outfit is that our Bomber Command HQ is planning on a strike to Borneo, which seems like a hell of a trip for those flying box-cars we do our work in. I figure that I've been out here too long and flown too many missions to start losing sleep over every rumor that some supply clerk or kitchen commando thinks up. So I don't pay much attention to the stories until one time at noon chow I run into an old buddy who is a clerk for G-2.

I'm chipping teeth with him as we work on bully beef and dehydrated potatoes and I ask him about the item that is number one on the rumor parade.

"What's the word on that Borneo business?"

"Yeh, Borneo's right. Should come off in a couple of days . . . They got the course all plotted and the crews picked."

"So," said I, trying to crowd down the anxiety that was creeping into my voice, "they got it all lined up. Figure my boys will be in on it?"

"I don't want to cause you any worry," this character says to me, "But, Ed, I saw the list and you boys are flying the lead plane in the second element.

"There'll probably be a DFC in it for you guys. Hell," he finishes off with what he probably feels is a finely developed sense of humor, "you guys will be making history—longest B-24 flight on record."

Soon as I go out to the washing line and dip my mess gear in the dubious looking water I head back on the double to our tent to spread the word. Packy, the flight engineer, and Williams, the ball turret gunner, are sitting straddle-legged across one of the cots playing a never-ending game of gin rummy. Mosconi, the nose gunner, and Martin who pulls the other waist gun along with me are both sitting on the edge of their bunks smoking an after-chow cigarette. McCarty is still stretched out on his sack with a

complexion the same shade as a moldy barracks bag.

I bang through the tent flaps, hang my mess kit up on a nail, then pull out my smokes so I can enjoy the effect of my big news to the full.

"Hey, men, I got the inside stuff on that Borneo strike. We're on it and it should come off in a couple of days."

"Good Lord," says Packy. Williams frowns unhappily and the rest of them sit there looking thoughtful and worried. That is, except McCarty. I guess he is feeling too rough to care 'cause he just rolls over on his side and don't make a sound which, believe me, is very unusual for the Mac who tosses language around with the same muzzle velocity as those twin fifties in his tail turret.

We sit there talking about how damned far it is and how many hours it will take and what the gas load will be. Williams says that we should go over to our officers' tent. We grumble about it for a minute but no one makes a move from his sack. We get along swell with our officers but most of us are washed out kaydets and, well . . .

The next morning some eager beaver comes running through the combat crew area shouting, "Got the poop from group," which means that the lineup for the next mission is posted on the Group bulletin board.

Mitchell's crew, Bleaker's crew, Garrison's crew . . . That's us.

A little later in the morning Lt. Garrison, our pilot, and Lt. Barker, the copilot, come down to tell us to be at the briefing tent right after lunch. Garrison who is a slow-moving but fast-thinking piece of Texas gives McCarty a gentle prod with his size eleven GI shoe but the unhappy Hibernian just moans, "Cheez, Lutenant, I feel lousy," and doesn't even look up.

Garrison gives the raised eyebrow to Barker, who is a nervous little guy that looks like a slightly filled-out version of Earl Sande. "Better have the flight surgeon look at this Sydney commando."

This is a bad move because the flight surgeon takes one look at McCarty's hangoveritis and the Mick is grounded. We have to fly the Borneo mission with a substitute tail gunner.

Maybe you figure, what the hell, anybody can press a trigger and one gunner is as good as another. But, brother, that's where you're wrong. When those Zekes start buzzing it takes a damn good man to tell one end of a gun from the other. And the Mac is plenty good. He has one Jap confirmed at Truk and two probables since. Mac is a handy guy to have riding along.

So, after forty missions, it seems like pushing your luck to take on a new guy. A little later we go down to the briefing tent and get a look at our new replacement.

Burnsides is a skinny stringbean sort of a character with an idiotic grin and a mop of yellow hair.

He shuffles up to where our bunch is squatting on the coral floor.

"They tell me that I'm going to be flying with you fellows tomorrow," he sputters with a friendly-dog grin spread all over his unlovely map. Lt. Garrison extends his big, powerful paw.

"Glad to have you with us," Garry says and then waves toward the rest of us. "You know the boys. Sit down and drink words of wisdom from the big wheel at the blackboard."

"Hiyah, fellas," stammers Burnsides and that silly grin gets even broader as he lowers himself to the floor. He tries to be friendly but I guess that we don't make it too easy for him. We're old timers and we resent a new guy, so we just give him the silent treatment as we listen to the operations officer give us the story on the new strike.

Seems like they're sending two groups of about 96 B-24's up after the Jap oil fields at some place called Balikpapan. Now to you fellows who flew in the ETO ninety-six planes probably seems like Three Eye League stuff but out where we're operating it is about the biggest thing that has happened since the PX got beer.

I am only about half-listening to all these goings on because it is just another "Three Rad Lecture" and something we've heard ninety-seven times before. I'm thinking it's hell to catch a stinker like this just when we'd been dreaming of a few more milk runs to the Palau and then—home. Now we're going to Balikpapan,

and with a sad sack new guy riding the tail.

During the rest of the day Burnsides tries to get buddy-buddy with us but we aren't feeling so good so the silent treatment continues. Nobody is very stripe happy in a combat crew but we are all staffs and techs with almost four hundred hours flying time and here this stateside corporal is moving in.

That night we get the word on strike positions, takeoff time and a few other odds and ends. Lt. Garrison says to move Burnsides into our tent so we'll all be together.

When we give Mac the news he grumbles a bit, then finally shuffles out into the night with his musette bag over his shoulder. The rest of us just sit there not saying much. We'd all been together a long time. . . .

"How about some knock rummy?" Williams ventures after a while.

"Sure," says Burnsides but just the sound of his raspy voice queers it for me and I guess that the rest of the guys feel the same way because they just grunt and don't move. Without Mac and his corny wisecracks the joint is plenty dead.

Pretty soon the cigarettes are in the butt cans, the candles are out, the mosquito netting is down around the bunks, and we are all sacked up. But none of us is doing much good in the way of sleep. They say that you get used to this stuff but you don't really. You just develop the habit of not thinking about it. I just lie there doing mental gymnastics and thinking how it would be to be home for Christmas and the next thing I know someone is trying to pull my foot off.

Mosconi, always an eager character, is trying to hustle us over to early chow so we won't have to wait in line with the rest of the guys slated for the strike.

"Wish to hell the guy up in Bomber Command who dreamed up this show had to get up in the middle of the night, too." Packy grumbles. "He'll be having his breakfast just about the time that we're over the target, and his only worry will be if he's got enough sharp pencils to get him through the day."

"Well," says Williams who is a perennial optimist and who was reputed to have said after a couple of cans of issue beer

that the New Guinea climate had 'a wild lush beauty about it,' "you'll be back New York by April polishing your medals and that poor fellow will still have two more years of spam and jungle rot to sweat out. Be happy, man."

Martin, who is just a kid and dreamy enough not to have forty missions knock the illusions out of him, is fondly handling the big service .45 that all combat crewmen carry. "How about it, Burnside?" he says to the newcomer. "You goin' to knock a couple of Nips out of the sky this trip?"

Burnside is fumbling with his equipment and looking awfully worried. He turns around and after a couple of very audible gulps mumbles, "I sure hope I can remember how to operate that Consolidated tail turret."

Well, as you can imagine, that about does it. The guy, besides looking like Sad Sack's stand-in, isn't even sure he knows his equipment! None of us say much after that.

After the spam and hotcakes we go over to the operations tent, pile into trucks and take a ride down to the flight line. We swarm all over the Lib, checking everything, and finally we are ready to go.

The takeoff is strictly a sweat job. We carry an overload of gas for this hop, which is about five hundred miles further than a B-24 is supposed to fly. And if the slide rule guys have made a mistake, it is exceedingly likely that we will plaster ourselves all over the landscape.

We roll down that runway for an awfully long time, and when we finally do get in the air, the big ship starts mushing out. But somehow Garry and Barker manage to keep us aloft.

I don't go for this night stuff, myself. It's too damn dark. But I keep earing my liaison set and flashing position reports for the navigator and I don't have time to think. Packy, the engineer, is sticking around in case the pilot wants him. The rest of the gunners are laid out sleeping.

Those dots and dashes have been beating against my eardrums for approximately three weeks when streaks of light begin to show through the blackness outside. I give myself the old mental hubba hubba because I know we'll be rendezvousing before long.

Lt. Garrison's drawl pours through the intercom. "Better test fire the guns. We join formation in an hour and a half."

Packy shoves his shoulders up into his top turret, hooks the belts into the guns, and cuts loose a short volley that adds a staccatto beat to the base beat of the engines. He winks at me, and I go back to my waist gun position while he moves in at my radio table. As a crew we are a pretty sharp outfit—anyone can move in on the other fellow's job and do it in a pinch.

I ease around the ball turret and fire a few bursts from my flexible fifty. I notice that the ammunition boxes that feed the tail turret are vibrating but the guns are not firing. By the time I get my gun stowed away, the tail turret door opens and out comes Burnside.

"The guns jammed," he yells shrilly. I shove Burnside out of the way not too gently and stick my head into the turret. The trouble is obvious. This mental fly-weight that the fates have wished off on us has gotten the ammunition belt for the right gun into the left gun slide, and vice versa. Naturally, the feeders won't work. I change the belts around, give Burnside a dirty look, and go back to my radio feeling very unhappy indeed.

In a little while we get the word for oxygen and flak suits and no sooner do we get them on than Lt. Garrison calls for combat stations. We're at twenty thousand feet now so I take a portable oxygen bottle with me back to the waist windows. Martin and I just stand there looking out over the formation and listening to the wind whistle in.

This is always the toughest part of any mission—this waiting around before things start happening. All you can do is search the sky for those little black specks, hoping you don't find any, but knowing damn well you will.

Well, it don't take long today. Lt. Barker sees them first. He barely gets out: "Bandits at two . . ." before they are all over the clock. It seems that the Nips really love this Borneo oil.

Two little green Zekes with the meatballs on their wings showing clearly come tearing in on my side and I start shooting. Behind me at the other waist, I can hear Martin throwing stuff, too. I am just get-

ting the range on that first Jap when I hear Martin stop shooting.

I give a quick glance back. He is slumped over on the floor with a very messy looking shoulder. I don't know whether to keep shooting or help him but just about that time somebody slaps a red-hot soldering iron against my leg. The jolt throws me against the gun mount and I hang there, dizzy and weak, feeling the blood run down into my shoe.

Outside, tracers from the tail turret have picked up my Zero and I see them chewing into its wing root. Little flames begin to lick along the fuselage but the Jap keeps coming. Suddenly, when I think he can't miss ramming us, the plane flares up like a piece of wadded cellophane and falls away below.

By this time we are into the flak area. The first black puffs are dotting the sky and the Nip interceptors decide to call an intermission. They pull out just in time for in a few seconds the stuff is really breaking, and, if you hadn't already heard about that walking business, I might mention how thick it is. I am hanging there wondering how any of us are going to get through it alive when the tail turret door opens and out comes Burnsid's.

He gives me a reassuring nod and bends over Martin. He checks the guy's oxygen mask and then goes to work on him with sulfa powder and bandages. He works quickly and calmly—not at all like the Burnsid's goof we knew.

When he finishes with Martin and drags me off the gun mount, I am about ready to admit that this character is the Burma Surgeon in disguise. He slits the leg of my flight suit and starts throwing more sulfa around. By this time, the numbness has worn off and, although I'm trying to be the young Spartan about it, the leg is hurting like hell. He must see it in my face because he whips out a hypo and gives me a shot above the wound. In no time at all, I'm as drowsy and comfortable as though I'd just tossed off a couple of jiggers of stateside brandy.

Things begin to get hazy after that. I remember we rode that flak for a hell of a time, and I remember the Jap fighters hitting us again after we turned off the target. In an academic sort of way I'm worried about all this but actually I'm

just a Joe along for the ride and none of it means much.

Burnsid's has plugged in his head set and throat mike and is hopping back and forth between my station and Martin's, squirting slugs at everything in the air. He must be doing a pretty good job, too, because I don't feel the plane taking many hits.

Eventually we outrun the Zekes and I'm debating whether or not I should go to sleep when the intercom starts crackling. It's Lt. Barker's voice and it sounds fuzzy, as though he's talking through a mouthful of cotton.

"We're both hit—somebody better come up and take over."

My ears are popping and I realize we're losing altitude fast. Burnsid's must have realized it at the same time, for he rips off his headset and hurries forward toward the flight deck.

For awhile nothing more comes from the intercom except a confused jabber from Mosconi's bomb bay, and I am just about to float off into unconsciousness when Burnsid's voice pulls me back from never-never land.

"How is it going back there, Ed?"

Martin is breathing regularly into his oxygen mask and I am so hopped up that I wouldn't know it if I were dead.

"Everything's chicken but the gravy," I answer, "and that's chicken gravy. Think you can get this baby back to Guinea?" A very positive, "We'll get you back," floats into my earphones.

I lie back among the shell cases and think some more about home and Christmas. This keeps me pleasantly relaxed until I suddenly wonder who's going to handle the radio fixes. The answer is me so I start crawling forward. I get only about three feet when Burnsid's shows up again.

He hooks his shoulder under my arm and, by doing a stork act on my good leg, I manage to get to the radio stool.

The "office" is plenty rugged looking. There is a double line of bullet holes stitched across the plexiglass and there's blood all over the place. Garrison is stretched out below the top turret, his face the color of skimmed milk, and Barker is holding a shattered left hand. Packy has taken over the pilot's seat.

While I'm playing around with the sending key, trying to make sense of the dits and dahs, Burnsid's takes over from Packy. He seems to know what he's doing, and, with a little advice from Lt. Barker, soon has us leveled out at eight thousand on a course for home.

It begins to look like we may make it after all. Burnsid's handles the ship easily and I figure that if Barker can stay conscious to tell him what to do, we have a fighting chance. But as the hours drag on the lieutenant gets whiter and whiter. And with the field in sight, he suddenly closes his eyes and slumps in the seat. So there we are. . . .

I tell the control tower what the score is—that a tail gunner and an engineer are bringing us in. The tower comes back cool and impersonal, just as though we pulled this stunt every day.

"Tower to Baron 606 . . . tower to 606. Circle field at fifteen hundred and await instructions. 606, over."

"Tower from 606. Wilco." Burnsid's voice has a high quaver in it but none of us feel like smiling. We fly around chewing our knuckles while they send for the Operations Officer. The new voice is full of confidence. Supposed to soothe us, I guess.

"Tower to 606. Fly due west. When I give you the word, make a three-sixty and start letting down. Acknowledge. Over."

Maybe this confidence stuff is not a bad dodge after all. Anyway Burnsid's voice has lost its quaver when he repeats the instructions. We head west.

"Tower to 606. Make your turn . . . now-w."

Burnsid's lets the left wing down and eases back on the control column to hold her level. Packy is adjusting the throttles and props. Both their faces are beaded

with perspiration and I am about as relaxed as a new Charley horse.

The tower is really talking us in now. "You're doing fine. Let the nose down. Easy now. A little more. Okay—ease back now. Back . . . back . . . back . . ."

There is a banging crunch as the wheels hit the runway. The plane sways crazily for a moment, then rights itself and settles down smoothly. I can smell the brakes smoking as we slow down and finally we stop.

We just sit there, looking at each other. Suddenly Packy lets out a roar, grabs Burnsid's with his big, greasy hands, and hugs him. Burnsid's face gets red and he spreads that silly grin. Together they start cranking open the bomb bay doors.

Several loaded jeeps slide up as they help us out of the plane. Colonel Mills, the group CO, is in one of them.

"Who brought that plane in?" he yells.

My leg is bad but there's nothing wrong with my voice. "Corporal Burnsid's, sir," I yell back. "I flew us all the way from Borneo."

Burnsid's is standing uncertainly under the wing, looking like he might start running any minute. But the colonel goes over and grabs him by the mitt before he can do anything foolish. He looks at the skinny guy a minute. Then he says:

"Damn fine job, Corporal."

And that's about all. After they load us lame ducks into the meat wagon, Burnsid's comes over to me. His right paw is waving in front of him and his eyes look embarrassed.

"Hope they patch you guys up in a hurry," he says. "I'll be around to see you."

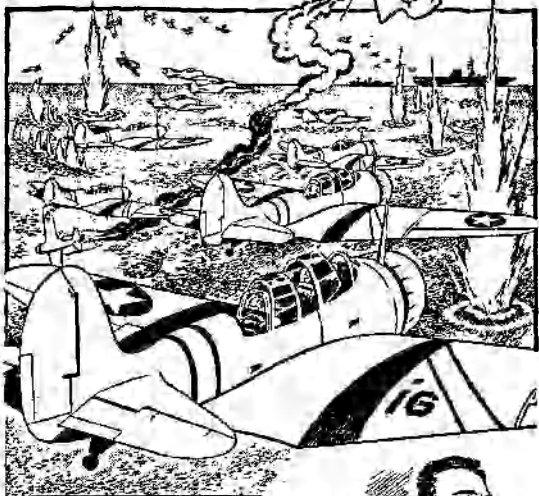
"Swell," I say, "and when you do I'm sending for McCarty. I want him to meet the new Best-Damned-Tail-Gunner in the Thirteenth Air Force.



A Fiction House Magazine



**"IF THERE IS ONLY ONE PLANE LEFT
TO MAKE A FINAL RUN-IN, I WANT THAT
MAN TO GO IN AND GET A HIT!"**



**WITH THESE EPIC WORDS--
LT. CMDR. JOHN C. WALDRON
ORDERED HIS HEROIC TORPEDO
SQUADRON EIGHT INTO THE AIR
AGAINST THEIR FIRST WAR TARGET,
A JAPANESE CARRIER FORCE AT
THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY...
SIGHTING THE JAP FLEET--THE
GALLANT LITTLE GROUP OF 15
DOUGLAS DEVASTATORS FLY INTO
A HEAVY CURTAIN OF ANTI-AIR-
CRAFT FIRE AND ATTACKING
ZEROS... ONE BY ONE, 14 OF
THE TORPEDO PLANES ARE SHOT
DOWN UNTIL ONLY ENSIGN
GEORGE H. GAY IS LEFT--HIS
GUNNER DEAD BEHIND HIM...**

ENSIGN GAY
... THE SOLE
SURVIVOR ...



**... AND SO GEORGE GAY, CARRYING OUT
HIS COMMANDING OFFICER'S ORDERS --
SPEEDS TOWARD THE TARGET-- LETS GO
HIS TORPEDO --AND THEN IS HIMSELF
PROMPTLY SHOT DOWN... HE SOMEHOW
KEEPS HIMSELF AFLOAT FOR 28 HOURS
THOUGH BADLY WOUNDED-- HIS ARM
AND HAND TORN-- HIS LEG BADLY
BURNED --AND ALL THIS TIME JAP
SHIPS ARE ALL AROUND HIM... HE
IS FINALLY RESCUED BY A PBY !!**

SIGHTED SUB SANK SAME

WALTER
GALL

EVERY WAR IN HISTORY HAS PRODUCED SOME SORT OF UNFORGETTABLE UTTERANCE--THE LAST GREAT WAR WAS NO EXCEPTION--ONE OF ITS MOST FAMOUS BATTLE MESSAGES WAS DONALD MASON'S LACONIC "SIGHTED SUB SANK SAME."



© IN JANUARY P. FRET, MASON AND HIS CREW WERE FLYING OUT OVER THE FOGGY ATLANTIC ON SUBMARINE PATROL WITH ORDERS TO SIGHT AND PICK UP AN AMERICAN CONVOY... AFTER FLYING AROUND FOR SOME TIME, WITHOUT HAVING SIGHTED THE CONVOY, MASON DECIDES TO HEAD BACK TO HIS BASE WHEN, SUDDENLY, THE PERISCOPE OF A SUBMARINE IS SIGHTED!! THE FOUR MAN CREW SNAPS INTO ACTION! MASON BRINGS HIS NAVY BOMBER DOWN LOW AND LINING IT UP WITH THE U-BOAT'S COURSE--HE STARTS HIS BOMBING RUN...

THE DEPTH BOMBS ACCURATELY FIND THEIR TARGET-- AND THE SUBMARINE IS DESTROYED... THEN HE RADIOS BACK HIS NOW FAMOUS MESSAGE... FOR THIS ACCOMPLISHMENT MASON AND HIS CREW ARE PROMOTED... THE PLUCKY PILOT HIMSELF WINNING A DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS AND THE SILVER STAR! ON MARCH 8, OF THE SAME YEAR-- HE REPEATS HIS FEAT, BECOMING THE FIRST AMERICAN TO SINK TWO SUBS FROM THE AIR! HE SENDS BACK THE SAME MESSAGE-- "SIGHTED SUB SANK SAME!"

Wings Across the Rhine

By STEUART M. EMERY

Yank armor and Thunderbolts cracked the Rhine at Brammer Bridge. Ahead lay the Berlin autobahn and quick victory. But Von Kagel, the Red Shark of Germany, had one last devil's ace up his sleeve.

FIVE miles to the Rhine! American armor ripped and plunged through the reeling rearguard of the Wehrmacht. The bayonets and machine guns of the grim, gaunt infantry followed close behind. And out in front, sweeping in stark, low-level attacks drove the Lightnings and the Thunderbolts. Five miles to go to the great waterway that formed the final barrier of Fortress Germania, behind which the once mighty panzers and the outfought army in gray-green waited to deal their furious destruction.

The Rhine would be reached and then what? The question kept on hammering inside Greg Blair's head as he opened the throttle of his racing Thunderbolt wider and took it, roaring, for the sweep of historic river ahead. His steely-blue eyes narrowed in his combat-taut face. His trained young muscles tensed for what was to come. He was a hard and cool fighting man in a machine that he handled as though it were a part of him.

The Rhine! Back home it was just photographs and pictures in travel books, a line that ran across a map in the geographies, a background for grand opera, the source of innumerable legends and stories. Now it seemed to come rushing toward him as he leveled off. Where the gray-walled, shot-up town edged the near bank it was the line of a front that had been pushed backward all the way from the Normandy beachheads clear into the enemy's homeland.

"The Rhine is more than just a river blocking us off from Germany." The steady, decisive voice of Colonel Dunbar, CO of Greg's squadron, still echoed in Blair's ears. Only thirty minutes ago he had been sitting in the bare-walled Operations Room of the captured German air-drome, fifty miles to the rear with the rest of his flying mates, gathered for their

final briefing before attack. "It is the living symbol of Germany's might and power. Cross the Rhine immediately and Germany will collapse, fail to cross it immediately and a new hope will be born in the shattered German nation. They will fight on and on and the Allied casualties will be terrifically increased before the final victory. Today or tonight sometime, with only five miles to go, the American army will stand on the west bank of the Rhine."

Colonel Dunbar paused. Every line in his drawn, battle-weary face stood out. His moustache was gray; it had not been gray last summer when the squadrons fought it out with the Luftwaffe in French skies.

"Yes, gentlemen, I repeat that the Rhine must be crossed at once. That is the order from Supreme Headquarters of the AEF. The next few hours will see the ultimate test of America at war."

THERE was not a sound in the barren room where the rows of fighting pilots sat on the benches. Not a foot shuffled, not a nervous cough broke out. The men of the Lightnings and the Thunderbolts knew and trusted their colonel; again and again he had led them out in blazing skies.

"You pilots are going out in less than half an hour. You are going to do the best job you have ever done in all your flying careers, no matter what the cost in men and machines."

"Okay, Colonel," sounded a drawing Texas voice from somewhere in the rear and Greg Blair, knotting his fingers, felt that the Texan spoke for all.

"Major Slade, our Intelligence Officer, will explain to you briefly what this is about. That's his business. Major Slade, take over, will you?"

The Intelligence Officer was clean-



In the last split second, the German jerked aside,

shaved with a firm, wedge-shaped jaw and his hair had gone as gray as the colonel's. He stepped to the large scale map tacked on the wall behind the dais, drawing his brier pipe from his mouth.

"It's the bridges, men," he said. "We've got to get Patton's armor across. You know what Patton's armor has done, battering its way clear across France until it got to be a rat race at the end. Also you know what the Germans have been doing all along when it came to a river. They retreat at the last moment and blow the bridges. We have to push the armor and the GI's over on pontoons and that costs a hell of a lot of lives. River crossings for our armor means bridges and bridges only. And here they are across the Rhine." His pipestem touched at one point after another.

"Helm, Rogge, Brammer. Here in front of us is the bridge at Brammer, the biggest and the strongest-built bridge of all, that can take three or even four lines of our armor abreast if we can get that armor onto it. Beyond is the town of Brammer, a stone-walled fortress, and if we can get our troops into it in force we have our foothold inside Fortress Germania. From Brammer the great auto highways run north and south and east to Berlin. You can picture what it would mean to us to get our armor onto those boulevards.

"At the first sign of any German retreat across Brammer bridge we are going to hurl our whole force at it and try to get over before they can blow it. For the last two days as you know the AAF in this sector has been grounded, due to rainy weather and fog." A mutter of disgust corroborated him.

"Now the low ceiling has broken at last we are going out to find out what conditions are at the bridge. Get down, scout low and bring back the vital dope. We don't know what the Germans have been doing for the last forty-eight hours. There's an hour of daylight left yet, you can do a lot in that time. You're off!"

They had taken off, a tense, action-seeking crowd of pilots to whom the two days' inactivity had been hell. Once more Blair rode his Thunderbolt and ahead of him he saw the crest of the hill outside West Brammer. Beyond it ran the broad waters

of the Rhine. And then out of nowhere burst the sleet of gunfire, the flashing wings. Tracer slashed in front of his propeller and ripped through his fuselage, he jerked the stick back instinctively and zoomed to fight for his life.

"Luftwaffe!" he shouted into his radio. "Luftwaffe, squadron! They're out at last!"

AND HOW they were out! The whole upper levels of the air seemed filled with the wings that had the swastika on them. Fifty, sixty, eighty, enemy crates had come rushing from behind the Rhine to cut off the Yank squadrons racing for the river. There was no scouting from the air, no reconnaissance any more; it was a brutal and ruthless dogfight into which Blair and his team-mates had plunged.

Into his ringsight flashed a German plane, rocketing at a terrific pace from the side and he let his guns go. Their burst tore into the squat, strange fuselage on which an anchor was painted. This was no Messerschmitt, no Focke-Wulf such as the AAF was accustomed to meet, it was a totally strange type of crate and he realized now that all these attacking craft were of the same peculiar pattern.

"What has the Luftwaffe dug up?" he muttered and wrenched his Thunderbolt out of a blast of gunfire. All over the skies the Thunderbolts and the Lightnings were shooting it out against the strange planes. Slamming his bursts at every pair of enemy wings he saw, split-airing out of sleet metal, Blair fought and flew on. Before his raging fifty-caliber barrels an anchor-painted crate blew up and from it pitched the pilot, grabbing at his parachute ring.

The canopy blossomed and he drifted to earth, a strange figure in a double-breasted brass-buttoned uniform and a black turtle-neck sweater. Blair gasped.

"I remember now! I've seen those planes in the identification course. On charts on the wall. They're German carrier planes—Navy crates! And that pilot who hit the silk was wearing a German naval uniform. Good crapes, have they turned out the German Navy to defend the Rhine?"

Once more smoking tracer sliced at the rear of his crate and he dug out of it.

These might be German naval aviators but they could fly and fight. They were as hellish savages over the ribbon of the Rhine as they were over the sea. Half a dozen of the blue-clad pilots were drifting earthward under their chutes but there were Yanks going down with their parachutes also. Flaming wreckage dropped from the skies, Thunderbolts and enemy crates alike, that had blasted it out together.

Blair's head came up suddenly. In all the riot of battle, the maelstrom of winged destruction that rode the heights, he had not forgotten one thing—his mission. Here now was his chance. Straight ahead the air was clear for a flashing minute and in the distance he could see the bridge across the Rhine.

"Keep 'em up and fighting, boys!" he called grimly into his mike. "I'm going for the bridge! Do you get me? Do you get . . ."

A blast of metal cut him off and he stared at the ruins of his radio outlet, shot clean away. He was off, jamming on the supercharger and tearing for the crest of the hill once more in a violent power drive. No enemy wings barred his way, no enemy gunfire for the moment burst in his face. He went down and lifted, and the white, startled faces of German machine gunners stared up from their pits. They had no time to fire, no time to cut him down.

Thrusting his stick forward as he crossed the rise Blair tore for the bridge along a narrow street, his fuselage almost brushing the roofs. A shout broke from him. The street was empty, it stretched vacant all the way to the river. But down by the river the columns of traffic boiled—infantry, machine gunners, mortar men, artillery tractors—all pushing and piling for the entrance to the bridge. From one end to the other the long bridge itself was a solid mass of retreating Germans.

"They're pulling out!" he gasped. "They're pulling clear back to the other side of the Rhine!"

II

THE Thunderbolt levelled off and Blair hurled it for the span. He saw the castellated towers that marked its near

end and its far end. He saw the dense-packed mass of the German retreat reaching to where the stone walls of the main tower of Brammer bulked on the east side of the river. Then he saw nothing but the twin blasts of flame that burst in front of him and the deadly German crate that rushed at him on his own level, pouring its lead.

His own guns crashed. Jaw set with the cold frenzy of the born air fighter, he met the charge head on. In the last split second the German jerked aside and went past him and from the carrier plane's cockpit there stared the most brutal face Blair had ever seen. This German flew bare-headed and his skull was covered with a close-crop of bright red hair. His square face gleamed bronze-red, everything about him was red. His mouth curved upward in a horrible bow that was like the mouth of a shark. And on the fuselage of his plane as he rocketed past Blair saw the painted insignia of a red shark. The blue-clad figure in the cockpit vanished lightninglike.

Desperately Blair plunged for the bridge and went between the low towers at the near end, while machine guns, swivelling on their tops, spouted lead past him. The Thunderbolt whipped above the heads of the men on the tanks, the tractors, and the hurrying infantrymen. It was flashing, instantaneous work but Blair was photographing the entire scene in his mind. At intervals on the bridge German military police stood with red flags in their hands, waving the traffic away from its edges. He could see the gleam of the wires that ran along the fringe of the bridge and disappeared overside, extending down the arches to where the water ran darkly.

"Mined!" he panted. "Those are the mines that will blow the arches to hell and drop the whole bridge into the river the second they pull the switch!"

On he hurtled over the heads of the Germans in the tanks and motor-propelled artillery as they pulled out over the span. More gunfire slashed into his face from the twin bridge towers at the eastern end of Brammer Bridge and then he was tearing over the roofs of the main town. It was a fortress, bristling with road blocks and anti-tank positions, with machine gun snouts jutting from the windows of stone-

walled buildings. But it was a disorganized fortress.

Through its streets rolled the mass of the German retreat, utterly out of order. Heedless of the metal that tore at him, Blair banked, bringing the nose of his Thunderbolt out pointed for home. Fifty miles away lay his drome, once on that drome and in seconds the information he carried would go out over the air waves to the commander of the American armor that even now would be grinding for Brammer.

"Brammer can be taken," the thought pounded in Blair's head. "Brammer can be taken if only the armor can surprise the bridge."

He and he alone knew what the situation actually was. He jammed on his supercharger and the Thunderbolt leaped like a horse given the spur. His glance, lifting, caught the peril that dove at him from the heights. He was not going to be able to fly home unobstructed, he was going to have to blow his way home. Two German naval crates were pouncing one after the other on him; their pilots had spotted him casing the bridge at treetop level and they knew what that meant.

THE first burst of tracer whipped under him as he jumped the Thunderbolt, slammed it back and pressed his own fire-button. Out from his wings volleyed his terrific firepower and the crate before him disintegrated. He mauled the controls again and the second German missed him by inches only.

"Squadron! Squadron!" he shouted into his radio. "This way! Fight me home, I've got the dope on Brammer Bridge!"

There was no answer; he had forgotten that his radio had been shot away. Frenziedly he stung the Thunderbolt around. Across his ringsight dove the second German crate and he gave it a blast that blew its tail assembly into ruin. His trigger clicked emptily. Shot out! All his ammo gone! Helpless in enemy skies above the Rhine!

Again the river seemed to leap to meet him and he roared over it. He lifted for the hilltop beyond the town where a line of smoke and flame ran and then he was over it and plunging at terrific pace for home. One more battle picture etched it-

self on his sub-conscious mind, the grim squat shapes of the hundreds of tanks that were shouldering up and out of the cover of a ravine and making for the hill that was the Brammer front.

Tracer sprayed past his wings as it had been spraying for seconds past, seeking him out to bring him down in flaming ruin. He swivelled his head and looked behind. A single crate rode his rudder and it was gaining on him.

"Can't turn, can't fight!" he panted and dodged.

The crate came on remorselessly and he knew who was hurling it along even before the head and shoulders of its pilot came into view above the spitting guns. It was the German in the naval uniform who flew with the crimson shark emblazoned on his fuselage. The man's face writhed with fury as his guns sought out Blair, driven into a mad, zig-zagging and now hopeless flight. He was savagery incarnate, riding a heavily-gunned plane that stormed furiously upon its unarmed target.

Blair gasped and the cold sweat ran down off his face. His stomach knotted with the knowledge that he was done for. Dodge as he would he could not escape the deadly sleet of metal that tore on him from the rear. Desperately his glance searched the skies and he saw Yank wings there, streaming back from the Rhine. But they were the wings of fellow pilots who like himself had shot away their ammo and ridden out their fuel and were coming home for more.

Closer leaped the pursuing crate that bore the red shark and now it was not a hundred yards behind him, flattening for the death burst. And then the vicious black burst of anti-aircraft fire broke squarely in front of Blair and he jumped his crate. An incredulous shout burst from him. "The field! The field! I'm on it!"

Not two miles ahead loomed the drome. That was its anti-aircraft defenses opening up at the pair of crates, their identity indistinguishable as yet, that were hurtling for it at attack altitude.

In that instant he flung his hand to the landing release gear and shoved his wheels down. In a flashing motion he hurled the Thunderbolt onto its back, tearing straight for the field with his head hanging down

in the cockpit. No German would attack that way.

THE A.A. fire lifted expertly and focused back of Blair's streaking crate. It flung a screen of protective fire between him and his pursuer. The plane with the red shark dodged wildly and its gunfire fell away. Blair wrenched his Thunderbolt back onto an even keel.

He put his wheels down and rolled straight for the battery where hands already were waving in his Thunderbolt. Here and there on the drome stood returned crates with the fuel and ammo crews rushing to stock them up and pilots stood beside them, drawing precious lungfuls of cigarette smoke in the scant minutes before they would storm back into battle.

The field ambulance with the big red cross painted on it stopped at one plane and Blair saw the limp figure that was lifted out of the cockpit and onto the stretcher. As he braked to a halt near the sand-bagged battery the ambulance passed him and he could see that all of its tiers of stretchers were filled. Here were the pilots who had made it home, sorely hurt but still alive and now safely out of the war for a while.

Blair flung himself out of the Thunderbolt and thunder dinned in his ears. Frantically he flung himself to the ground. Hurling in, not thirty feet above the earth, came the red shark plane that had been smashed off his tail. Ruthless to the end the Nazi was following him. The machine guns of the anti-aircraft battery, lowered instantly, spat flame but the German jumped the tracer. His bursts drove into the turf not three yards from Blair, hurling clods into the air.

Gunfire crashed at him and rifle lead but it was scattered and spotty. On these newly-captured advance dromes within striking distance of the Rhine there had been no time to set up heavy ground defenses. With the Luftwaffe in hiding, the anti-aircraft guns were needed elsewhere on the breaking front. Not a Yank pilot was up, and for minutes this savage German would have a free hand to deal out destruction.

He dealt it. Roaring past over Blair's head he flattened even lower and from a

range of twenty yards, driving onto the open rear of the burdened Red Cross ambulance he launched his full gunfire straight into its interior where the wounded men lay. In terrible, shattering blasts the metal struck and tore. The crashing explosion of a cannon shell burst inside the ambulance. The ambulance itself erupted into flame and wreckage. There was nothing left of it or of its human load.

Rage such as he had never known gripped Blair. He stood with his fists clenched until his knuckles went white staring at the winged shape that soared up from its mission of destruction, and drove for a fleecy bank of clouds that stretched half way to the Rhine. He was watching the most cold-blooded German murderer he had ever seen make his clean getaway with not a Yank plane in position to knock him down.

Toward Blair at top speed bounced a jeep with a Headquarters orderly sitting beside the driver. It stopped with a screech of brakes and the orderly beckoned.

"Operations at once, Lieutenant. The CO is calling for reports on the situation at the bridge."

BLAIR gazed into the upper skies where a dot was being swallowed in the bank of clouds. The pilot of the red shark plane had his cover for a sure escape into Fortress Germania. He shrugged hopelessly, and stepped into the jeep. At the main building, he stepped out and pushed into Operations Room. Colonel Dunbar stared at him with the strain even deeper on his face.

"The bridge, Blair!" he shot out. "Can you tell me anything of it? Not a pilot who has come back so far was able to get down and scout it. They were all caught and held in that fight upstairs, and we have just had word that the bridges at Helm and Rogge have been blown. That leaves the Brammer Bridge the only one standing."

"You can take the Brammer Bridge." There was a hard edge to Blair's voice. "I was down not thirty feet over it. The Germans have pulled everything but a thin line of rearguard out of the west bank of Brammer and have piled it across the Rhine in a disorderly retreat. We can take the Brammer Bridge, all right, but it will

go sky-high the instant our armor gets its tracks on it. It's wired for hell's own explosion. If we could beat the Germans to the turn . . ."

"By gad, we'll try. Captain Morse!" The officer leaped forward instantly. Radio the tank commander there's nothing ahead of him but a screen of German rear-guard. If he crashes it, the way to the bridge is clear. If he can get over the bridge we're across the Rhine onto the tail of a disorganized German army. Right, Blair?"

"Right," said Blair quietly. Here was a CO who thought and acted like lightning. "But it's wired. The bridge is wired."

"We'll have to take the chance," bit out Colonel Dunbar. His jaw set as hard as granite. "No doubt it will be the same old story, everything going up in our faces. But we'll have to run the risk. This is the kind of a war where a hundred thousand lives can hang on a single minute. We got one break when you got back, Blair, perhaps we'll have another. The boys tell me you met naval planes above the Rhine. There certainly is no telling what the Luftwaffe will pull out of the bottom of the barrel."

"There certainly isn't," gritted Blair. "They pulled out one killer who flies in a plane with the insignia of a red shark and who looks like a red shark himself. That's the pilot who chased me back here and murdered our men in the ambulance."

"Von Kagel! Conrad von Kagel! Is that devil in human form on the Rhine?" The question burst from Major Slade, the Intelligence Officer, his face working excitedly. "A Naval officer with flaming red hair and face and a cruel bow of a mouth?"

"That's the one," rapped Blair. "You saw what he did to that ambulance after he missed me."

"A typical trick of von Kagel's," said Major Slade grimly. "Slaughtering the survivors. I know all about that merchant of death. 'Shoot the Survivors' Kagel, without a doubt, known also as the Red Shark when he was in the U-boat service at the start of the war. He was no better than a murdering pirate on the high seas and now it seems he's a murdering pirate in the air."

"From the U-boat service to the Luftwaffe?" said Colonel Dunbar curiously. "That's rather a startling switch, isn't it?"

"Not when you know the construction of the German High Command. Half their top-ranking officers are trained in the various branches of the service. Von Kagel went in for civilian sports flying and qualified as an expert. He's due for the gallows as a war criminal when we win this ruckus. He's one of the top ten on the British list. And for that murder he pulled on our men in the ambulance he's on our list now."

BACK into the room rushed Captain Morse from the Communications. "I got the tank general. He's going to throw everything he's got straight at the west bank of the Rhine at Brammer. He's flashing the word up and down the river now to all American armor within reach to go for the Brammer Bridge. If it stays up . . ."

He left the remark unfinished. The same expression was on the face of every officer who had crowded into the room. For a bare instant hope flickered and then it settled into a deadly, grim gloom.

"They'll blow it the second the first doughboy sets his foot on the bridge," said a voice. "Or the first armor puts a wheel on it."

Into Blair's mind wild inspiration sprang.

"The wires are bare," he said. "They're in plain view. A single man with a wire-cutter could cut them. The Germans can see and shoot down any doughboys, any armor getting onto the bridge but if it was done fast enough one man could get through. One man with wire-cutters in a plane, landing at top speed on the smooth bridge roadway and braking right on top of the wires. Colonel Dunbar!"

A sudden flash of hope illuminated the colonel's worn face. "Blair, you've got something! It's the element of surprise that turns trick after trick in this war. One man with wire-cutters? I'll send flyer after flyer in there as fast as they land back here."

Blair's glance went out of the open window. There was no flash of returning wings in the skies, no din of homecoming motors. The drome stretched bare, the

pilots who had returned to rearm had gone back into the fight.

"You've got one flyer on this field," he grated. "That's me. How about it, Colonel? Send the others when as and if they come in in time."

"You're on. Get to your plane! Wire-cutters, someone!"

Blair tore for the door where the jeep still waited and plunged into it beside the driver. Far off down the drome stood his crate with the ground crew swarming over it.

"Get to that crate!" he rapped at the driver. "Step on everything you've got!"

The driver grinned and stepped on it. Rushing, the jeep went over the field and pulled up beside the Thunderbolt. A capable-looking sergeant saluted.

"Fuelled and ammunitioned, Lieutenant Blair. But we haven't fixed the shot-out radio."

"Never mind the radio," Blair hurled himself into the cockpit. "I'm taking off in this pronto, as is."

His jaw was set and his eyes flamed. Wildly driving a staff car Major Slade was rocketing for the plane and pulled up beside it with a scream of brakes.

"Sergeant. Give this to Lieutenant Blair at once." The big wire-cutters passed from hand to hand and the sergeant slipped them into the cockpit. The engine of the Thunderbolt roared into violent life as Blair slammed on the power. "Good luck, Blair. We'll follow you with all we've got!"

The engine's racket drowned out the IO's cry. The Thunderbolt rolled forward, its wheels left the ground and Blair was throwing it through the air for the Rhine in the last of the sunset.

III

A SHOUT of mad exultation broke from him. This was American armor going all out. Tanks, armored cars, motorized artillery, all in a wild race for the only bridge across the Rhine. Up and over the hill that crowned the Brammer bank the mechanized attack had rolled, crushing the last fringes of resistance in its path, inexorably pushing on for the waterway. The crooked streets of West Brammer roiled with the Yank metal, everywhere

there were doughboys with fixed bayonets and machine guns and mortar squads running forward. A vast tide of armor and olive-drab flowed onto the river. But they still had a quarter of a mile to go and the bridge stretched bare and sinisterly empty. Blair gritted his teeth and drove the Thunderbolt over the roofs of the houses.

A last, frenzied fringe of the Wehrmacht, doomed to destruction, held the riverbank, fighting it out to the last. The skies overhead were a mass of smoke and vapor trails where the air battle was still smashing on, still far in the upper altitudes. But ahead of him no wings rode.

He was on top of the bridge and going down onto its empty span. His wheels touched the roadway and the Thunderbolt rolled along. He slammed the brakes and the plane stopped close to an arch. Blair was out of it, panting, gripping the wire-cutters and racing for the gleam of the strands.

A hell of machine gun fire sprayed straight across the span from the eastern bank where the Wehrmacht crouched. Desperately he flung himself face down and it passed above him. Yells, shouts of alarm, curses dinned from the bridge's end and a second fury of bullets tore at him, this time from his rear. He slewed his head.

"The rear guard's after me, too!" From both banks the leaden maelstrom plunged and the thunderous roar of an airplane rose above it's din. Flying low between the bridge towers, came the deadly crate he knew. "Von Kagel, the Red Shark! Guarding the bridge again!"

In panic Blair hugged the stonework, he heard the violent bursts of von Kagel's guns, he felt the stone rip and gouge beside him and then von Kagel, the Red Shark, was over and past him. He was worming forward, body pressed to the bridge, inching the last few bullet-swept yards.

"They'll blow!" the ghastly thought came to him. "They'll blow up any second!"

Every nerve taut, he braced for the crashing exploding that would hurl him into eternity. The blood ran down his chin from his bitten lips, his body reeked with cold sweat but he was on the wire and

had it gripped in the cutters. A savage pressure, a jerk and the strand parted.

"One!" He reached out amid the hell of pouring bullets and the cutter caught the second strand. It parted cleanly. "Two! And by cripes, three strikes and out!"

The last wire broke in half. Dazed, incredulous that he still lived, he lay there on the Brammer Bridge that still stood. But he wasn't going to live much longer. The machine gun fire from the Brammer was lowering, it was hitting the stonework beside him instead of passing over him. Then the far end of the bridge weaved in flame and smoke.

Blair swivelled his head and looked westward. The first squat shape was clanking onto the span; twenty, thirty others were shouldering along the riverside itself and from their turrets flame leaped viciously.

"The tanks, the tanks are in! They're blowing the guts out of the guns on the other side!"

AS THE ejaculation broke from him the machine gun fire blew crazily askew and he leaped to his feet, racing for his crate. Under the covering barrage of the tanks he had his chance. He flung himself onto the Thunderbolt's wing and into the cockpit, hand flashing to throttle. The crate roared into power.

Yelling infantry were racing onto the span, light tractor artillery began to appear. The great Yank tide, dammed back so long by the Rhine, was bursting across it in a single rush of surprise on the Brammer Bridge. The Thunderbolt went racing along the smooth bridge floor, lifted and went up in the steepest zoom that Blair had ever attempted. He flattened out at five thousand feet and looked down. He felt limp from the reaction. Over the bridge the American armor was streaming and it was black from end to end with the figures of the racing infantry.

"If they can take Brammer and hold," he gasped, "it's on to Berlin! We've got our bridgehead!"

Wearily, shaking, he turned the nose of the Thunderbolt for the field. Then every muscle in his bone-tired frame came alive again. His eyes gleamed and he whirled back again for the east bank. Out

there, not half a mile away and two thousand feet below him, flew the plane with the insignia of the Red Shark, headed north up the Rhine and travelling with the speed of a fugitive.

The light was fading fast and he could barely make out the Red Shark. But there he was and Blair's brain surged with fury. His thumb strayed to the fire button and poised there. The German crate leaped forward suddenly going into full speed and streaking up the river.

"Spotted!" snarled Blair. "He spotted me!"

He jammed on the supercharger and thundered in wild pursuit. This time the Nazi killer was not going to stand and fight, he was headed for home in full flight. He had a lead on Blair, but that lead was being eaten up. The Thunderbolt roared on, sliding skilfully for the Red Shark's tail. The bridge at Brammer and the flame and crash of the battle faded out into the shadowy distance. Blair felt himself going cold and hard in implacable decision. One more jump of speed and he would be within range.

His bracketing tracer went out. Frantically the Nazi dodged, lost speed and Blair picked up fifty yards. In a wild maneuver the Nazi slanted off over the Rhine's bank and Blair came after him inexorably. He had him exactly in his ringsight.

"Now!" he grated and his blast took the rear of the fuselage full. It veered and half a wing came off, shredded into debris. "Got him!"

In that instant the Nazi crate whipped over onto its back and a dark figure plummeted into midair from the cockpit. The white of a parachute blossomed in the murk and Blair drove for it. He had the Red Shark cold, drifting helplessly to earth, a dangling figure before his guns. Rearing, the Thunderbolt plunged on top of its easy target and in the ringsight, not one hundred yards away, the Red Shark showed, his face twisting with hatred.

"Killer, here you go!"

And then Blair's thumb dropped from the fire button and he groaned.

"You shot the survivors of ships in cold blood, you shot my pals in the ambulance in cold blood when they were helpless but somehow—somehow—I can't do it!"

BELOW on the carpet stretched the waters of a long bay that ran inland, forest-fringed, from the Rhine. It seemed to reach for miles and the Red Shark was going straight down into it with no life-preserver on. The odds were ten to one that he would drown, tangled in the harness. Blair flattened out and rode easily, not a thousand feet above the bay in the darkening light. He felt a savage exultation, watching the killer drifting down into that wide expanse of water where there was no sign of human life. There was only a single tiny island, covered with underbrush, in all of it and that was a full half mile from where he would hit the water.

"It's all over now," he said quietly as the figure of the Red Shark hit the bay and the chute sank down over it. "All over with—Good crapes!"

The Thunderbolt under him reeled with the force of the explosions that hit it. From the thicket of the island flame sprang in steady bursts. His crate was being torn to pieces by hidden anti-aircraft fire. Lured onto the bay by the Red Shark and with his senses momentarily dulled he was going to his destruction in a lethal trap.

He flung the wreck of his plane out of the gunfire and shoved on the power. Rocking, reeling, the Thunderbolt answered drunkenly. One wing was cracking, the fuselage was a ghastly mess. It couldn't hold together more than a minute longer. And he had no chute. It lay, forgotten in his haste, back at the drome in the jeep.

There was no place to land. Everywhere Blair looked the tangle of the forest stretched in an impenetrable mass. He groaned and set the nose of the riddled crate up the bay, rolling it from side to side as the bursts followed him. Then he plunged it down in a last despairing effort as he saw his wing begin to come apart and with every ounce of his flying skill tried to keep it in the air. Seconds that seemed to be an eternity passed and the belt of trees loomed up before him.

In a welter of spray the wrecked plane struck and he flung back the cockpit hatch and leaped, the breath almost driven from his body. He landed on the wing, raced along it and flung himself into the water

just as it settled under. He was hardly twenty yards from the shore and he made it in a few fast strokes. He hauled himself out of the water and crouched in the thicket, staring out over the bay. A searchlight flashed over the water, hurled from a fast motor boat that split the water at top speed. He watched it travel with its torch flickering here and there over the surface and then it pulled up suddenly. A moment more and it was circling around and speeding back in the direction from which it had come.

It picked up von Kagel. "The filthy killer is safe," rasped Blair. The motorboat went rushing on and pulled up at the blur of the island from which the anti-aircraft fire had blasted. It was a miniature island, not more than seventy-five yards each way and Blair puzzled for an instant. "Why didn't they land him ashore? What's an A.A. battery and a motorboat doing on a hunk like that? It's no bigger than a swamp hummock."

The questions drifted from his mind. He had another and bigger question to face. He was afoot in a cumbersome flying suit in which any kind of fast travel was impossible.

From the far distance came the dull, endless roar of battle and he figured he was at least fifteen miles from Brammer. Also at least two miles from the Rhine, every yard of whose bank would be guarded by enemy machine guns. For long minutes he crouched, surveying the bay and then the plan came.

"Out through the bay and into the Rhine," he counselled himself. "Float through in the dark and cross the river. A man hidden by a log could get past through the mouth of the bay where a man on foot couldn't cross the lines."

THERE was no sign of life on the bay, no sound of any alarm or pursuit as the minutes passed. A deep murk hung over the water and Blair rose and stumbled along the shore next the water's edge. It was only minutes before he found what he was looking for amid the fringe of debris washed up by the waves. A long and buoyant log, and near it a hunk of board that would serve for a paddle.

He stripped off his waterlogged, weighty

flying suit and shoved it in among the root of a thicket. He pushed the log into the water, got it out waist deep and straddled it. A faint grin cut his face.

"Off on the canoe trip, Hiawatha. Duck when you pass that island, big chief."

He plunged the board into the water and thrust strongly. The log moved with lightness under him and it rode evenly with branches that jutted out from its sides keeping it from rolling. Through the shadows, plying his improvised paddle, Blair sent his crazy craft and hope rose warm in him. Only the strange island, it seemed, was inhabited and he could swim past it, holding to the log for cover. It would be a matter of time only before he made the Rhine. For a moment he stopped paddling and the log still went on slowly. He could feel the slow current against his legs.

"This isn't a bay," he told himself. "It's really the mouth of some tributary that runs into the Rhine. Heck, the current will take me out into the river. I can sit at ease in my water taxi."

He was halfway to the island, far out in the expanse of water. He turned his paddle in the current and started to swing the log away from the hummock where von Kagel had landed. His head came up abruptly and he turned around, fighting for his balance. From behind him, coming fast, crashed the din of an airplane's motor and he saw the winged shape that slipped over the treetops and headed straight for him, dropping closer to the water every instant. He glimpsed the objects that hung from it, he knew what it was.

"German float plane! Landing on the bay! Landing on me!"

Swiftly he toppled sideways, splashed and clutched the log, keeping his head against it above water. The plane cut its motor and its floats hit the bay, hurling a white wake out to either side. It was right on top of Blair and it was going to pass directly over him. Desperately he trod water with only his head showing. The bulk of the crate swept over him and its floats passed on either side, their wash slamming into his face.

Half-strangled, he fought for breath as the plane passed. Something thin and dark looped after it. The log he clutched leaped

forward as though it had been suddenly seized by some giant hand and he was pulled along with it, fighting to clear the water from his lungs. Dazedly he realized that he as being drawn along with the log straight for the island that loomed now close at hand. He dared not loose his hold to flounder half-drowned with no support to keep him up. Slowly his lungs cleared and he saw the thing that had caught in a branch of the log as it trailed the plane.

"Tie-line with a hook on the end of it. It came loose and uncoiled when the plane hit the water. I've been snatched."

G RIMLY he held to the log and the plane, taxiing, pushed up into the shadowy blur of the island. It came to a stop with its wing not ten feet from the island's rearing side. Blair reached out just in time to release the landing hook. A figure stepped onto the plane's wing, reeled in the line and flung it to someone on the island who hauled away at it. The plane moved in and came to rest.

Overhead, thickets seemed to rise and a net stretched over the water. This was camouflage, this was no real island at all. It was something else. Blair kept down behind his log, watching. Von Kagel's voice came from the island, his figure was darkly limned on its surface.

"Is that you, Admiral Rohde?"

"It is Rohde, von Kagel."

Out of the float plane's cockpit onto the wing stepped a burly individual. Blair had a glimpse of a brutal, bulbous nose and a granite chin; of huge, hunched shoulders and muscular torso that swelled a ribboned naval uniform. This man gave the impression of malignant savagery and a smouldering rage. He was high Nazi from his braided cap to his polished shoes.

"Those accursed Americans have crossed the Brammer Bridge! I want you and I want you fast! They must be destroyed by dawn!"

"I am here, Admiral Rohde," grated the Red Shark. "So we use my plan, devised to serve if all others fail?"

"We do. And if it works the American army will lose half its armor and it will suffer a hundred thousand casualties. Its entire spearhead will be broken. Where can we talk?"

"Down below," said von Kagel.

Admiral Rhode stepped from the wing onto the island over a plank, hastily thrown down, and a second figure in flying kit followed him. Once more a wild hope surged through Blair's mind. There was devilry afoot here, some desperate menace planned against the AEF on the Brammer bridgehead.

He gave a gasp as his vision, accustomed now to the dark, made out the slim steel side of the island, the superstructure that loomed above it, the tower, the deck guns.

Submarines! These were small submarines lashed side by side, riding on the smooth waters of the bay and masked with thickets and camouflage netting. Submarines in the Rhine! What for? How? He kicked the cramps out of his legs, and readied himself for a mad gamble. All he had to do was climb into that empty float plane, and cast off after the Germans had disappeared. Head for home and the bombers would be over in half an hour. He slipped from the log as it drifted within yards of the offside float of the plane and went forward under water, coming up and gripping the float. Now he was hidden under the wing.

"Where can my pilot fuel up?" he heard Rhode inquire. "We just about made it here."

"Yonder," answered von Kagel. "Signal, sailor." The flashes of a blinker began on the submarine's deck and answering gleams broke from the distant, dark shoreline. "Our fuel depot is there in the woods."

"Shove off, pilot," ordered Admiral Rhode. "Be back as fast as possible."

The pilot's flying boots thudded on the wing as he made his way back into the cockpit above Blair. The motor went on, the line cast off, the float that Blair clung to began to move.

"And now we go below," said Rhode curtly, "Lead the way, Colonel von Kagel."

Blair's grip was torn away from the moving float and he went under, holding his breath. He came up, gasping and treading water. There was no one any longer on the deck of the submarine and he saw the loose rope that trailed down over its side into the bay. Noiselessly he swam for it and caught hold, his body

pressing against the steel hull of the U-boat.

IV

HOPELESSLY Blair looked at the diminishing shape of the float-plane, heading for the shore, while his fingers grew numb on the rope. Nowhere could he see the log that he had ridden on. It had drifted off into the dark with the current. He could never even make the Rhine, much less cross with the chill of the water draining his strength. Cramped and paralyzed, he would go down before he had swum any distance. He strained his ears, listening. More footfalls sounded, then died out and silence gripped the bay.

"No one on the deck of this sub," he told himself. "And it's me for it while I still have my strength. The only chance. Here goes."

Gripping the rope he hauled himself upward, hand over hand, swung his body at the top and floundered onto the metal deck. He lay there for long minutes, letting his breath come back, feeling the icy grip of the cold water leaving his limbs. Only yards away the deck of another submarine appeared with a board catwalk running onto it. Side by side with the walks between, a small armada of U-boats, half the size of the average, undersea raider, nested under the camouflage nettings. Slowly he became aware that voices were coming from somewhere under him and that only a few yards away a circle of light was cut in the deck.

"The drinks have been ordered, Admiral." He heard von Kagel speaking. "The steward will bring them from the supply ship which, I am glad to say, carries every luxury."

Blair got to his hands and knees, crawling. It was an escape hatch, open for ventilation, from which the words were coming. Von Kagel and Admiral Rhode must be directly below him in the submarine. He could listen to them, but he was trapped and it could only be minutes before someone came along.

On the decks of the other submarines occasional figures moved, he saw sentries and the tilted barrels of deck guns pointed into the dark sky where gaps showed in

the camouflage. One of those had shot him down. Blair thrust his head over the rim of the hatch and stared down. At a table directly beneath him sat Admiral Rhode and von Kagel and they had a map of the Rhine, pencils and paper before them. Von Kagel was tracing a line down the river with the point of a pencil.

"Here is the bridge at Brammer, admiral. Six arches of stonework hold it up. Those six arches will go in six seconds. After that, every man in the AEF and every piece of its armor that has crossed the Rhine is isolated and doomed."

BLAIR raised his head. He had heard the stumbling steps and the low-muttered curses only yards from him. A man in a white coat and white trousers carrying some kind of a burden was on the catwalk that led to the submarine's deck from the next vessel. It was the steward with the drinks. Into Blair's mind flashed the wildest idea he had ever had. He rose and moved to the head of the catwalk.

"I speak enough German to get by," he told himself while his nerves tensed. "And I understand plenty more. No high Nazi brass ever looks at a servant or remembers him. Who wants the handsome waiter?"

The steward looked at him out of dull eyes set in a stupid face, halfway up the sloping walk. He was about Blair's build. Blair reached out.

"Let me take your tray, *kamerad*," he said. "Or you'll lose it."

The steward loosed his grip on the high-sided sea-going fiddle tray that held bottles and glasses. He scrambled the rest of the way. Blair set the tray down on the deck, his right fist bunching.

"Thank you, *kamerad*. I would have my neck wrung if I dropped my load. You are . . ." The steward's dullish glance flared as he gazed at Blair's dripping figure in its betraying Yank uniform. A sailor's knife flashed into his hand. "Gott, an American! Gott, an . . ."

The yell of alarm died in his throat. Blair launched the terrific uppercut and took the steward full on the point of the jaw. He went down where he stood, out cold. Swiftly Blair turned him over, stripping and pulling, and the white coat and trousers came away.

He climbed into the steward's uniform and lifted the inert body and let it slide overboard into the space between the two submarines. Blair picked up the tray and stood for a long minute, breathing hard. Under his waistband, hidden by his steward's coat, was the comforting steel of his automatic and flyer's knife.

"Here comes the handsome waiter," he murmured grimly and headed for the conning tower. He lifted himself through the hatch, carefully holding the tray, and went down the ladder rungs. His feet hit the steel plating and a voice rasped at him.

"This way, steward. It is about time you arrived. Have you feet of lead?" It was von Kagel, arrogant and domineering.

"I am sorry, Excellenz," panted Blair, hanging his head humbly and moving forward to the table. "The brandy was hard to find."

"French brandy?" inquired Admiral Rhode. "Ah, looted stock, the best! We may be losing now, von Kagel but bei gott when we were on top we took what we wanted!"

"Pour, steward," bit out von Kagel. He did not even glance at the pseudo-servant. "Then stand by for further orders."

BLAIR set the fiddle on an adjoining stand and slopped out two huge drinks. Admiral Rhode's face, Blair could see was mottled with an alcoholic hue. He stepped back, eyeing the scene. Sailors stood here and there in the submarine's interior but it was a stripped interior. Instruments and torpedoes were missing, it seemed to have been dismantled to serve as a floating headquarters. In some compartment a radio crackled off its code. It stopped and the operator stepped through his door and came to the table with a sheet of paper.

"For Admiral Rhode. The latest report from Brammer."

"I gave notice I could be reached here," said Rhode, scanning the written lines. His face grew purple, his bloodshot eyes bulged and his thick lips writhed with rage. "How fast those verdammt Americans travel! Give them the smallest opening and they are through it like water

through a dike. They have pushed two infantry divisions over the bridge with more on the way and they have filled their bridgehead across the Rhine with armor. All the American armor up and down the river is headed for Brammer and the bridge. The officer in charge of the explosives was drunk. Who would ever have dreamed that a fool Yankee flyer would land his plane on the bridge and jump out of it like a monkey with wire-cutters?"

His face suffused even more and he gulped the drink in his hand.

"More cognac, steward!" he roared. "Von Kagel, if the Americans can really get across in force to stay you know what that means. They will plunge forward and take the broad auto highways that lead to the Ruhr and Berlin. The war will be over in three weeks. Von Kagel, we face disaster."

"You are forgetting my plan," rasped von Kagel. "Let the Yankee armor pour across the span all night. Let them fill their bridgehead at Brammer with tanks and tractor artillery and armored cars. When dawn comes I shall send these submarines down the Rhine and they will blast the arches out of the Brammer bridge. Every piece of the American armor and every man of their divisions across the river will be trapped."

"That they will!" roared Admiral Rhode. His face was bestial. "For an instant I was upset, von Kagel. I ignored your plan. Already our heavy artillery is being rushed up to the Brammer sector, already our reserve of panzer divisions has been ordered to take the roads for Brammer from its position in the rear. Within twenty-four hours our armor can launch a counter attack that will pin the Americans inside Brammer while every gun we can bring up will tear them to pieces. We shall make Brammer a caldron of destruction. Radioman!"

"Yes, Excellenz," answered the operator, still standing respectfully by.

RHODE traced a pencil across paper, his brows knotting and a flare in his eyes. "Take this. Dispatch it immediately to the High Command." The operator darted for his compartment.

"That, von Kagel, will bring every

available force that we have on top of the Brammer bridgehead. It is my promise to the High Command that the bridge will be destroyed at dawn and the opportunity given us to annihilate the hard core of the American army and its best storm troops."

He paused and silence fell in the metal chamber. Blair's brain throbbled with sudden emotion. Submarines! submarines in the Rhine! The deadly undersea wolf pack of Germany loosed against the single span that connected the Yank spearhead with its reinforcements and its supplies. This would be worse than Bastogne, worse than Arnhem.

No more armor could get to the spearhead except on pontoon bridges and those would be blown to pieces by the sudden mustering of the German heavy guns. Slowly, inexorably, the isolated Yanks would be pulverized, starved, crushed. The Rhine would stay German, the weight of the great driving offensive would be dissipated. The push to end the war in swift and overwhelming victory would stop. Von Kagel, the Red Shark, had pulled a deadly trick out of his sleeve and it would work.

"Let them come on now," said von Kagel contemptuously. "The more armor and troops they get across by dawn the more their losses. We pulled our own troops out of East Brammer late today with a minimum of casualties. Our last complete organization of fighting planes, the Naval carrier flyers, went in for a screen, as you know. Steward!"

He held out his empty glass without turning around and Blair filled it. His hand was shaking so that the bottleneck clanked against the glass.

"Stupid!" snarled von Kagel swivelling his flaming head and for the first time he stared at Blair. "Who are you? You are not the regular steward."

Suspicion rode his voice and Blair mastered his panic. "No, Excellenz," he said servilely. "I am a substitute. The steward has been taken ill."

Still von Kagel's savage stare held him and then the German shrugged his shoulders. "For an instant you reminded me of someone—who, I cannot remember. However, it is of no importance. Now, Admiral Rhode!"

He began to scratch notes on a sheet. "All that I have to do is to call in the submarine commanders and brief them in detail. They already know the general plan. The course down the Rhine is simple, it is deep and there are no rocks or other obstacles in the river between here and Brammer. It is nothing but a matter of submerging outside the bay and heading straight for the bridge. The arches form stationary targets. This is child's play for U-boat men who have sunk convoys and warships."

Footsteps scraped on the conning tower ladder and thumped to the floor. A man in flyer's kit with his helmet thrust back on his head was advancing to the table. His entire face seemed twisted from the malignant scar that cut slantwise from hair-edge to jaw. His pale blue eyes gleamed avidly as he sighted the tray of drinks in Blair's grip.

"I am fuelled and back, Admiral Rhode," he said, saluting. "Heil, Hitler!"

"Heil, Hitler!" returned Rhode. "That will be all for the present, Leutnant Witte. Await orders and in the meantime refresh yourself."

THE pilot did not even wait for Blair to fix him a drink. He grabbed for the bottle and shot its contents to the top of a glass, flinging the fiery brandy into himself as though it were water. His face, too, bore the drunkard's look. Half the Nazis must be drinking themselves to death these days, Blair thought, drowning their fear and their despair in alcohol.

He remained in a servant's stiff attitude, tray extended to receive back the bottle and glass. But hope filled him. Out there only yards away the plane once more rested.

The brandy bottle was practically empty. He would be sent for another in minutes only, without a doubt. And once on deck within a few steps of the plane he would make it to the cockpit. If he had to he would blow his way through whatever guards were on deck. His hand slid under his steward's jacket and instinctively loosened the Colt held in his waistband. This nest of sea wolves wouldn't last fifteen minutes after the first bombing wave got over.

"S-steward," hiccuped Witte. "Another

drink." The heavy tumbler held out by him slipped from his shaking fingers and hit the floor. "P-pick that up, you!" he stammered.

Blair obediently thrust the tray onto the stand beside him and bent down, reaching for the tumbler that rolled a foot away. Something hard and metallic slipped from under his coat and hit the steel plates with a ringing sound. Von Kagel stared down at it, the pilot's jaw dropped in surprise.

"A Colt. An American army Colt! *Bei Gott*, we have a spy aboard! You are not the steward's substitute! You are . . ." Recollection flashed into the Red Shark's face. His cruel bow of a mouth set in a murderous line. "You are the American I chased back to his field! You are the American who cut the wires at the bridge and pursued me here! Shoot him down! Shoot him, sailors!"

Blair scrambled desperately for his gun but Witte's foot flashed out, kicking it yards down the submarine's floor. His hand went into a clumsy kit searching for a weapon. Unarmed, Rhode and von Kagel glared from their seats at the table. Blair came upright and grabbed the pilot's arm, wrenching him off balance and flinging him into the wall. Then he was tearing for the conning tower ladder while the skeleton crew, too amazed to take in the situation, remained rooted at their posts.

UP THE ladder Blair hauled hand-over-hand, flung himself out over the conning tower's edge and hit the surface deck. A brawny sailor only yards away turned to look at him, his hands still busy winding the float plane's landing line around a ring set in the deck. Blair, plunged at him, a wild figure in white with a knife in his left hand and his right fist bunched.

The sailor straightened up in surprise and Blair's fist took him on the side of the jaw. He staggered and Blair followed through with his body, crashing against the off-balance German and pushing hard. The German slipped on the deck, threshed madly with his arms and went overboard into the water. He came up, bellowing at the top of his lungs. Wild yells of alarm rose from below. Figures began

to appear on the decks of the other submarines.

Blair did not stop to look at them. The wing of the float plane rested not five feet from the hull of the submarine and he made it in one leap, scrambled for balance and tore on. His knife slashing down, severed the landing line that held the plane to the U-boat. He was in the cockpit, shoving on the power. Above him bulked the submarine's hull, he would have to round it and pass across the bows of the array of lashed U-boats. But the waters of the bay were clear.

The already warm engine was thundering into power, he opened the throttle and the floats began to move. The submarine's hull drifted behind him. He was clear. In a swift circle he swung the plane for the entrance of the bay. A wild exhilaration gripped him, mounting as the din of his engine mounted. Another instant and he could lift the plane off the water. He flung a glance at the ranked submarines, a hundred yards off to his left, and saw the two men who crouched over objects in their bows. On the deck of the U-boat he had left the Red Shark stood, shrieking orders.

"Fire! Fire! Spread your pattern in front of him!"

From the bow of every one of the submarines, flame sprang and the sparkling tracer streaked across the water, straight for Blair. It flung a curtain of fire in front of his speeding plane, it pounded and smashed the plume as it ran, it shattered the cockpit glass about him. Desperately he yanked stick and the plane jumped off the water. But he knew it was too late. He was caught in the terrific crossfire of almost a score of machine guns mounted on the bows of the submarines he was crossing.

Under him, behind him, his crate was being splintered. His engine erupted flame and smoke and went dead, the plane dropped back onto the water a riddled wreck. It pushed ahead and stopped, a motionless thing, slashed by unrelenting bursts of metal. One float went down and the crate reeled onto its side. A burst caught the cockpit above Blair and a great sheet of glass, torn away, came crashing onto the top of his head. He

felt himself going out, and the plane going down beneath him.

V

BLAIR stood in the grip of the two sailors, his dazed head clearing from the effects of the blow. He had a hazy recollection of gunfire ceasing, of a motorboat that swept up to the side of the sinking plane and of being hauled roughly aboard it. Now he was back in the hull of the headquarters submarine confronting von Kagel and Rhode, and there was no mercy in the face of either of them. Witte, the pilot, had gone back to the bottle again and was downing another huge drink. He too glared viciously at Blair.

"How did you get here, Yankee?" snarled the Red Shark.

Blair shrugged hopelessly.

"As the steward-spy you have heard every word of our plan," grated the Red Shark. "Because of that you are not going to live very long. As a matter of fact"—his ruthless bow of a mouth became horrible—"I am not in the habit of allowing any American aviators who fall into my hands to live very long. I have disposed of at least twenty since I was put in charge of the Naval flyers."

"I don't doubt it," flashed Blair. He felt a deep and terrible hatred of this inhuman killer rising in him. Their glances locked. "I saw what you did to our five wounded flyers in that ambulance."

"An excellent burst." The gloating look of a sadistic killer dawned in the Red Shark's blazing face. "Shoot the survivors is an excellent maxim. Shoot the prisoners. Then they will not live to fight again another day."

He lifted his head. Men in blue, brass-buttoned uniforms were coming down into the hull through the conning tower. They were of all sizes and builds, but they all had the same drawn, gray look. These were the U-boat commanders, Blair realized, the leaders of the wolf pack, every man of them a brutal undersea killer.

"Ah," said the Red Shark abruptly, "you have reported for the briefing? Very well. Sailors!" His voice rose. "Take this American and lock him up in a forward

compartment. Yankee, I will see you at my leisure when I have finished with these gentlemen. Then I shall tell you exactly how and when you are to die."

The sailors tightened their grasp on Blair's arms and rushed him roughly over the floor to the front of the submarine. He was flung through the entrance to a watertight compartment and its steel door was slammed shut. He heard the bolt dropping and got up from his hands and knees, more bruised and aching than ever. By the light of its single bulb he studied the compartment and realized that his situation was hopeless. It had been completely stripped of every article of furniture or gear. It was nothing but a steel-walled box that had no porthole, no opening of any kind in it except the barred door. There was nothing he could do except wait until they came in to bring him out for his finish.

The voice of von Kagel came from outside in an indistinguishable, distant blur. Blair stretched himself on the hard plates, his head throbbing and his frame bone-weary. A slow drowsiness overcame him and he felt himself drifting off into a sleep of utter exhaustion.

Combat scenes and flaming skies broke into his slumber in quick flashes of nightmare. He twisted on the hard floor and then relaxed.

HE SEEMED to be again in the cockpit of a roaring plane with tracers streaking at him from all directions. It was hitting him hard and cruelly in his ribs. His eyes opened and a gasp of pain broke from him. Standing over him, his face a mask of passion was the Red Shark, and his booted foot was driving into Blair's side.

"Wake up," he snarled.

The two sailors framed in the compartment doorway had their lugers trained on Blair. He got to his feet and stood waiting.

"Outside, Yankee." Blair stepped through the door into a deserted hull. "Tie him hand and foot," grated von Kagel. "Then throw him on that bunk."

Ropes slipped swiftly over Blair's ankles and wrists and were pulled painfully tight in expert sailors' knots. There would be no wriggling out of those. He

was pitched onto a low bunk where he lay, bound and impotent, with the Red Shark looming over him.

"You have been sleeping a long time," said the Red Shark. "It is drawing close to dawn. The rest of the submarines have left, they are well on their way up the Rhine to Braummer."

He paused with a satanic menace underlying his silence. "This one is crippled and, after I leave, will be scuttled. With you in it!"

Blair felt a terrible chill run down his spine. This devilish Red Shark meant every word he said.

"Like a rat in a sinking ship, American. You will see the waters rise to the bunk on which you lie, you will feel them lapping over you, you will fight for breath and strangle with the water pouring into your lungs and you will drown. And then the bay will pour into this U-boat and it will go to the bottom. That is the death that I am meting out to you for what you have done. You do not die in the air like a fighting flyer, you die like a cornered, drowned rodent. How do you like that?"

No speech came from Blair. He was knotting his fists together, fingers interlocked, as he fought to keep his emotions under control. With his hands bound in front of him, yards away from the Red Shark, and his feet lashed so he could not rise and strike the gloating face before him, he could do nothing.

"This is war," rasped the Red Shark. "War as we Germans fight it. A war of extinction. There will be no victors in it, only survivors. And I mean to survive. If the Reich goes down, and perhaps we are in its last days, there still are long-range submarines and planes left. Spain, Portugal, hidden bases in Africa—oh!—there will be plenty of our party survivors left to plan the next war, the one in which we shall not fail."

"You filthy beast!" flashed Blair. "You are not fit to live!"

THE RED SHARK stepped forward. Brutally his fist crashed against Blair's jaw, sending him into a heap as he tried to rise with his lashed limbs.

"That's enough from you. I have every intention of living. I shall be quite alive

and flying safely into the interior of Germany long after you have sunk under the water."

He raised his wrist and glanced at the watch on it.

"It is time for me to be going. I leave behind me nothing but a single plane and a single pilot to see that this submarine goes down."

For an instant the Red Shark's face seemed to hover in a veil of utter savagery before Blair. Then von Kagel turned on his heel, his voice rang high.

"Open the sea cocks! American, I leave you to the waters."

The sailors moved off, out of Blair's sight. He heard the creaking of machinery and a soft, lapping sound began. Straining, he got himself up on his low bunk. The Red Shark was at the foot of the conning tower ladder. "Good-bye, American," he snarled. "You're not the first I have drowned. Add yourself to my list."

He was gone up the ladder and the sailors followed him. The lapping sound became stronger and Blair could see the streams of water that were beginning to roll over the plates of the floor from the opened sea cocks. No tool, no cutting implement of any kind appeared.

Wrenching and tugging until the veins started on his forehead, he tried to loosen the ropes that bound his wrists, then sank back gasping, watching the tide roll in increasing depth. The water swirled past his knees now, covering the bunk. Odds and ends of gear were beginning to float around.

If he rose to his feet he would fall, if he sat where he was, it would be minutes only before he would drown. Now the water pressed against his chest, not six inches from his chin, and more objects eddied around in it. Bobbing, with its neck clear of the flood, an empty cognac bottle was floating past him and hardly a yard behind it the wooden fiddle sailed. A mad thought burst in Blair's brain as he reached out and grabbed the bottle with his bound hands. He turned with the tide pressing on his neck and dashed it against the steel wall. The bottle smashed into fragments and in his hands he held a sharp-edged tool, the broken shards projecting from the neck.

Swiftly he thrust the bottle neck between his submerged knees, gripping tightly. He began to saw his wrist ropes against the keen edge of glass under the



The Thunderbolt fighter-bombers hurtled toward Brammer.

water. The seconds passed like so many eternities, but finally, his hands were free. He drew a long breath, shoved his head under the water and reaching down sawed the bonds about his ankles.

Gasping, he stood erect, chest deep in the water, but free to use his limbs again. Through the tide he stumbled for the conning tower ladder. Under his feet the steel plating was moving, rolling a little. He did not know whether he had seconds or minutes more to get to the ladder before the U-boat went down.

HE REACHED the ladder and went up it hand-over-hand. Overhead a circle of light showed. His head came slowly over the tower's rim. It was almost dawn and the night mists were rolling off the bay in long streamers. Not twenty yards away, half-veiled by the mist, bulked the shape of the float plane whose pilot had been left to check the finish of the U-boat. There was no other sign of life on the water.

A figure crouched in the cockpit seat and suddenly a match flickered. By its light Blair made out the twisted features of the alcoholic Lieutenant Witte lighting a cigarette. Then a flask appeared and the lieutenant tilted it to his lips.

"Ha!" he gurgled, his exclamation carrying clearly across the short space. It was all too evident that he had more than enough liquor to last him through his wait. The bottle came down, empty and he slapped the cork back into it.

He rose and tossed the corked flask out of the other side of the plane. Then he drew a revolver and began firing at it. His shots cracked in staccato succession.

Under Blair the submarine gave a frightful lurch. He glanced down and saw the inky waters rolling almost up to where he stood on the ladder. He swung over the conning tower's rim, hit the deck and dove for the water. He was stroking vigorously for the wing of the plane in the fog ahead. He reached it and hauled himself onto it, scrambling for the side of the open cockpit.

Witte turned around hardly two feet from Blair, crouched on the wing, staring at the U-boat. A bubbling noise rose but Blair did not look behind him. Every

muscle in his body was tense with the preparation of what he meant to do.

"It is going down! It is going down with that *verdammt* American in it. It is . . . Aaaaah!"

The cry of terror stuck in his throat, his eyes seemed to leap from his head. Blair was upright on the wing in a single motion, he had Witte by the throat with both hands and the pistol fell from his grip. Remorselessly Blair pressed with his thumbs on the German's windpipe in the commando grip. Witte's tongue protruded, his face went black and as his body sagged Blair wrenched it out of the cockpit and hurled it into the water.

A rushing noise assailed Blair's ears, a sudden jet of foamy water sprang up before him as slowly the deck of the submarine vanished. The plane shuddered to the vibration of the suction and then there was nothing but the slow ripples spreading out where the craft had been.

The limp body, washing around close to the U-boat where Blair had flung it, went down with the suction and it did not come up again. One more ruthless Nazi was wiped off the list.

Blair shook all over with the relaxation from strain as he slipped in behind the controls and thrust on the power. The mist was shredding fast from the bay as it would be shredding from the Rhine yonder and there were miles between him and the Brammer Bridge. The float answered to the throttle and began to move. It gathered speed and was airborne headed straight.

At the mouth of the bay he came around in a bank, going up for altitude and following the Rhine. His heart leaped in him as he saw far in the distance the spreading arc of flame that was pushing out from Brammer.

THE scene of the battle was a thin, misty veil, torn by fire. Everywhere the carpet of the fog that came with dawn was clearing fast. And somewhere in it lay the U-boats of the Red Shark, by now within easy range of the Brammer Bridge and only waiting for the last of the mist to clear to launch their blasting torpedoes against the arches and bring it down. Blair's hand went to the marked lever and he yanked. The plane's floats

fell off, spinning through the air, and released from their weight the crate rocketed forward.

So fast that it was incredible the shape of the Brammer Bridge appeared. A yell broke from him. In the last shreds of the rapidly burning mist he could see the endless column of armor that trundled across the span, filling it from shore to shore. The American armor from eighty and a hundred miles away had come sweeping down the Rhine in an all-night rush.

He swept on and past the bridge, eyes roving here, there and everywhere in the arch. Then he caught it, the glint of sunlight far above on hostile wings.

And the wings were pouncing, they were driving for him, as he zoomed straight for them.

Lead slammed into his crate, and then he was around with the sun in his back, clear-eyed and cold. The plane of the Red Shark shot toward the Rhine beneath him. On went Blair's supercharger. He tore at terrific speed on the Red Shark's tail, and as the Brammer Bridge swept up to meet him he loosed his blast.

Von Kagel had overshot his target, he had not been able to wrench his crate out of its power dive and Blair's blast took it full half way between rudder and cockpit. The whole crate reeled and began to come apart. It plunged on for the river where now no mist hung, rocketed over the bridge and hit the water in a tremendous geyser of spray.

Blair flattened out. Up from the water near the span, jutted the tiny upright tubes that were the periscopes of the wolf pack. One after the other they came, their wakes like tiny ribbons.

Hoarsely Blair shouted and came around a quarter of a mile away before he could stop. On the wreckage of the Red Shark's plane, a figure poised, tearing off a blue coat.

"He's getting away!" gasped Blair.

A TORPEDO sped straight for an arch. There were a score of periscopes showing now within half a mile of the span. The whole U-boat pack was crowding down for the kill. Wildly Blair

glanced above him and gasped in incredulity. From the west, flying at two thousand feet in a gigantic armada of power, came two hundred Flying Fortresses on their way to the Rhine.

"Forts! Forts!" he called fiercely. "German U-boats in the Rhine attacking the arches of Brammer Bridge!"

Three streaks of white passed the bridge, missing the arches by yards only. But the next torpedoes would not miss. Blair saw one of them, not a hundred yards from the central arch, streaking straight for it. And he saw the figure of von Kagel, hands above his head ready for his dive. The wreckage of his plane was right in the torpedoes' path. It rested there, immovable, as though waiting for the torpedo to strike it.

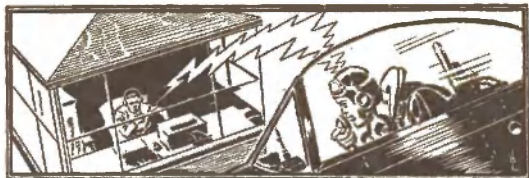
The torpedo struck! In a terrific maelstrom of upflung water the war head exploded against the frame of the waterlogged plane. Flame burst and smoke and the wreckage went up in a shower of splinters, taking along with it the torn body of von Kagel.

Down from the lower levels of the great Fortress armada now squarely over the river, plunged the sticks of explosives as Blair zoomed. The whole surface of the Rhine seemed to leap skyward, the river became an expanse of upward shooting fountains where the masses of bombs struck and blasted. The bow of a submarine, of two, of three, reared up from underwater like the heads of horses and sank back.

Down there under the water the wolf pack U-boats were being torn apart, their hulls crushed by the weight of the explosives from which there was no escape. Down there also the torn and crimson body of the Red Shark was washing around. Blair blinked his tired eyelids.

He rode at five thousand feet, watching the fighter-bombers go in with their loads now that the Forts had passed. Far to the east, well beyond the rim of smoke-hung Brammer, the dots that were the American armor were rushing along the great autobahn that led to Berlin. And still the reserve armor poured across the untouched bridge.

The Yanks were across the Rhine.



TOWER TALKING!

WINGS tower calling all readers!

This is your frequency, gang, and it's definitely two-way . . . in fact, it's *your* way . . . your chance to shoot the breeze, heat your guma, do some hangar-flying— what have you? Do you want to comment on our stories? Okay—comment! Do you want to sound off on some aspect of flying or fighting? Okay—sound off! Do you want to tell us your adventures? Okay— let's have it!

Please acknowledge . . . OVER!

—THE EDITOR

HUH, MR. HARVEY?

Portsmouth, Va.

DEAR EDITOR:

In Tower Talking of your summer issue I read a letter from T/Sgt. Gene Harvey criticizing Naval warfare. If it had not been for the Navy in this war America would not be today.

He speaks of "if the Navy had met up with the Germans . . ." They did, in the Normandy Invasion. The Germans had eighteen inch guns against the Navy's sixteen inch guns. May I remind him who won out?

The Navy and Marine Corps could have drove the Japs out of the Pacific without the help of the Army. The Pacific was strictly a Navy show from start to finish, and the Army ground and air forces had very little to do with victory there except for the Philippines.

The carrier was the decisive weapon of victory. It fought the whole war, not just the end of the war like he says. As long as carriers, battleships, cruisers and destroyers work together in a task force, they remain the most versatile force in the world.

The pee-wee fighter did more in this war than the big four-engine bomber, especially in the Pacific. May I ask him what plane sunk the most enemy shipping? It wasn't a big four-engine bomber or a two-engine one. It was the little Douglas Dauntless dive bomber. The next most effective plane was the Avenger which packed a big punch below the belt of ships. I would like to see where Mr. Harvey's nose would wmd up

if he said something about a pee-wee fighter of the Navy to the few survivors of Torpedo 8.

I would also like to tell him that the Navy has the record for the most planes shot down in one day and also a higher percentage of total planes shot down than the Army. They shot down several thousand more.

So carrier warfare isn't profitable, huh, Mr. Harvey?

A FUTURE NAVY PILOT

IT IS GOOD

1105 Regier Avenue
San Leandro, Calif.

DEAR EDITOR:

I have been reading WINGS for about three years, and have secured some of your past publications such as "George Bruce's Air Novels", Air Stories, Ace's and etc., back to 1929. On the whole they are pretty good. In my estimation you can't beat WW 1 stories, and I certainly wish you could put in at least one.

I am glad to see you are putting in a few features. Tower Talking is good. I also think it would be an improvement to have the story behind the cover as some of them are a little hard to comprehend.

Yours for WW 1 stories,

AL ELLISON

(Any other readers in favor of a WW 1 story in each issue?—Ed.)

SADLY LACKING

31 King Philip Rd.
Worcester 6, Mass.

SRS:

In a recent fit of nostalgia for my flat-top days, I turned to your magazine.

I found your flat-top story (Kamikaze Bait, summer issue) sadly lacking in authenticity.

Having spent two years as catapult officer on the night carrier, *Bon Homme Richard*, in the Pacific, I know whereof I speak . . .

KNUTE LARSON

SWELL YARN, BUT. . .

Hillcrest, Port Stanley
Ontario, Canada

DEAR EDITOR:

Kamikaze Bait, by Scholz, was a swell yarn but . . . tell him there ain't no Flight Officer. There is an Air Officer. There ain't no Landing Officer; there is an L.S.O., or Landing Signal Officer.

And the Flight Air Officer would never brief a squadron. That is done by the Air Combat Intelligence Officer. And on the type carrier he describes, the fighters and bombers would never be briefed together in the same Ready Room. On large carriers each squadron of the Air Group has its own ready room and ACI Officer, etc., etc., etc.

Don't you love people who write letters to the Times?

JAMES POLING

(We do if they send them to WINGS.—Ed.)

EMERY'S LIGHT

16 Maple Street
Milford, Conn.

DEAR EDITOR:

WINGS is one of my favorite magazines. Not only does it give me many pleasant hours of relaxation but it brings back many of the sights and sounds of the late, not-lamented WW 2. Your authors are on the ball, with one exception. I refer to Stuart M. Emery.

While this writer puts out fast-action, interesting stories, I seriously doubt that he has ever been within a hundred yards of a real airplane, and he certainly knows nothing of modern aerial warfare.

For instance—Emery's favorite method of getting his hero out of tight spots is to have him perform a "mad split-air" and get on the enemy's tail. Just how this is done is never explained and although I was in the AAF myself and had friends in both the Navy and Marine air arms, never have I heard of a "split-air"—mad or otherwise.

Another thing—real pilots actually spend some little time studying the cockpits of unfamiliar planes before they attempt to fly them. Yet the Emery hero jumps into any plane, foreign or domestic, fighter or bomber, and merely "thrusters on the power and hurtles into the arch". One of these days the power is going to thrust back, and said hero will find himself hurtling into the arch *sans* plane.

A complete catalogue of Emery miracles would be too lengthy here but I will list a few. His hero is always extremely sharp-eyed, being able to describe an enemy's face, from the color of his eyes to the cavities in his teeth, after passing him once at a relative speed of 800 mph; and he thinks nothing of landing in pitch darkness without lights. His hearing, too, is very good. So acute, in fact, that he can distinguish the "scream" of a bullet even above the roar of his engine.

Finally, the Emery hero has a wonderful way with an aircraft radio. Without changing frequencies, he can and does contact anybody anywhere. Once contacted, he directs them to the scene of action with short, pithy instructions such as: "Yanks! Attack!" or "Destroyers! Shoot them!" And the called-on party invariably does.

I'm not complaining, understand. But Emery has been hiding his light under a bushel. The War Department should have been given these secrets. Think what a difference it would have made. The war shortened; the boys home sooner; and WINGS with a new name—Tech Order 08-15-7.

Yours,

CHARLIE WARNER

(Not Not that!—Ed.)

THE WORD

Cranberry, N. J.

DEAR EDITOR:

You'll not take it amiss, I trust, if I give you the word on the Fall issue of WINGS. It wasn't the best I've read nor was it the worst. But, as one of my favorite radio commentators is wont to say: "This may or may not be significant."

Actually there isn't too much wrong with it. The monotony of locale is one thing. Us readers get tired of the Pacific and China. Surely once or twice, fifties were heard to yammer over Europe, so why not get somebody to write about it? The illustrations were on the poor side with only two—The Black Air and Chair-Borne—rating more than a ho-hum.

As far as the stories go, it seems to me that the shorter ones are better. I would rate them as follows:

1. The Black Air—a good solid Navy story.
2. Ace In The Hole—nice twist ending.
3. X Marks The Vultures Kill—the best of the long ones.
4. Where Angels Fear To Fly—fast paced but a little too fanciful.
5. Flight of the Bashful Bomber—silly plot. Had some laughs though.
6. Four-Fan Foxhole—good action.
7. Chair-Borne—interesting.
8. Milk Run—not much to this.

In conclusion let me say that I really like the mag or I wouldn't take the trouble to criticize it. So please don't go out and shoot yourself over this letter.

Sincerely,

BERNARD GRAHAM

(We'll try to bear up.—Ed.)

TRIAL BY FLAK

By JOHANAS L. BOUMA

Every airman has his secret fear. And sooner or later he must face it. Lt. Dan Pearson faced his in the flak over Ploesti.

LT. DAN PEARSON climbed his twin-bladed fighter up and behind the trailing box of B-24 Liberators. His eyes narrowed to slits as they swept the vast blue bowl of the sky.

Up ahead the sky-marching army of bombers winged towards the target. P-38's strung a thin protecting line along the flanks of the formation, 25,000 feet below the sun splattered against the crazy quilt pattern of the Rumanian country side.

Suddenly Pearson stiffened in his seat. His eyes fastened the burning belly of the sun. There it was again. Two flicks of silver that showed for an instant, then disappeared. His fingers curved the wheel and pulled back. At thirty thousand he leveled out. He squinted again into the sun and saw nothing.

"Must be seeing things," he muttered. He relaxed, his eyes following the sweeping line of bombers. A darting speck at his right and he banked swiftly. "Messerschmitt." He spoke the word out loud. Gunning power to the twin Allison's, Pearson streaked towards the enemy fighter. Suddenly bullets smashed into his right wing. A swift glance showed the Focke-Wulfes growling his tail. Pearson cursed himself softly at having fallen for the old decoy trick.

The aircraft shuddered as he pulled the wheel into his guts. For an instant the P-38 hung on its props and the terrific pull-up washed Pearson back against his seat. The blood drained from his brain and for split seconds there was darkness. The blackout passed, and he slapped right rudder in time to see the Focke-Wulfes beneath, its Mausers spurting flame.

Pearson banked in a screaming turning dive. The Nazi attempted a vertical turn. Pearson followed, cutting the circle shorter. The German's cockpit cradled his gun-sight and he flicked the button. The guns

spewed lightning bits of steel. They chewed through the canopy and splattered the German pilot against the side of his office.

Pearson straightened out and looked down. The Focke-Wulfes was in a spin, a dead pilot at the controls. A glow of satisfaction came with the kill, his second in the past month. The Messerschmitt decoy had vanished. Halfway along the formation Pearson saw three P-38's intercepting four charging Focke-Wulfes trying for a break-through to the loaded bombers. Instinctively he advanced throttle, wanting to join the dogfight. But he held back, knowing he couldn't leave the tailing boxes unprotected.

Must be two hundred bombers in the formation, Pearson thought. In one of the bombers, *Bottoms Up*, one man was his friend and one man he hated. Flight Officer Cornero and Captain Duarte. They had arrived at the Italian bomber base the week before, and today were flying their first mission.

In his mind Pearson went back to his cadet days. He had been twenty-six, just inside the age limit when he volunteered. A good student, he had his eyes set on fighters long before Duarte entered the picture. Duarte, a civilian instructor in the States, had tried to stop Pearson from getting into fighters.

"You're too old for fighters, Pearson," he had snapped. "I know what I am talking about. I've been flying for ten years, started when I was seventeen. You'd be good for a couple of months in combat. After that the strain would tell. The headaches start and the blackouts last longer. You're a good pilot, Pearson. But not for fighters. You'll do fine in bombers. They need good steady men who fly a straight course. I am recommending a change."

Pearson had filled with futile anger. "I want fighters, Duarte. For months I've

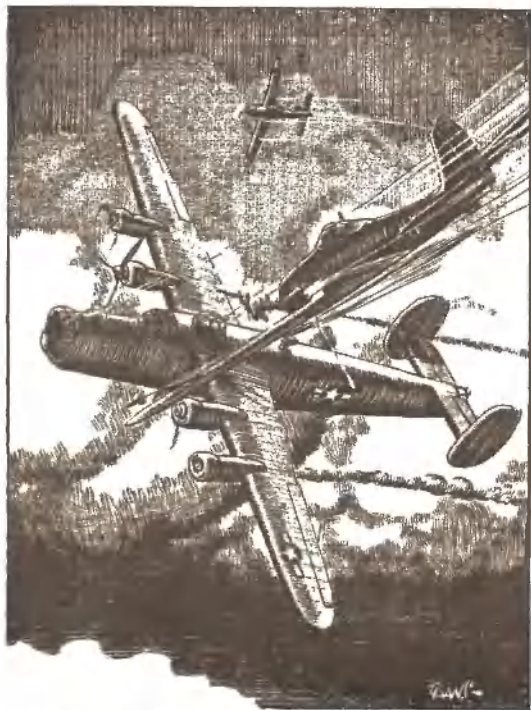
thought nothing but fighters. They're in my blood."

Duarte's eyes had lanced straight and uncompromising. "You can handle them all right, Pearson, but there's more to it than that. They need young blood for fighter pilots. Kids nineteen and twenty years old. Kids that'll take chances. When you fly bombers in combat there are rules

to follow. You'd follow them. You fly in formation to a certain target at a certain time. That's your type of flying."

Pearson had argued hotly but to no avail. "A fine Air Force we have, Duarte," he had raged, "when civilians have the final say in selecting pilots. I am going over your head, Duarte. I'll get fighters."

"If you don't like our Air Force I can



The Focke-Wulfs hurried in. At five hundred yards the Nazi threw his rockets.

wash you out altogether," Duarte had snapped back. "Maybe you'd like the infantry better."

"No, Duarte. I wouldn't like the infantry. I want fighters. I'm getting fighters."

"I am giving you two weeks training in four engine jobs whether you like it or not."

"If you're such a good judge as to who should fly bombers why don't you join up, Duarte? I am sure they could use a good man in the E.T.O...."

DUARTE'S voice had suddenly sounded weary "Report this afternoon. I'll have your transfer ready."

"You wouldn't be yellow would you, Duarte?" Pearson had yelled after him. Duarte had turned, his face white. He looked straight at Pearson for a moment, shrugged his shoulders and walked away.

At the bomber training field Pearson had flown the heavies for a month. Then he had again applied for fighters. His record had been excellent. He had been accepted.

The sky had been swept of the intercepting enemy fighters. In the distance, five miles ahead of the leading box, black clouds of flak designated the target. Pearson swept alongside the bomber formation. He found *Bottoms Up* flying deputy lead in the second attack. He flew close to the nose of the bomber and dipped his wings. Flight Officer Cornero, flying co-pilot position, gave an answering wave. Pearson flicked his V.H.F. radio.

"P-38 to *Bottoms Up*. How they going, Cornero?"

"Are you happy?" Cornero sang back. "My tail stinger tells me you knocked a F.W. down. Congrats."

"Nothing to it, old boy. This is the life." Pearson laughed. "Ask your pilot what he thinks of his former pupil."

"He ain't talking, Pearson. Stick around and watch the oil burn at Ploesti."

"Good luck, Cornero. I'll be around." A black puff of flak materialized at Pearson's wingtip. "Wow," he yelled. "This isn't for me. I'll be watching your ship." He dug right rudder and jerked back on the wheel. The P-38 bounced out of flak range.

Watching the bombers go over the tar-

get, Pearson shuddered when he remembered how close he had come to flying the huge ships. One month of combat had taught him to love the bright flash of his fighter. The dart across the open sky to intercept the enemy. The aliveness inside him as the twin props chewed the thin air. This is living, he told himself.

The second attack was going over the target. He could see *Bottoms Up* flying in position. At times the ship seemed to disappear in black puffs of flak. He saw it stagger, then straighten out. Down below the target was a blaze of burning oil. Then they were over and Pearson closed in with the rest of the escorting fighters to herd the bombers back to the Italian base.

No enemy fighters came up to intercept the empty bombers. Over the Adriatic Pearson dropped close to *Bottoms Up*. He tried to contact the bomber but received no answer. He flew close to the nose of the ship and saw one man in the pilot's compartment. Pearson called again.

"P-38 to *Bottoms Up*."

"Go ahead, P-38," Pearson recognized Duarte's voice.

"Anything happen to Cornero?"

The answer snapped back. "He was hit by flak." Pearson suddenly felt sick.

"How is he?" he asked.

"He's all right. Hit in the shoulder."

Pearson sighed with relief. He edged closer to the bomber trying to look inside.

"Keep your distance, P-38." Duarte sounded angry. "Damn it. Keep that mosquito away from this ship. If you get caught in prop wash you'll slam into us." Pearson grew cold with anger. The man was trying to give him instructions again.

"Go to hell, Duarte. I am flying this ship. Your instructing days are over."

He eased away from the bomber and headed for the fighter base. He thought of Cornero being hurt on his first mission. "Damn it," he fumed. "It should have been Duarte."

Now with the flight almost over he suddenly felt very tired. The oxygen had a queer taste, like the inside of a long closed room, he thought. His head was beginning to hurt. His dials showed eleven thousand feet altitude. No need for oxygen at this height. But, without the oxygen, his head began to pound. He slapped the mask against his face and turned the oxygen

regulator to pure. After awhile the pain went away.

HE LANDED and made his report. He hurried out to his tent and changed clothes. Outside he grabbed a passing truck to the infirmary. A nurse led him to a room where Cornero, his face pale, lay under the white sheets.

"How you feeling, boy?" Pearson asked him. Cornero grinned.

"Not bad. A chunk of flak slugged me in the shoulder. Looks as if I am in for a couple weeks rest."

"That damn flak. I don't think I could stand it, Cornero. You can't fight back at it."

Cornero's voice was serious. "Takes a lot of sweating to go through the stuff. I found that out today. But it's the bombers that are going to shorten this war. That lick today at the Ploesti Oil Fields hurt the Nazis plenty."

"That's right, Cornero. But me, I'll stick to fighters."

"I don't blame you, I guess. Take care of things. I'll be back in a couple of weeks begging for escorts."

"I'll be in to see you before that."

The nurse entered the room. "I think Flight Officer Cornero has had enough excitement for one day, Lieutenant. We'd better allow him a little rest."

With a last grin Pearson followed the nurse from the room. Outside it was getting dark. He walked down the steps and almost collided with a figure hurrying into the hospital.

"Pardon," a voice snapped. Pearson knew that voice.

"The voice that goes with the face," he said.

Duarte looked at him. Tall and thin, he looked like a steel lath in comparison to Pearson's short stature.

"Oh, it's Pearson."

"Yeah, it's me, Duarte. I see they finally begged you to enlist."

"They didn't beg me to enlist. I had to fight to get this assignment."

"I can imagine," Pearson said. "How'd you like that little trip today, Duarte?"

"Didn't mind it a bit. Just tough about Cornero."

"Yeah, tough it was him."

Duarte peered down at the smaller man.

"You mean it's tough it wasn't me, don't you?"

"That's just exactly what I mean."

"All right. Keep praying, Pearson. Maybe I'll get it tomorrow. Headaches bothering you yet?" he asked.

Pearson started. He remembered the headache he'd had this afternoon. He'd almost forgotten it.

"Haven't had any," he snapped.

Duarte grinned. "If they get too bad, look me up. I need a good co-pilot."

"Listen, Duarte. I wouldn't fly with you if there was only one plane left on the field. I'd take the infantry first."

Duarte laughed. "Can't ever tell, Pearson. Can't ever tell."

He swept past and walked into the hospital. Pearson stood for a moment wondering what Duarte had meant by that last remark. Can't mean anything, he told himself. He headed for the officers club, had a drink and went to bed.

The next morning there was no mission. In the afternoon Pearson received a summons to the squadron commander's office. Major Rankin sat behind his desk, shuffling through a sheaf of official looking papers. He ignored Pearson's salute.

"Sit down, Lieutenant," he grunted. He cleared his throat. "I have orders to release one of my pilots to a Bombardment Group. They need co-pilots desperately. I hate to let you go, Pearson. You're good on fighters. I tried to keep you, but they mentioned your name. You're the only man I have who's had training on four-engine jobs."

Pearson half rose out of his seat. So Duarte had pulled strings to get him out of fighters. That's why he had made the remark about needing a good co-pilot last night.

"I don't want any part of those bombers," he said angrily. "There are plenty of spare men around."

"Not now, Lieutenant. Don't worry. This won't be permanent. They expect some new men in a couple of weeks. Till then you'll have to help them out."

"Why pick on me," Pearson argued. "You have newer pilots. Anyone can handle that co-pilot position."

"Sorry, Pearson." Major Rankin's voice was final. "You're the man I am sending. Not only because they suggested you, but

because I think you're the man for the job. You know the ropes. You've flown the bombers and you've escorted them. You know how they work."

"I wouldn't be any good as a co-pilot, Major. I'm telling you. I wouldn't be any good."

THERE was a tight look on Rankin's face. "Don't disappoint me, Lieutenant. I want you to show these bomber boys that fighter pilots can handle all angles."

Major Rankin paused, then continued softly. "There are over two hundred bomber skeletons in the Ploesti oil fields. That means that two thousand men have died trying to knock them out. Two thousand men, Pearson. Two thousand torn bodies. You know what they're beginning to call Ploesti? The graveyard of the 15th Air Force. Doesn't sound good, does it?"

Pearson squirmed in his chair. "That's just it, sir. They'll need fighter protection."

"That's all, Pearson. No use arguing. You report tomorrow to the 460th Bomb Group."

Pearson walked back to his tent, the anger burning inside him. After he packed his gear he went to town. He needed a drink. "A double vermouth," he told the Italian bartender. He drank it fast and ordered another.

"Why so glum, Pearson?" He spun around at the words, knowing who spoke them before he saw the man. Duarte was sitting at a corner table, alone. With a wave of his hand he invited Pearson over.

"You won't mind it after a couple of missions," Duarte said.

"Mind what?"

"The flak. Cornero told me you didn't like it."

"You took a rotten way to get even with me, Duarte. You asked for me, didn't you."

"I did," Duarte snapped. "But not for the reason you think. They told me they were going to ask the Fighter Groups for available men. I mentioned your name. Not to get even with you, Pearson, but because I know what you can do with bombers. I've got a green crew. It'll bolster them up to have an experienced man along. When Cornero is in shape you can damn well go back to your fighters."

"Don't worry, Duarte, I will. I had to

take it. I couldn't get out of it. But I don't think you're worrying about your crew. You're thinking of your own neck."

Duarte stood up. "You cockeyed sap. You think I like this any better than you do? It's corny, boy, but there's a war on. If you think I am yellow, step outside. Don't worry, I'll ditch these captain's bars."

Pearson grinned. "Now you're talking. Let's go."

They fought in the half light of a cobble-stoned alley. When Duarte landed the first punch Pearson knew he had a fight on his hands. The punch shook him. He covered up, feinted, and swung a hard right at Duarte's bobbing head. He missed. He clubbed a left into the man's stomach. Pearson's fist felt as if it had struck a steel plate.

All the hatred he had felt for this man who had tried to wash him out of fighters came to the surface. Rage mounted inside him. "You rat." He almost sobbed the words out and charged, flinging aside the little he knew about boxing. His arms swung, his knotted fists hit empty air. Duarte danced away. Pearson followed. A light left struck his face, straightened him up. His charge stopped and he stood uncertain for a moment.

"Had enough, sonny?" Duarte asked.

"You'll be the one hollering enough," he snarled and charged again. His left caught Duarte high on the head before he moved out of range. Pearson, following, stumbled on a protruding stone. Duarte was on him in a second. Pearson felt the crash of a fist against his face. Another and another. Everything blurred and he sank to the pavement.

Someone was slapping his face. "Come out of it, boy." He staggered to his feet. Duarte was holding his arms, an anxious look on his face. "You all right?"

Pearson tore himself loose from Duarte's grasp. He shook his head a couple of times.

"If I hadn't slipped," he began.

"I'd have taken you anyway. I'm a fighter, too. I've had to fight for everything I ever got in this world."

"Okay, Duarte. That was your round. There'll be a next time. Now you can go to hell." Pearson turned and walked rapidly away.

THE SILVER SHIPS, staggered in uneven pattern along the hardstands, blended with the gray-packed dawn. Pearson squatted on his heels watching the groundcrew hoisting the 500 pounders into the empty swelling of the ungainly bomber. His heavy muscled thighs tensed as he thought of the approaching mission.

He remembered the bright flash of the P-38 he had been flying two days before. Then the fight last night. His jaw was swollen where Duarte's fists had battered him and he filled with futile anger at himself for not beating the man.

"Lt. Pearson." The words cut a burning tracer across his mind. Captain Duarte spoke slowly, clipping each word as though it might be the last. "You might help me give this ship a last minute inspection." Pearson tried to listen as the pilot explained the different points of inspection. Following the words but not their meaning, he wondered if Duarte would refer to last night. He didn't. The inspection finished, the crew gathered beneath a wing for final instructions.

"Lt. Pearson." Duarte paused a moment, looking his co-pilot up and down. "You're a fighter pilot. There are a few things you ought to know about bombers."

The crew closed in, listening. "I know all about it, Duarte. I've seen a little more combat than you have."

The pilot ignored him. "When you handle this ship, you handle the lives of nine men besides yourself. We have one aim. Get to the target. Drop our bombs and return. There is no glory in bombers. Remember that, Lieutenant. No glory."

"I am not asking for advice, Captain," Pearson said thickly. He saw the frozen faces of the gunners and heard the distant chuckle from the navigator.

"You're getting it just the same. We hit and run. Remember that. Hit and run."

Pearson slipped into the co-pilot seat and adjusted his earphones. Four hours from now he would be plowing over the target, sweating out the flak, unable to fight back. He felt the fear rise inside him and he wondered if he had the guts to see it through. The boys in the fighters stayed clear of the stuff. They took a grandstand seat, glad they weren't moving through the pattern of death.

He watched Duarte's thin profile as the

pilot taxied *Bottoms Up* to the head of the runway.

"Give me a rich mixture, Lieutenant." Pearson moved the fuel throttle to rich and leaned back. The powerful engines shattered the air with their roar. Slowly the huge ship rolled forward. With every turn of the giant landing wheels it gathered speed. Then they were clear.

"Landing gear up and locked, Lieutenant."

Like an office boy, Pearson thought. Sweep the floor, Lieutenant. Empty the waste basket, Lieutenant. He felt the resentment mounting inside him, hating this playing second fiddle where flying a plane was concerned. His hands itched to handle the controls, to feel the ship answer his every command.

Just sweat it out, he told himself. You're going along for the ride, that's all. You've got a fifty-fifty chance. You either make it or you don't. He had a sudden sickening feeling as he pictured the ship plowing through the flak. A singing voice came over interphone:

"You must remember this,
The flak don't always miss,
And someone's got to die.
The odds are really pretty high
As flak goes by."

Pearson squirmed helplessly in his seat. He'd heard about that song. A gunner's song. He didn't like it. He had an urge to tell the songster to shut up. But he didn't. The kid has a right to sing if he wants to, he told himself. He's sweating the stuff out just like you are.

RANKIN had said replacements would arrive in a couple of weeks. Maybe it would be a month. One month of sweating while another man flew the ship... He looked across at Duarte.

"See how we work?" the captain said. "The deputy lead we're flying today is important. If anything happens to the lead ship, we take over. That means we drop the initial bombs and the following ships drop when we do. Pattern bombing."

Pearson knew all about it. He looked down to where the white mountains lay like molehills and the Adriatic seemed like a pond. Then they were over Yugoslavia and cutting towards the Rumanian target.

"Tail gunner to crew. Enemy fighters at

five o'clock high. Our escort is tangling with them. Some lovely dogfights."

Pearson twisted in his seat trying to spot them but number three engine obstructed his view. He cursed softly to himself. In his mind he saw the flashing fighters; the maneuver for position; the race of steel across the empty sky; then the oil burning spin of the defeated fighter.

He became tense with anger. This, he thought, is a hell of a way to fight. He wanted to feel the gun button under his thumb; to feel the ship answer the controls; the wings his arms, the rudders his pressing feet.

Suddenly the ship shuddered under the recoil of machine gun fire.

"Two Messerschmitts coming in at three o'clock."

Enemy steel punctured the sides of the bomber. Pearson ducked in his seat. If he could only do something... He should have refused this assignment flatly.

The ship staggered. The plexi-glass shattered in front of Pearson's face and bullets passed close by. He heard a long-drawn gasp. The nose of the ship dropped and the dials on the instrument panel seemed to go crazy.

Instinctively Pearson grasped the controls, everything forgotten while he straightened the ship. He looked at Duarte. The pilot slumped in his seat, one hand pressed against his side. Blood seeped between his fingers and Duarte's eyes above the oxygen mask were hard and filled with pain.

Pearson started to call the navigator, but the radio man, his oxygen hose dangling like a long snout from the mask, was already bending over the pilot. Pearson saw that the kid's eyes looked frightened, but he worked swiftly and efficiently. He unfastened the pilot's safety belt and pulled him from the seat onto the flight deck.

The radio man came over interphone. "Duarte's in bad shape. I fixed him up the best I could. Maybe we'd better call some fighter protection and take him back."

Pearson looked back where the pilot lay and saw him motioning for the radio man to connect his interphone line. His voice was weak and halting.

"I am turning the command of this ship over to you, Pearson, but I've got one last order. You're not to return to

base until you've accomplished your mission. Understand that. It's an order."

Pearson suddenly felt a wave of admiration for the man. He had guts. He wondered why he had ever thought the pilot yellow.

The Nazi fighters were coming in again and they outnumbered the escorting P-38's two to one. They struck again and again at the bomber formation. Pearson saw three Messerschmitts concentrating on the lead ship. It took the full impact of enemy bullets and suddenly it was down in a twisting spin. Pearson nosed *Bottoms Up* to the left, taking the lead position.

He saw the target ahead. The sky seemed black with flak puffs. Then they were flying through the first sprinkling of the stuff and the fighters disappeared.

It was almost impossible to keep the ship flying straight and level. Intent on fighting the controls, Pearson forgot the flak and his fear of it. A shell burst like a red flare under the left wing. Another lifted the tail towards the sky. Bomb-bay doors were open now and ice cold wind whipped through the ship and out the shattered plexi-glass dome of the pilot's compartment.

THE FLAK was thicker now. Every battery down below seemed concentrated on the lead ship. Every second seemed an eternity as Pearson fought the ship through the steel-filled sky.

A cry over interphone told him that a waist gunner had been hit. At the same time the controls twisted in his hands as a direct hit smashed into No. 3 engine. He feathered the whirling prop and saw that the engine was burning. The spray of carbon dioxide smothered the flames.

"If only we can keep enough speed to hold the lead," he muttered.

He forgot the wounded pilot, the hate he felt for the man, and there was only this, this flying, this dropping death on the enemy...

"Bombs away." The ship spurted ahead with renewed energy. Pearson began weaving the ship from side to side in evasive action. They were clearing the flak now, and Pearson banked the required 80 degrees for the breakaway. Then they were past and the fighters swarmed in for the kill.

Two dove head on at *Bottoms Up*, their guns spewing flame. The twin nose guns talked and Pearson saw one of the charging Nazis burst into flames. The remaining German came on, looming larger and larger as he approached and Pearson wondered if the Nazi would attempt to crash him. At the last second the German pilot pulled his fighter over the top of the bomber. The top turret guns stuttered, and the enemy fighter blew up.

A Focke-Wulfe threw a cannon shell that tore the guts out of No. 1 engine. The prop spun away and flew like a shining blade across the arching sky. Pearson fed a rich mixture to the remaining two engines, but the ship lost speed, and he knew they would never hold their lead position.

The fear came back, and his hands trembled. His chest filled with it and his throat was tight and thick. He fought it, tightening his hands around the wheel, trying with the strength of his body to force more speed out of the bomber.

The fighters stayed clear of the dropping plane. They respected the belly stingers in the formation above. Pearson tried desperately to hold altitude, watching his speed drop from 150 to 130.

"I'll hold her till she stalls, he thought, then I'll dive her.

Pearson felt the ship shudder under his hands. The nose dipped and the ship groaned as if in agony. Then it was going down, and Pearson was helping, shoving the wheel forward, leaning forward in his seat, feeding full throttle, the fear inside him forgotten in the wild downward rush.

At fifteen thousand he eased back on the wheel and watched the needle creep up to 180 m.p.h. Ten thousand feet up and far ahead the formation was silhouetted against the blue sky. Two of the darting fighters peeled off and headed for him.

They came in slow, staying at 12,000 feet outside of fifty caliber range, watching for an opening, an easy kill.

"They're carrying rockets," the top turret man called.

They'd have to come in close to discharge their rockets efficiently. Pearson had heard of pilots dodging the white streaking bombs. But those pilots had had four engines and full power. He didn't.

"Top turret from pilot. When the first

Nazi starts coming in, call his position and keep calling it. When you estimate he will throw his rocket, yell."

"Coming in now, pilot. Four o'clock. Cutting toward the nose." Machine guns chattered. "Cutting across three o'clock now. Five hundred yards out." The ship trembled with the recoil of the fifties.

"He's hit," the top gunner yelled, "but he's still coming. He's letting go. Here they come!"

BEFORE the gunner had finished speaking Pearson jerked the heavy bomber to the left. He saw the sharp yellow-flashing rockets passing close to the nose of the ship. Behind them the Focke-Wulfe suddenly exploded and scattered into bits.

"The other one's leaving, screamed top turret. "He doesn't want any part of it. A neat bit of flying, sir."

Pearson muttered a "Thanks." A good crew, he thought. What was left of it. A check revealed one dead waist gunner, a wounded tail gunner, and, of course, Duarte. Two engines were out and another one was acting up. The Adriatic was in sight now and Pearson nursed the broken ship, a prayer on his lips.

As the sea slipped below them No. 4 engine sputtered and conked out.

"Pilot to crew," he called. "Prepare to ditch."

Pearson fought the ship trying to keep it level, trying to sustain a glide and approach as close as possible to the Italian coast. A choppy wave slapped against the belly of *Bottom Up*. There was a terrific jolt of metal against water and they were down. Pearson, flung against his safety belt, felt as though he had been cut in half.

The crew scrambled out of the plane into the life raft and paddled swiftly away. Pearson looked back. *Bottoms Up* was settling. Its tail lifted, it poised for a moment then slid beneath the sea.

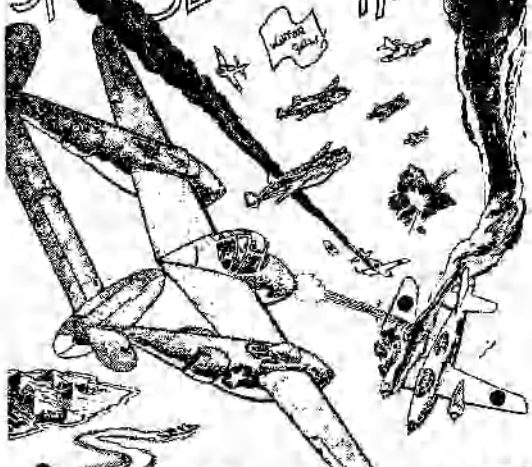
"A good ship," said Duarte. The radio kid was crying. Pearson patted his shoulder.

"Never mind, kid. We'll have another one tomorrow."

He saw Duarte look at him. "Gonna stick with us?" the pilot asked.

"Yeah," said Pearson softly. "I am gonna stick."

SPLIT SECOND TIMING



THE ORDERS WERE ISSUED IN THE WHITE HOUSE IN WASHINGTON D.C. AND CARRIED OUT THROUGHOADS OF HISS AWAY IN THE SKY OVER BOUGAINVILLE—AND AS A RESULT, ADMIRAL ISOROKU YAMAMOTO, CHIEF OF THE IMPERIAL JAPANESE NAVY WAS DESTROYED IN ONE OF THE MOST THRILLING EXPLOITS OF THE PACIFIC'S WAR-TORN SKIES! SOMEHOW, U.S. NAVAL INTELLIGENCE HAD OBTAINED INFORMATION, COMPLETE IN EVERY DETAIL, CONCERNING ALL MOVES THE HATED JAP MILITARIST WAS TO MAKE ON AN INSPECTION TOUR OF SOUTH PACIFIC ISLES! FULLY AWARE OF THE ADMIRAL'S RIGID ADHERENCE TO PUNCTUALITY, THE NAVY DEPARTMENT ACTED ACCORDINGLY. SO—ON THE MORNING OF APRIL 13, 1943, A PICKED GROUP OF 18 FIGHTER PILOTS WAS SELECTED TO TAKE OFF FROM HENDERSON FIELD ON GOODENAU AND INTERCEPT YAMAMOTO. MORE THAN 300 MILES AWAY OVER THE KAVILI AIRDOGS ON BOUGAINVILLE ISLAND—

WITH RADIOS SILENT AND BARELY SKIMMING THE WATER TO KEEP UNDER THE JAP RADARS, THE LIGHTNINGS SPED TOWARD THEIR RENDEZVOUS WITH THE ENEMY WHO HAD BOASTED HE WOULD DICTATE PEACE IN THE WHITE HOUSE!... AND THERE, RIGHT OVER THE DESIGNATED AREA, JUST AS THE MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY OF THE NAVY HAD STIPULATED, THE JAP PLANES APPEARED IN THE SKY! IMMEDIATELY THE ATTACKING LIGHTNINGS SCREAMED IN FOR THE KILL. THEIR AIM WAS ACCURATE—AND THE MADMAN WHO HAD ORDERED THE INFAMOUS ATTACK ON PEARL HARBOR—WAS PROMPTLY DISPATCHED TO MEET HIS ANCESTORS. THIS MAGNIFICENT BIT OF COORDINATED SPLIT-SECOND TIMING WAS ACCOMPLISHED WITH THE LOSS OF BUT ONE AMERICAN FIGHTER PILOT!!

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Cooper ripped the guard in half with .45 slug



The Glorious Goofball

By WALT SHELDON

Col. Sakana was the cleverest Jap agent in all China. Against him were pitted a rank-happy desk pusher; a missionary's daughter; and Flight Officer Cooper, the C.B.I.'s champion goofball.

THE GENERAL appeared to be more interested in the wall map than in what A-3 was saying to Flight Officer Claude D. Cooper, late of Yale University and practically any cocktail bar between New York and Boston. The Gen-

eral stared at the southern Kwangsi area, that wild fairyland of conical mountains and twisting gorges near the Indo China border. His dachshund perched on the chair beside him and absent-mindedly, he ran his fingers over the animal's head.

This apparent preoccupation on the General's part was about the only small bit of luck to come to Flight Officer Cooper's way for some time. Because Colonel Kegg, head of the operations staff, was reviewing in not too encouraging terms Claude's recent safety record. Kegg's would have been a cherub's face, but for the quick-frozen eyes.

"Cooper," he was saying, "back in the states, and even in other theaters we can allow for average accidents. Here, material is too damned scarce. You've had at least one major one a week since you've come. Plain pilot error, too. No other ~~examine.~~"

"Yes, sir," said Claude.

"Now on this mission, today, I want special care. You're flying two very important people to Junning. A Colonel Dupue and a Miss Alcott. I can't tell you why, but their safe arrival in Junning is vital to our China campaign. So check every detail. Your navigation. Your airplane. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," answered Claude again. His part of the conversation had been exclusively that phrase. He felt like a broken record.

"That's all, Cooper," Kegg said, then. Colonel Banstetter Kegg was a West Point and Kelly Field man who always looked as though he might find you guilty of at least treason when he talked to you.

"Yes, sir," said Claude, he hoped for the last time. He executed a very military salute, put one toe behind the other foot as a preparation for a smart about-face. Something happened. Either the toe got tangled with the heel, or vice-versa. Claude lost his balance, tripped, fell backward before he could stop himself, making a wild, useless grab at the desk.

He struck something. There was a clatter. Cold wetness drenched him from the shirt down.

"My water bottle!" roared Col. Kegg.

Claude looked up from a shower of broken glass and a large puddle. Col. Kegg, he remembered, was very particular about his water; he had it boiled and aerated and filtered to avoid that halizone taste, then carefully stored it in a home-made cooler built of salvaged coils and a carbon dioxide extinguisher. Claude felt his cheeks begin to glow.

The General turned very slowly from the map and cocked his weather-beaten head to one side, as he always did when he spoke. A surprisingly gentle voice, more indigenous to a magnolia covered piazza than Chinese earthen walls, came forth.

"Ah expect you ought to keep out of China shops, Mistuh Cooper—you're likely to do more damage than the bull." Claude wasn't sure whether the deep indentation in the General's face was another weather seam or the wrinkle from a smile.

IN THE cockpit of the passenger rigged C-47, Claude stared straight ahead at the runway and tried to forget the incident. He could still feel the hot spots below his ears. The airplane had been ready, passengers aboard, when he arrived; the co-pilot was already warming the engines. Claude looked down presently at the instrument panel, wondering if he had forgotten anything this time.

Just why he seeped to run into enough accidents for a whole squadron he didn't know. But ever since arriving in China, he had been cutting himself while shaving, putting right shoes on left feet, forgetting his insignia—scores of little things like that.

If he could have kept the streak of mishaps away from airplanes it might not have been so bad. But a man who taxied into crash trucks, forgot to fill fuel tanks, neglected daily recognition codes—well, a man like that had no business in the air and Claude knew it.

Yet, essentially, deeply, he wasn't careless—he was sure of that. It was just some twist of the unfathomable law of averages piling all the accidents he might have in a lifetime into a period of the last few weeks.

His headset sounded off. "Six four one, you're cleared for immediate take-off."

Claude threw a Roger into the microphone and nodded to the freckle-faced boy in the co-pilot's seat. A good kid and a good co-pilot; Spook Henry was his name. Looked as though he ought to be piloting a bicycle on a high-school playground instead of a twin-engine transport. Went to show you that you couldn't always tell much from the way a pilot looked.

Claude, himself, for instance—you might swear he was the ablest stick stirrer this side of the Mekong. He had a loose way

of moving, as though his bones were green saplings; he had airmen's eyes, crocheted at the corner with wrinkles; he had tousled, light hair that hung a little over his forehead in a kind of hell-with-it knot. The very epitome of a pilot—yet, look at that accident record.

Claude rested long fingers on the controls lightly. With these same fingers he knew how to make a piano keyboard cry for surcease, and in both cases he used the same light, confident touch. Airplanes and pianos—let *them* do the work. He shoved the throttles forward. Number six four one pounced at the runway as though it were starved for space.

"Sounds good!" Spook lifted his freckled head and shouted over the rich roar of the engines.

It did sound good. Sweet and powerful, and literally in his own bones could Claude feel the big, tapered wings find the invisible substance of air and bite into it. He let her take herself off. With plenty of runway and miles of flat paddy clearance ahead, Claude didn't bother to move the stick. She was well trimmed and headed for the well-known wild blue. He let himself lean back a little—looked as though he were going to do something right for a change.

Junning—that was the destination. To Claude a spot on the map, somewhere in Kwangsi province. It was deep in guerilla territory, actually an operating base behind enemy lines, and they used it as an airhead to supply the partisans, or as a staging strip for long distance strikes. Just why he was ferrying to that place a Lieutenant Colonel of Engineers and a decidedly striking girl in rumpled khaki, was, as far as Claude was concerned, another of China's many mysteries.

They roared over the village at the end of the runway. The ubiquitous rice paddies stretched on ahead until they merged with the shore of Tien Chi lake. Hell for a landing, those paddies, no matter how soft and smooth they looked from the air. The soft mud under the rice grasses and the sun-baked dikes were enough, between them, to rip an airplane's belly to shreds.

Claude gripped the stick to bring it over and back for a gentle, climbing turn. It wouldn't move. The fact presented itself as calmly as that, at first, then suddenly

came up and hit him between the eyes—*it wouldn't move!*

"Hey!" he said.

Spook Henry turned. "What's up?"

"The stick—I dunno!" Laminations appeared in Claude's long forehead.

Spook made a grab for his control column and tried to manipulate it. No soap. He could however, take it to either side. The wings dipped obediently.

"Oh, my aching back!" said Claude, showing the co-pilot a face the color of boiled-rice. "The control locks on the tail—I forgot to take 'em off!"

"Brother!" piped Spook hoarsely.

CLAUDE tried to spend the next couple of seconds concentrating on the rather grim business at hand. But he couldn't keep down the thought of the two passengers back of the crew compartment. Vital to the China campaign, Col. Kegg had called this mission. Funny, arriving at the airplane and seeing his two lone riders, Claude had felt it to be the veriest boon-doggle of a trip.

He had made the usual pleasant remarks, smiling and asking: "All set, folks?"

The man—Lieutenant Colonel Salton Dupue, the manifest said—had slowly elevated a dark, completely expressionless eye. "Naturally," he had said.

The girl hadn't even bothered to look at him. He noticed that she was quite tall, but evenly proportioned so that it wasn't particularly noticeable. Her hair was bundled up in a tricky manner on top of her head and had a deep lustre, not unlike black Foochow lacquerware. Her skin showed a pale, almost waxen look. Altogether pretty near the breathtaking side—yet she hadn't even looked at him. Tie another knot in that crazy, inexplicable string of tough luck. And now, with locked tail controls, it was a toss-up what might not happen. His hand dove for the trim tab control.

"Wh-what are you going to do?" Spook didn't sound too comfortable.

"Land her straight ahead with the trim tabs—if I can," answered Claude.

"In the paddies?"

He kept thinking, *you've goofed-off again, Mr. Cooper*. And in a beautifully ignominious way, too. Airmen could understand almost any other take-off oversight excepting neglecting to remove the wooden

slats that held the rudder and elevators stationary when the ship was on the ground. Hell's bells, they even painted 'em red so you couldn't possibly miss 'em. Unless you were somebody like Flight Officer Claude D. Cooper. . .

Spook jerked a stubby thumb toward the rear. "How about. . .?"

"Hope they're buckled in," said Claude grimly. "Haven't time to warn 'em. And this won't be exactly like hitting a feather-bed."

He rolled the trim tab wheel until the nose dipped gently below the horizon. With his other hand he jockeyed throttle, pitch and mixture. About a hundred feet of altitude now, and the green and yellow checkerboard of the earth was coming toward them fast.

"The wheels," said Spook.

He nodded. "Get 'em up." Good Lord, if Spook hadn't remembered that, he'd have goofed off there, too. "Tell the tower." he added.

Claude spot-welded his eyes to the patch-work ahead and below, as Spook advised the tower of their situation in a succinct and remarkably profane statement. A hot landing, this, needing plenty of control. He could pick out the texture of the rice grasses, now. "Hang on," he said.

He spun the trim wheel quickly, leveling the ship. Ochre mud and green rice whipped past. There was a moment of that sense of incredible speed which nearness to the ground brings; the nose reached out, the tail dropped minutely.

Whirr—am!

ALL THE noise in the world, collected it seemed and dumped into a hundred yard stretch of rice and mud. Claude felt his safety belt hit him in the stomach like a well-aimed two by four, he jolted from side to side until his teeth rattled. On the heels of the crash came grinding and tearing noises.

"Brother!" said Spook Henry again. And for some reason that struck Claude as so funny that in the midst of everything he came out with a crazy burst of laughter. The big airplane plunged forward, then skidded and careened to one side. It rocked after coming to a stop. Bent propeller blades jutted like broken bones above the engine cowlings.

"Cooper goofs off again." Claude muttered slowly and softly.

"Huh?" asked Spook Henry. His face was flat white and the freckles on it looked like stark paint splotches.

"Nothing," Claude growled. He pulled at his safety belt. "Come on, let's look at the passengers."

They crowded into the waist together and found two very shaken people. Lieutenant Colonel Salton Dupue, Corps of Engineers, Army of the United States, unbuckled his safety belt and rose slowly from the bucket seat.

"Guess we kind of forgot to take the control locks off the tail," said Claude, shyly, hopefully.

Dupue tried both knee joints, then waved his arms in the air. He was a well proportioned, rather dashing handsome man who affected British shorts and a bush jacket. Most of his dashing pulchritude appeared to be in good working order. He straightened, then, and glared from under great pelts of eyebrows at Flight Officer Cooper. He retrieved horn rimmed glasses and put them back on. "Of all the idiotic, incompetent and grossly unwarranted action," he roared, "this is the ultimate!"

"Now, Colonel, simmer down, sir," said Claude.

"What?" said Dupue. He swept his eyes up and down Claude's lounging stance. "Since when do you talk to a Colonel like that?"

Claude drew back his head and squinted. Oh, one of *those* guys. "Since I got into the Air Corps, Colonel — Lieutenant Colonel," he said.

The girl interrupted quickly. Claude tried to find a hasty comparison for her voice, but all he could think of was one of the little, cool brooks up in the Mountains of the Clouds, just west of Kunming.

"Don't you think," she said, "that we'd better get out of here before we decide who outranks whom?" She sat in the bucket seat, her safety belt loosened and thrown to either side of her. She was looking up, her face glacier calm, her hands folded quietly in her lap.

"Sure," grinned Claude. "You said a mouthful, there." He put his hand out to help her up. She ignored it, and stood under her own power.

Claude led the way to the rear hatch

and banged it open. The co-pilot hooked the dural ladder in place, and as Dupue stepped forward, Claude backed out of the way and bowed with an exaggerated flourish. "After you, Lieutenant Colonel," he said. Dupue glared through his horn rims, but didn't answer.

Miss Alcott followed in his wake. She stopped momentarily before putting her foot on the ladder rung and locked eyes with Claude.

"That," she said, "wasn't particularly funny. And this delay isn't, either. We aren't going to Junning for a summer vacation, you know."

Claude frowned. "I know. And I'm sorry about the crack up. Really sorry. It was an accident. . . ."

"Obviously," she cut in, and then went down the ladder.

Hundreds of yards away the red crash truck could be seen trying to pick its way over wagon trails and foot paths to the scene of the crash. A liaison grasshopper of the rescue squadron was already circling overhead. Spook looked up. "Guess we just wait, now."

Claude sat, dangled his legs and sighed bitterly. "Afraid I'm in no hurry," he said. "When Col. Kegg sees me again, my troubles just begin!"

II

COLONEL Kegg was waiting for him in the Operations office. Claude spotted his cherub's face, floating like a strange, angry moon in the far corner of the room, and, pretending he didn't see it, he circled the fire bucket by the door and strolled blithely to the operations counter to fill out an accident report. Colonel Kegg was not thus easily dismissed. His short legs carried him to Claude's side in swift, choppy strokes.

"Cooper!"

"Oh, hello, Colonel."

"Cooper, I never—great jumping jack-asses, Cooper—why. . . ." He stumbled all over his anger, then backed up and tried to get started again. "What in the devil is wrong with you, Cooper?"

"I don't know, sir."

"How can you possibly have so many accidents?"

Claude shrugged. "They . . . they just

happen. I swear I have everything checked, and—wham— another accident pops up. Maybe it's psychological, or something like that."

"Psychological?" snorted Kegg. "That's the trouble with this war. Too much psychology. Doesn't leave any time for fighting." He swung his chubby finger to the whorls and convolutions of the weather map. "You see that? Colonel Dupue and Miss Alcott won't get off for another twenty-four hours, now. There's a cold front moving in. Do you realize you're holding up the war?"

"Yes, sir, I guess so," Claude sighed unhappily.

"And Colonel Dupue mentioned that you were exceedingly discourteous. Disrespectful. Now, look, Cooper. . . ."

"Wait a minute, sir. Maybe I was. But how would you feel if you'd just had an accident to shake every nerve in your body and then some ground-bound swivel chair commando hops on you?"

"Hm," said the Colonel. Discipline had to be maintained and all that, but then he was an airman, too. "Well. . . we'll let that go for the moment. However, I'm grounding you for a couple of weeks, Cooper, to see if you can't get yourself straightened out."

"Grounding me, sir?" Claude's long jaw fell.

"I don't like to do it. We're short enough of pilots, especially around headquarters, here. And we haven't got another man checked out in all the types of planes you are. But, for the love o' mike, Cooper—what else can I do but ground you?"

"Sure, I understand, I guess," said Claude.

"Now you try to straighten yourself out."

"I'm sure I will." Claude looked earnest and steadfast. "I'll study up on all the check lists and stuff until I know 'em inside out."

"Just know 'em the right way, that's all that's necessary."

"Okay, sir. Okay." Claude began to back away from the counter. All he wanted to do was to flee the Colonel's presence and get somewhere more conducive to what was really a form of creative writing—wording the accident report so it wouldn't look too much like his own fault. "I'll try

my damndest, sir," said Claude. "I know, that this time..."

There was a soft *chunk* and Claude felt his foot and ankle become suddenly cold. He looked down. He had stepped directly into the fire bucket. He fled.

AFTER completing his report, Claude headed for the turn-around shack. This was the establishment where air crews who flew the hump and other routes snagged hasty sustenance at odd hours. He kicked the screen door open and breezed on in.

Wally Tong, the shack's major domo moved down the counter and stood before him. "Well, okay, what you want?" he shouted angrily. The mere presence of practically anybody in Tong's eatery was a gross imposition as far as the little fat Chinese was concerned.

"Sixteen eggs," Claude said. That was a standard joke. You always asked Tong for sixteen eggs just to see him react.

"*Sixteen eggis!*" screamed Tong. "Damno! No slixteen eggis! *Two* eggis. Nobody get slixteen eggis!" he shook a pair of fingers under Claude's nose.

"Okay," grinned Claude, "two eggs." Then he dropped his grin wearily. Hell, all of a sudden nothing seemed very funny any more. He was restless, itchy. He drummed nervously on the counter until hot coffee came, so hot that sipping it he burned his lips. Yet he scarcely even noticed.

Grounded. No flying at all. Take away an angel's harp, a fisherman's rod and reel, the spangles of a demimonde; take the moon from the sky and candy from a baby—but never ground a pilot. That came under the heading of refined cruelty, psychological torture.

A gentle buzz of conversation to his right resolved itself into words, snatches of phrases. He listened. "...No, we didn't find anything, so we went and dumped 'em on the way home. ...Yeah, Hirohito's apple orchard, again."

A grease-stained pilot, leather jacketed, hunched across his coffee talking. His companion had the same taut, businesslike look. Combat men. There, but for the grace of his aircraft qualification record, sat Flight Officer Claude D. Cooper. He sighed, and listened further to their talk.

"...a little dumpy air strip and a few bamboo shacks tucked away in the mountains. Right on the way to Junning." The speaker sloshed the coffee in his cup a little. "Maybe they use it for a weather station, or something. Anyway, whenever we have any bombs left over, we drop 'em there on the way back. Just for the hell of it. Hirohito's apple orchard—dunno who gave it that name."

It made Claude ache not to be able to sit there and make casual remarks about such things as having bombs left over. If only he had kept his big, flannel mouth shut when he had first reported to 14th Air Force Headquarters in Kunming.

He had handed in his papers to Personnel and rather proudly called attention to his qualification in at least eight types of operational planes. Fatal, that. A man who could fly a C-47 in the morning, a P-40 in the afternoon and check hop a B-25 right after supper was just the man they needed around headquarters. He had been told to report to HQ Flight Section. Now, in two months time, he had fought the war by chaffering Big Wheels and Brass Hats to nearby bases, or flying as co-pilot so that anything from Majors on up could log four hours and collect their monthly flying pay.

And today—when he'd finally gotten a chance to fly across Jap held territory, even in the relatively unexciting role of airborne bus-driver, he'd muffed it with another careless accident.

The combat pilot who had been talking happened to look around, and caught Claude staring at him. Claude turned back to his coffee hastily. He sipped for just another moment, then additional words came to his ears. He couldn't help overhearing them.

"...Yeah, some guy named Cooper. Never met him but they say he just *looks* at an airplane and it automatically has a crack-up."

Claude slammed his coffee cup from the table and went to the door. Behind him Wally Tong screamed profanely that his eggs were ready, but he didn't hear. He was becoming a China legend, now, with his accidents. Soon they'd know Cooper in every bar from Kweilin to Calcutta—the *Goofball*, the all-time champion Goofball."

HE STALKED to the edge of the field where a number of jeeps were parked. Their drivers were having business with the various operational offices at the field. Claude cast a critical eye over them, selected the shiniest and newest looking and got into it. Much less trouble simply to swipe one than to go through all the formality of telephoning the motor pool. A moment later he was bounding along the road from Hostel 7 into Kunming.

At first Claude didn't recognize the trim figure in khaki walking toward the city. He was concentrating not so much on his driving as on his woes. He careened around a native cart, pulled over to the left again and sailed through a large puddle of muddy water. Sheets of spray went up on either side.

He heard the gasp and the frantic: "Hey!"

He looked back. Miss Alcott, earth and water had all met in one place. "Oh my aching back," said Claude. He jammed the foot brake, slid to a stop and backed up again.

The mysterious Miss Alcott looked as though she had been wallowing. Her dark eyes burned at Claude through a layer of mud. "Good Heaven!" she said, "It's you! I might have known it. Why, of all the roads in Kunming I picked this particular one at this particular time, I don't know."

"Better get in," said Claude. "You're too wet to walk. Here. How about my handkerchief?"

"Thanks," she said sarcastically. "I'll use it to sleep under some night, too." She wiped her face and took the seat beside him.

"We can get you dried off in town. Maybe the Red Cross club," he offered hopefully.

"I suppose so," she sighed.

Claude started the vehicle, slipping the clutch a good deal so that Miss Alcott was slammed none to gently against the seat cushion. He heard her cluck her tongue. "Don't you ever do *anything* right, Mr. Cooper? You know, it almost gets to the point where it's funny."

"Good," Claude nodded. "I was beginning to think you wouldn't believe *anything* was funny."

She was silent for a moment, holding her hands in her lap. Then she tufted her

lacquer-black hair with her fingertips. "War isn't funny," she said. "And there's an awful lot of it around. Everywhere."

"Huh?" said Claude.

She turned her wax-smooth face toward him. "Never mind. I shouldn't have mentioned it."

He shrugged. Claude hadn't thought much about war, whether it was funny or tragic, near or far. To him, being a pilot in the Army Air Forces was something one did, like going to school, or getting a job, or learning to play bridge.

He waited until she had faced forward again, and then admired her profile on the sly. Very nice; it reminded him of some of the old-fashioned cameo carvings he'd seen. "Say, Miss Alcott—what's your first name, anyway?"

"Janice—Jan, for short."

"Mine's Claude. I'll call you Jan, then."

"Suit yourself."

"You're not...uh...exactly the friendly type, are you?"

"It's not that," she said, shaking her head. "It's...well, the way things are...so much to do."

"The war, you mean? The one you don't think is funny?"

"Yes."

From several points all about them a brash clanging began; other echoes joined it. Claude lifted his head, looked around. "Air raid," he said calmly.

She stared uncertainly. "Shouldn't we jump into a slit trench, or something?"

"Naw—that's only one ball. They won't be here for an hour or so. May not even be heading for Kunming. The Chinese warning net spots 'em and passes the word."

"Yes, I know," she nodded. "They're really in this war, the Chinese. Every civilian, every infant, every grandmother. It's something to think about."

"Huh?" said Claude again.

She didn't bother to answer him this time, instead she stared straight ahead through the muddy windshield. Claude pulled into a side road and racked to a stop before a long, low adobe house with a thatched roof.

"What's this?" she asked.

"The Stork Club," he grinned. "It's really a little wine shop run by a character named Tung Lichien. You've got to

see him before you leave Kunming. He's the only immodest man in China. Brags like a . . ."

"I thought you were going into town?"

"This is better," said Claude. "We can have a quiet drink together and you can dry off—"

"Well, of all the nerve!"

"Yup," he admitted benignly.

She stared back for a moment, then finally broke into a grin. "Well, all right," she said, "but don't get *too* encouraged."

TUNG LICHIEH himself took the order for a pot of hot wine and two orders of sweet and sour pork. He had a large, globular head that hung like an observation balloon over his tiny shoulders. The yellow skin on it was stretched almost to the bursting point. His eyes were mere slits in his cheeks, button-holes for his everpresent smile.

"Tung," Claude asked. "How's the sweet and sour today?"

"How is pork?" Tung retorted. "Clazy question. I make personally. Is wonderful. Bes' damn pork in China!"

"See," Claude told the girl. "What did I tell you?"

"Wine good, too," Tung said. "Tung always good. You know that."

When Tung had turned away again Claude found cigarettes, offered one to Jan and lighted both. "Look, mysterious one," he said. "Not to be personal, or anything, but just what is your status in these benighted parts? You don't wear any insignia."

"P.F.C.," she smiled.

"What?"

"Poor Foolish Civilian, it means."

He laughed and drew back his head. "So you do have a sense of humor after all!"

"Of course. Only it's a little hard to exercise at the drop of a hat. I don't want to sound smug, but the war has a terribly deep, personal meaning to me. You see, I was brought up in China, in Kwangsi province, a missionary's daughter. I saw what happened when the Japs moved in—I was up north by that time."

"Well, sure. I guess it's all pretty bad," said Claude. He didn't know exactly what else to say about it. Speeches bothered him, especially the kind that usually went

with tricolor bunting. "But what are you doing here, now?"

"It's a special mission. Colonel Dupue—whom I'm sure you remember—is from the Office of Strategic Services."

"The cloak and dagger boys."

"So they say. Anyway, I can't tell you much more than that. Other than the fact that Dupue's escorting me to Junning to do a certain job. I'm really about the only one who can do it, you see, because of a certain dialect I speak. At that, I had to break down every door in Washington before they'd listen to me."

"An interesting assignment, anyway," commented Claude, just a shade on the bitter side.

She shook her head. "A plain job. It's got to be done."

He had the uncomfortable feeling that she considered him rather a child and eschewed explaining things further to him, not believing he'd grasp them. At that, there might have been some truth in what he thought. Claude had never gone in much for philosophizing about the world and the people in it. It was enough trouble just trying to make your way among them.

Tung Lichien arrived presently with a small pitcher and two cups. He poured the hot wine, splashing a little into Claude's cup first. "How you like?" he beamed. "Big style. Just like Shanghai hotel. Serve host number one. Tung know all things like that. Tung damn good, yes?"

Claude chuckled. "There. Isn't Tung worth the price of admission? You won't see anything like him in all of China. You'll miss Tung when you get to Junning. That place is . . ."

He saw her head jerk erect with a snapping motion, saw her dark eyes get sudden rings of white around them. He frowned, waited until Tung had shuffled away, then asked sharply. "What did I do now?"

"You shouldn't have mentioned Junning. That's supposed to be a secret flight."

"Oh—that." Claude laughed and waved his long fingers. "Don't mind Tung. He's just an old Chinaman. He probably doesn't even know where Junning is."

"I hope not." She didn't return his smile.

III

THEY WERE in the jeep, heading back to the OWI hostel where Jan was staying, when the three ball sounded. Claude swung the jeep over to the side of the road. "This is it," he said. He doused the lights.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

He nodded at the revetment on the taxiway. Banking on her unfamiliarity with the environs of Kunming, he had driven the long way home, half circling the air field. The shadowed snout of a parked P-40 loomed over their heads. He took her arms and steered her behind the piled earth.

"As safe in here as a slit trench," he said, "and a lot more comfortable."

The wierd, modernistic symphony of air attack began. Sirens made a wavering alto to the baritone snarl of engines. After the first few bars, the thick percussion of exploding bombs began to sound. They were hitting far below the field, near the lake.

A shadow whooshed over them at an altitude of not more than a hundred feet and Claude caught the shape of it against the sky. It might have been a B-25, except that B-25's didn't have wide, forward sweeping wings. Nor that peculiar off-phase sound to their engines. Suddenly a break, like a slit in a coat seam, appeared in the alto-stratus layer; a moon began to peek through it, a full moon.

"Good," said Claude, "that'll fix 'em."

"Who?"

"The raiders. Our fighters can see 'em now. We don't have any radar night fighters yet. By golly, I wish I was up there."

"I didn't know you were that blood-thirsty."

"Bloodthirsty? No—it's not like that at all. I just wish—well, hell, I'd like to get myself a Jap plane." He looked around him, frowned curiously at the P-40 in the revetment. He noted the number on the tail.

"This is a good ship," he said, half to himself. "I check-hopped her the other day." He stepped to the engine and patted it. "Warm," he said. "Somebody's been running her up. All set to go. Wonder where the pilot is?"

"What are you up to?" She was watching him curiously.

He didn't answer. He slid under the wing and back to the cockpit. "Maybe they couldn't get him in time. Seems a shame to waste a good ship. Hm." Jan took a few steps to the rear. Her face seemed even more waxen in the moonlight.

"Well," she asked him, "what are you going to do?"

"What I've been wanting to do," he said. He clambered on the wing and lifted a leg into the cockpit. "Stand clear, kiddo. I'm going to show 'em some flying they won't forget."

The last glimpse he had of Jan was as she turned her shoulders away from the blast of the slipstream. After that he was leaping the Warhawk down the taxiway, using it for a take-off strip.

Claude climbed as though he were winding a ribbon about a May-pole. He could feel the airplane shake him by the seat of the pants and beg him to cease and desist. But he kept climbing. At perhaps a thousand feet, he spotted the line of bright flashes that indicated the laying of a bomb stick. He corkscrewed in that direction.

The moon flashed intermittently on something. Squinting, Claude made out a bomber's wings. Red meatballs in the tips. It had a Japanese name, but who in blazes could remember it, much less pronounce it? *Nell*—that was its recognition designation.

"Wait 'til the moon shines, Nellie," said Claude grimly. He nosed over. He jockeyed rudder pedals until the big spinner of the forty was aligned with an imaginary point yards ahead of the scuttling bomber.

CLAUDE'S excitement seemed to crystallize all through his lungs and make him breathe in hard, short strokes. This was it—his first Jap plane, and nothing short of a miracle could stop him. This was what he had wanted to achieve ever since signing his application to flying cadets, this was another of those things you simply did, like earning your letter at basketball or making the grade with the campus widow.

It would be certain to impress Col.

Kegg. He might even put Claude back on flying status . . .

Flying status!

Claude remembered suddenly that he had no more right sitting in this cockpit than the veriest company clerk! And compliance with orders grounding you was one thing they were mighty, mighty strict about, air corps or no air corps. For a chip of a moment he was tempted to pull the fighter from its power glide, circle back to a landing and hope that no one had noticed. But the Jap bomber was already growing fat in his windshield sight. In a moment its silhouette would cut the ring.

The hammers of hell descended upon metal. Even above the drone of the engine, Claude could hear the noise. He whipped his eyes to one side and, with morbid fascination, saw a line of neat holes appear on his own wing, inches from the cockpit!

Claude reacted without thinking too much. No time for thought, not even time to be frightened. He skidded into a shallow turn. He was over the lake, now, and he realized that he must have been very clearly outlined against the water. The thing to do was to return where the darker land would be more of a covering background.

He managed to fess a glance over his shoulder and identify his attacker. *Hap, Mitsubishi 2F*. Tear drop auxiliary tank beneath him, showing he'd come a long way to Kunming. A hot, maneuverable job, upwards of three hundred miles per hour. Not the best thing in the world to have on your tail—even in the moonlight.

Claude hit the deck then, and saw the express speed of the earth not fifty feet beneath him. Difficult to maintain that not-too-comfortable fifty feet. In just a tenth of a second he could be low enough to tangle with tile roofs, trees, telephone wires, or the tops of small hills. And the way his luck had been running—well, he wouldn't be surprised if one of the hills moved up of its own accord and smacked him.

The jinx was certainly consistent; in one tick of a stop watch he had been about to get himself a nice, fat, twin-engined Nell, and in the very next he had found

himself facing death, of the most sudden kind.

When Claude finally came to a decision the Hap had been on his tail for perhaps ten seconds. It had seemed like hours. But in that time he thought all these thoughts and analyzed his own situation. It came to this: not much he could possibly do would be any more dangerous than flying under the Hap's guns, which might go off again any time. The best bet was an attempted breakaway, ticklish as that might be.

He pulled the stick back to one side, kicked his right rudder. The P-40's nose rose like a balloon in a beautiful chandelle and he felt himself press hard into the seat. The Mitsubishi with the belly tank streaked past.

Claude dropped off in a shuddering stall that might, with just a mile-an-hour less air speed, turn into a spin. He jammed the throttle. The image of the Hap somehow got into his sight and hung there, momentarily. Quite instinctively, Claude gave the trigger a short, sharp burst.

The improbable caught up with a certain Jap fighter pilot in the form of fifty caliber slugs, one tracer to every three. Claude saw a blinding, irregular splotch of flame make a sudden hole in the night. Then the whole mess of it went down and splattered in a thousand directions against the ground.

"How do you like that?" was Claude's surprised remark to nobody in particular.

He swept away in a gentle turn. He wanted to sing, cheer, jump up and down. It looked like the law of averages wasn't so dead set against him, after all. He had had no legitimate right to catch the Jap's unprotected gas tanks with a lucky, practically unaimed burst like that—yet, it had happened.

He looked about. The raid had passed apparently; the countryside inactive except for scattered spots of fires. Landing in the darkness would be something of a problem, but now that his luck had made a sudden one-eighty turn, Claude felt quite confident. No more goofing off. No, sir, not any more. He called the tower.

The voice that came back was too, too familiar. Claude heard the short, choppy phrases and could almost see the cherubic

countenance of Col. Kegg putting into the microphone.

"Is that you up there, Cooper? By damn, I thought it might be you swiped that P-40! You get the hell down here—but quick!"

"How about some landing lights?"

"Don't be a jackass! You have better sense than that. Or do you?"

"I'm coming," Claude sighed.

IF SOMEONE had broken an egg atop the colonel's head, it would have cooked in two seconds flat. Kegg's smooth, rounded cheeks were vermilion with anger, and his knuckles were starch white against the desk top.

"Cooper!" he spluttered, "You're the damnest nincompoop in the Army Air Forces—and that includes the Pentagon where they raise nincompoops by the square foot! So help me, this time I'm going to throw the book at you. What do you think we're running here, anyway—an air force, or an organization for your amusement?"

"Dammit, sir, I shot down a Jap plane, didn't I?"

"So what?"

"Well, so . . . uh . . . isn't that good?"

Colonel Kegg shook his head slowly. "Can't you realize that shooting down that Jap was incidental to the main issue? Let me put it this way. A gangster robs a bank, and during his getaway saves somebody from being struck by an automobile. So he saved somebody's life—does that excuse him from robbing the bank? Cooper, you operated an airplane without authorization. You were lucky this time—but that airplane might have been red-lined. Or its regular pilot might have needed it for a special assignment. Now, Cooper, I'm not tough to get along with, but I am trying to run an operations section, and regulations are regulations."

"Yes, sir," said Claude unhappily.

"Now, until I decide whether I'm going to court martial you or just ride you out of China on a rail, you're to consider yourself under arrest. You're confined to quarters."

"Yes, sir. Uh . . . is that all, sir?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

Cooper saluted and about faced. He

took a long sigh out of the door with him.

It didn't take Claude long to become sick of the four walls of his room. He shared it with three other occupants, and among all of them they had managed a rather complete collection of graphic feminine anatomy from magazines, calendars and postcards from Calcutta. In forty eight hours Claude had memorized every curve and hollow. He tried reading, too, but felt his eyes skip over the print without absorbing it.

He sat there presently and extended his long fingers before him, brooding at them. He moved one or two experimentally. A little musical phrase came to his head. He whistled it and moved his fingers as he might have played it on the piano. That was it—a good session at the keyboard would calm his nerves. Help him, probably, to think things out. He got up from the bunk and slapped his crush job to the back of his head.

THE HQ squadron day room was empty at this time of the morning. He pulled a chair up, ran his fingers experimentally across the keys. A little stiff. Three quarter job, action tacky. Probably had been flown in over the hump. Or maybe borrowed from one of these mission schools—they always seemed to have pianos in the most remote, improbable places.

Claude put his left hand down and gave it a little workout in a walking boogie-woogie pattern. He liked the sound of that and added a few embellishments in the treble. Hm, not bad. A moment later the floor was shaking with Claude's music.

He had played many a club date in New Haven with a pick-up orchestra while he went to school; maybe if a war hadn't come along he might have made a career of it.

Oh, well—plenty of time to think about that when and if he got back. He stopped at the end of a chorus and pushed away from the instrument.

"Nope," he said, shaking his head. The piano helped, but it didn't take away that restless gnaw inside him. Company was what he needed more than anything else at this point. A certain, special kind of company, come to think of it.

There was a base telephone in the office. Claude had it in his hand a few moments later and asked the operator for the OWI hostel.

A house boy answered. Claude shouted and circumlocuted and blended his own brand of pidgin English with guide-book mandarin. He finally got the house boy to understand he wished to speak to Miss Janice Alcott. After that there was a long wait.

"Hallo?" said a voice.

Claude brightened and leaned forward. "Jan?"

"No—this number one boy again. Miss Alcott not here."

"Not there? Well, where's she gone? When's she getting back?"

"Missy Alcott check out. All gone. Goodbye. Scram. Yesterday."

Claude hung up without answering. He took one step toward the door and heard the wailing of jeep brakes outside. There were a few pattering footsteps and then a lieutenant stuck his head in the door. The blue "Officer of the Day" brassard was just above his elbow.

"Hey—are you Cooper?"

"Yeah, that's me." Claude looked up curiously.

"A-3—Col. Kegg—he's been looking all over for you. I been chasing everywhere. Come on."

"Ah," sighed Claude. "This must be it. Notice any arenas with lions in 'em around the compound?"

"No," said the O.D. "All I know is he wants to send you on some kind of an important mission. And I spend an hour looking for you. What do I care about important missions? I got duties to perform."

"Then you don't know how well off you are," said Claude, getting into the jeep.

IV

COLONEL KEGG was seated when he entered the office and somehow that struck Claude as possibly a good sign. The man's baby face looked unusually serious, and when he spoke his voice was very quiet. "Sit down, Cooper." He indicated a chair.

"Yes, sir?"

"I have," said the colonel sadly, "no other choice this time."

"About what, Colonel?"

"About sending you on a mission."

Blankness hung for a second over Claude's face, and then a huge grin moved in. "You mean—I'm not grounded any more?"

Kegg looked up sharply. "I didn't say that. I said I'm sending you on a mission."

"Well, how can I go on a mission if I'm grounded?"

"I don't know," sighed the colonel. "But the mission's got to be flown and there's no other pilot available. I'll figure out how to make it conform with regulations afterward."

"Yes, sir."

"They're all out on a search mission."

"Search mission?"

The colonel nodded. "The plane taking Colonel Dupue and Miss Alcott to Junning hasn't been heard from. Can't understand what happened."

"What?" Claude stood up and put his palms on the desk.

"You heard what I said. Sit down."

Claude sat. "You want me to join in the search?"

"No." Colonel Kegg shook his cherubic head hastily. "Definitely not. You'll be passing over that route, but don't let me catch you wandering around on your own private search mission. So help me, I'll make it a firing squad, if you do."

"What kind of a job is this, sir?"

"If you'll shut up a minute and relax I'll tell you. Damnation, Cooper, you're the jumpiest man I ever saw."

"Yes, sir," said Claude. The hollow feeling was in his stomach again. Somehow he'd had an idea that maybe he'd run into Jan Alcott again, somewhere. Now—with her plane missing . . .

"You know about our base at Junning?"

Claude nodded.

Colonel Kegg rose and stepped to the map tracing the eastward route from Kunming to southern Kwangsi province. "They've been maintaining one airplane down there for utility purposes, and it got cracked up yesterday. They need a replacement. You're to fly it to 'em."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, as you can see, you'll fly over Jap territory. But there aren't any major Jap installations near your route. They maintain one little auxiliary airfield here—the one we call Hirohito's Apple Orchard. But all they've got there is one or two trainers and utility cargoes. Officially we don't even bother to bomb this little place, so it shouldn't worry you."

Claude nodded, scarcely hearing. He was still thinking about Jan Alcott.

Kegg went on: "Junning depends on the cooperation of the guerrilla forces around there for its existence. That's why we were sending Miss Alcott down there. She's one of the few people in the world who can speak the local tribal dialect. We're never quite sure whether they're on our side or the Jap's. And we've had rumors that Colonel Sakana is operating somewhere around there."

"Who?"

"Colonel Sakana—the sacred fish, they call him. Supposed to be a personal pal of Tojo's. He's kind of a Mata Hari, Heinrich Himmler and Mr. Pinkerton rolled into one."

"Excuse me, sir," Claude interrupted. "You haven't had any report on Miss Alcott's plane—no rumors or anything?"

"No," scowled the Colonel. "Now pay attention to what I'm saying. You may want this information if you crack up in those mountains and have to walk out." He looked down, then up again. "What *was* I saying?"

"Something about a fish," Claude reminded him.

"Oh, yes—Sakana. Well I doubt that you'll ever run into *him*. They say he speaks American like a Kansas farmer. Raised in the states. Went back to Tokyo and became a professor, but really headed their secret statistical project on the U.S.A. If Miss Alcott had been able to get to those Loto tribesmen we might know by now whether those rumors mean anything. Well, anyway, it all adds up to this. Junning needs that airplane you're flying down there—needs it damn badly."

"Sure, I know that, Colonel," said Claude. He stifled a yawn.

"That's why I hate like the very devil to send *you*, Cooper. But I've got to do it. Now, for the love of Mike, check everything this time. Go over that air-

plane from top to bottom. Make sure your tanks are topped. Try the controls. Check your instruments—hell's bells, you know what to do. This time, *do* it!"

"I will, sir," said Claude, in a slightly injured tone.

"Hm," said the colonel. He folded his hands on the desk top and looked at Claude for a long time. "Why in the devil," he asked, "can't I have a nice, peaceful war where everybody just fights and things don't get so fouled up?"

"Don't worry this time," Claude said, getting up and carefully placing the chair against the back of the desk. "I've got the accident bugaboo licked, now."

He started to salute, thought better of it and made a kind of half wave with his hand. He turned partly—saw the water bottle standing there and made a wide circle to avoid it. He managed to get to the door without upsetting it.

"Well, that's a step in the right direction," sighed Col. Kegg.

IT WAS a battered, shark-nosed P-40 that Junning was to get. Claude spanked it down the runway, argued it into the air and wondered if it might hold together long enough for him to reach his destination. A belly tank clung to the fuselage. With that, he ought to make Junning just a few minutes from a dead stick landing—providing he didn't have to use any extra gas dodging thunderstorms, mountains, zeroes, or any other of the thousand shocks the air was flush with.

Once on course, he must have checked his map a hundred times. Pilotage on a clear, singing day with not a cloud in the sky seemed simple enough—until you tried it in China. The check points were confined largely to mountains and rivers, and they all looked the same.

He ran his finger over the route, frowning and trying to picture the real shape of the things represented by scrawling quill marks on the map. The colonel had marked one or two uncharted streams and the location of Hirohito's Apple Orchard, which could be used as a good navigational point in itself. After a while Claude frowned, folded the map and put it back in the plywood case. He was acting like a Sunday afternoon pilot on his first solo. Nuts. He'd flown routes tougher than this

one a hundred times. And under worse conditions.

He crossed the high escarpment east of Kunming and saw the land drop away below into a mountainous, eroded plain. The characteristic red and grey of Yunnan gave way to a scrubby green and volcanic soot color. Once he spotted a waterfall, a beauty of a thing pouring from a high ledge of rock that looked as though it might be the mountain's pouting under lip. He circled it once, wondering if maybe he wasn't the first white man ever to have seen it.

Occasionally there would be houses, nearly all of them with grey tile roofs, and twice he saw the walled ruins of abandoned villages.

But mostly it was a wild jumble of scrub-grown rock and earth. Walking back from a crack up through this country, he reflected, would be no picnic. Further north, where most of the fighting took place, there were always guerilla bands and even detachments of Nationalist soldiers to help you along. But here—well, you could count on a good six months vacation if it ever happened.

He tried to imagine whether Jan Alcott and her bespectacled, pseudo-British escort might not be tramping some Chinese ridge right now. Unreported, the Colonel had said. That would mean that they hadn't picked up any guerrillas or friendly natives, yet.

He crossed a wide valley and began to fly over a vast stretch of peculiar conical crags. It was stubborn looking terrain, and the absence of rice paddies was not too encouraging. If the Chinese couldn't exist on the land, nobody could.

Once more he checked the map. So far, so good. Hirohito's Apple Orchard should appear in a few minutes now; then he'd change his heading just a few degrees and should hit Junning on the nose. He banked lazily to enter a long, river-cut valley. He glanced perfunctorily from one wing tip to another, not expecting to spot anything in particular.

Suddenly he made his backbone straight as a bamboo shaft.

Over to the left, the sun had reflected on something flat against the mountain-side and for a moment it looked like the shape of wings and fuselage. Now the

angle of the mountain obscured it from view.

He circled back in that direction. The Colonel had made it plain enough that no private search missions were to be instituted. Well, he was right, of course—but a look wouldn't hurt. Perhaps he'd be able to report something when he got back. And that glinting shape had certainly looked like a cracked-up transport.

THE P-40 lazed around the mountain. Stark and unmistakable, then, the sweep-back wings of the grounded Douglas came into sight. Claude circled down on it. On the first pass he saw that it had managed to land in a clear, sloping area and that it had cut a long furrow before coming to rest. On the second pass he noted that the left engine had been torn from the firewall.

He climbed again, then spread the map on his knees and noted carefully the coordinates of the wreck. He looked about for usable references—an oddly shaped mountain, a certain bend in a stream, a distinctive patch of color somewhere.

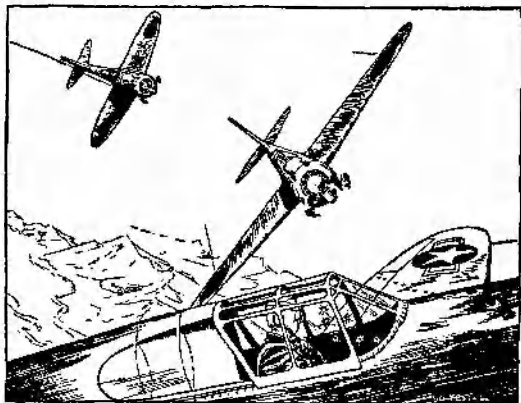
And that was how, looking around like that, he spotted the two Zeroes.

"Whoa, Tillie!" gasped Claude, gaping at them.

They were already nosing toward him, fattening with every second. They must have been circling high between Claude and the sun. He didn't stop to wonder what fighters might be doing here, miles from any Jap fighter base—he didn't stop to wonder much of anything. He swung the rugged snout of the forty around until it pointed directly at the two attackers, and then he brought the throttle from cruising position up to the bar, glutting the engine.

He noted that they flew in stagger formation, and appeared about to attack in tandem. Copying Chennault's tactics, it seemed. Not good. Any Jap, even the usual ones who stuck to their funny dogma, was dangerous—a wised-up Jap could be ten times as lethal.

They had expected him to hit for the deck, he supposed. Therefore he wouldn't. It might give him a slight advantage to shake them a little with the unexpected, upset their sense of values, and possibly thereby spoil their aims. Claude got the



The Zeros peeled off, fattening with every second.

two of them in his sights and headed directly for them!

The space in between vanished with incredible speed. No one deviated from his course. It reminded Claude a bit of two people trying to stare each other down—at over three hundred miles an hour. Jap faces, he knew, were looking at him through their own gunsights, probably wondering what he looked like. He hadn't seen a Jap as an enemy, yet, and he found it difficult to picture them as the same quiet, polite, painstaking little people you found back in the United States.

Well, there was one advantage to fighting your war in an airplane; it was plenty impersonal. You fought with, and against machines. At the same time, here he was taking the human factor into account; hoping that the pilots of the two Zeros would lose nerve and turn from a head on crash before he did. He watched them come and clamped his lips together.

Bright orange specks showed along the leading edges of the first plane's wings. Good—they were nervous already. Sheer idiocy to shoot from that range. Claude

5—Wing—Winter

waited for another second, then jammed his own trigger. Nothing happened.

He blipped the trigger several times. Still nothing. Panic rippled through his chest; he jammed at that trigger until he thought his thumb might snap. *Nothing, absolutely nothing.*

In that moment, he saw the sweep of two long, foamed bodies as his attackers broke away and peeled off to one side. They'd lost the stomach for that head-on flying—and if his guns had been working he'd have surely ripped wide the belly of one of them.

If his guns had been working . . .

And then Claude remembered. He had checked every detail of the airplane, every detail but one—the one that had suddenly become the most important. *He hadn't even loaded his guns before taking off!*

"Goofball!" he said to himself softly. Maybe this time a dead one.

V

CLAUDE groaned. The ordinary thing in this case would have been to sweep about in as tight a circle as possible

until the tails of the Zeroes came into his sights. Instead—having no guns—he stuck quickly away in the opposite direction.

He looked frantically about the sky for a cloud, even a small one. Not a chance. And the weather sergeant had been so happy about the wonderful route forecast he had handed Claude. "Not a cloud," he had said. "Not a chance of one."

He looked behind him. One of the Zeroes was already streaking his way with that peculiar, aerial illusion of crabbing. His aching back, but those babies could turn—they could about face on a biscuit without cutting the crust. He saw wing guns winking at him again.

Claude put his P-40 through the book of advanced maneuvers and then invented a few of his own. The Zeroes stayed right with him. He felt his entire tail section shudder and his foot pedals went mushy. That settled it. It didn't take any vast brilliance to know when you were licked—but good.

Claude slammed the canopy away and caught a glimpse of the second Zero bearing down on him as he flipped the P-40 on its back.

He unbuckled his safety belt, stood on the seat and then pushed with his legs. The slipstream caught him and sent him hurtling away.

Claude waited as long as his galloping heart would permit before he pulled the rip cord. No use floating down any longer than necessary and becoming the object of joyous Nipponese target practice. On the other hand, that good, green earth looked mighty near. . . .

He pulled the rip cord.

There was a loud, blasting pop; the risers slapped his chest and the leg straps dug into his groin. Not really too bad. Not as bad as he might have thought. And then, it was unbelievably, celestially quiet. He was swinging under the big umbrella. The earth began to move faster toward his feet, and he got ready for it. He realized with a little respiratory tug that with about one more second of dropping time he wouldn't have been able to pull the ring. He pulled on the risers to stop the swinging, then held them and attempted to pick out his landing spot. There wasn't much picking to be had.

The slope of the mountain came up and hit him, knocking him from his feet. He felt his teeth jar. The big chute billowed down and capsized beside him; he unbuckled one strap of the harness and then heard the full-throated roar come out of the sky. The nasty, stutter of 7 point 7 millimeter guns punctuated it. Small, progressive geysers of dirt pattered across the slope and crossed the pile of white silk, burning dark holes into it. Claude threw himself face down.

He heard another roar, more firing, heard another burst of slugs slap nearby. Claude practically leaped from the harness. He set off at a top-speed run for the clump of trees several hundred feet away.

They made a second pass before he quite reached his haven and he managed to throw himself behind a jagged outcropping of rock. As they passed he lifted his head and swore at them; caustic, imaginative swearing that all but turned the air about his head a smoky blue. He got to the trees before the third pass.

CLAUDE sat there until he heard the definite fading of the engines, indicating that they were gone. He wondered if his own airplane had crashed or was still flying upside down somewhere over China. Hard to tell. He'd heard nothing—but then the excitement could have prevented that.

Right now the problem was to get out of this Kwangsi no man's land. Primarily, that involved getting in touch with someone—finding a habitation. He shook his head ruefully. The nearest one might be fifty miles from here.

He came to the edge of the clearing and took in the general look of the country. It was erratic terrain; the mountains, not inordinately high, were all steep cones. Volcanic rock covered them with wierd, disturbing shapes, like those in a Dali painting.

Claude consulted his wrist watch. Four p.m. It would be dark in three hours, perhaps a little more. In that time he wouldn't be able to make too much progress—he might better employ it setting up a comfortable camping site for the night, and then sitting down for some good, concentrated skull practice.

This was one of the very few unpopu-

lated stretches of China; the bad lands, in a way, and the nearest organized fighting was a hundred miles distant. It was extremely unlikely that Jap patrols would be in this vicinity. It appeared therefore that the best thing would be to look for a settlement of some sort.

Deciding that, he eyed the looping stream in the valley. He would make for that in the morning, follow the current downstream and sooner or later he'd reach something—even if only the coast.

Claude snapped his fingers. The wreck. It was surely around here somewhere, perhaps not too distant to find before dark. He frowned, trying to remember just how he had mentally marked the location. There had been one mountain to the right with a kind of V-shaped notch in it, somewhat like the rear sight on a .45 automatic pistol.

He swept his eyes across the skyline. By golly, that one over there looked as though it might be the one. He studied it a little more. Yes—he was sure of it, now.

He should be able to walk it in an hour. The C-47, itself, would make a good shelter for the night. Perhaps there might even be some indication of what had happened to Jan—a note—a trace of clothing—that idea made his heart pump faster.

He slapped his thigh, made a careful sighting on the notched mountain and set off, down grade.

Silent country, this. The bird calls, few and far between, startled you when they came. He wondered what topographical fault would keep even the birds from settling in decent numbers, even though the honeycombed volcanic hills might have made ideal nesting places. The sod he trod was covered with short, wiry grass and very little else.

There was a faint rustling noise—it might have been the scraping of a foot on a rocky patch. It came out of the silence with screaming suddenness. Claude brought his feet together and made himself immobile. He held that for a second, then turned his head slowly.

BEHIND him were the figures of five men, standing about thirty yards uphill, looking as though they had popped from the ground only an instant ago. He

made one quick motion toward his holstered pistol, then stayed his hand. They were Chinese and there was a definite grin on the face of one. Claude raised his thumb experimentally, and gave the ubiquitous Chinese greeting. "*Ting hao!*"

The man simply continued grinning, giving no sign that he understood. Claude noticed that the five of them were in ragged clothes, mostly of an original blue or white, but now rather uniformly grey with dirt. Even at this distance, he could begin to detect a rather unpleasant whiff of unwashed humanity. All of them carried small, slender rifles and canvas cartridge belts.

Claude tried again. He pointed to himself. "*Mei kuo ping,*" he said. He had seen the words for "American soldier" many times in the G.I. emergency phrase book, but had never dreamed that he would ever find any use for them.

The grinning one shook his head this time. Claude evidently had his dialects crossed. He heard the man jabber something in a thin falsetto to the others and they all laughed. Claude had a sudden idea. "*Hey—you speak English? English?*"

That brought no response either. The grin stayed where it was and the native came forward carefully. The others followed a few paces behind him. Claude saw that he was flat-faced and quite dark skinned, brownish rather than yellow. They came up to Claude and stood there staring at him; one or two of them open-mouthed. Flat-face pointed to the south and jabbered something. Claude shook his head. "No savvy, chum," he said.

The other pointed to Claude, and then to himself. He extended his arm toward the south once more and, turning on his heel, took a few tentative steps in that direction.

"Oh, I get it. You want me to come with you. Well—what have I got to lose." He took a half turn to show that he was willing to comply. And that was when he got a closer look at the weapon the man carried—the weapons they all carried.

Japanese rifles.

Claude whirled to a crouching position, slammed his hand to his side and dragged forth the big .45 pistol. They must have expected something like that. By the time

he had begun the movement, they were already pushing toward him. A rifle swung in a short arc, struck Claude's gun hand causing sharp, abrupt pain. The pistol dropped to the ground. And after that they were atop him, pinning his arms and shoulders to the ground.

Claude struggled just long enough to get the adrenalin out of his system. After that his common sense began to function and he saw that the first to become exhausted in this affair would most certainly be himself. A very sharp crack from a rifle stock to the side of his head helped to consolidate that truth.

He let himself go limp, looked up and said, between labored breaths: "All right boys, let's see what's next on the program." After all, the Japanese rifles might very well be stolen ones.

They backed away from him. Flat-face held his weapon pointed at Claude's midriff. Incredibly, the man was still smiling. Claude stared at him a little more thoroughly, then, and saw that the smile ended in a long scar. A permanent smile, it was, brought about by slashed facial muscles. Claude shuddered a little and got to his feet.

Flat-face pointed to the south again and swung his hand, indicating that Claude was to walk. The pilot shrugged, rubbed the side of his head and felt the beginnings of an egg. Then he started off. Two of the bandits—or whatever they were—fell in on either side of him; Flat-face and the others brought up the rear.

They trotted like that for perhaps half an hour. Several times Claude attempted to establish communication. He went through every phrase of G.I. mandarin he could recall, a couple of Cantonese words he'd learned in restaurants, and when none of this worked, he threw in some college German and Spanish. He had quite given up the project by the time they emerged from a thin wood patch that circled the base of the mountain like the fringe on a friar's pate.

He stepped into the open, stared and stopped so suddenly that the upper half of him rocked forward. Flat-face shouted something angrily, evidently an order to keep moving. Claude continued walking, but he kept wide-open, troubled eyes on what he saw.

There was, first of all, a long, level stretch—obviously an air strip. At several points about it were structures of camouflage netting covered with twigs and branches. And in each one of these shelters sat an airplane.

This would be the auxiliary strip, *Hirohito's Apple Orchard!*

THE TYPES of the aircraft were somewhat unfamiliar, but he thought he recognized the ghosts of outmoded American designs in them. There was one that resembled very much an old Lockheed cabin job with its single engine, circular fuselage and high wing with the inboard dihedral. Utility cargoes, every one of them; they would be used to hop personnel back and forth between here and one of the main Jap bases, perhaps.

His captors herded him across the strip and, beyond another patch of trees, scattered shacks came into view. They moved toward a tall barbed wire fence, toward a gate and a sentry with short, bandy legs. The sentry's khaki uniform was plain enough, and so were the words he called out.

"*Mate kurai!*"

Claude watched the Jap soldier chatter for a moment into a field telephone that hung on the gate post. In a moment he looked up from it, nodded, and Claude was shoved forward again.

He noted what he could, walking the short distance through the camp. There were a number of shacks built mostly from woven matting and bamboo, some camouflaged, some not. Poles and wires were profuse. A parabolic receiving antenna topped one of the structures. From somewhere nearby Claude could hear the steady thrum of a gasoline generator. He noticed that loudspeakers topped some of the poles at certain points.

Presently he was led before a shack very much like the rest but boasting a shaded porch. A soldier with a small star on his cap trotted forward, babbled something, then took Claude by the arm and shoved him toward the shack. When Claude had passed him he jabbed his bayonet lightly into his rump to accent the order.

"Hey—listen you buck toothed ape!" Claude snarled. He looked again at the

bayonet point and decided not to press the matter.

The soldier waved toward the shack, and motioned for Claude to precede him. They stepped to the porch, the soldier reached around Claude's shoulder, knocked at the door once, then pushed it in gently. It made a long, slow creaking noise as it opened.

"Come on in, fella—come on and take a load off your feet," came a voice from inside the shack. Claude blinked. Shades of apple pie, that voice was right off of Main Street, U. S. A. He spread a wide, joyous grin on his face and stepped inside. Then he stopped cold, and dropped the grin as though it were poison.

THE MAN who sat at the desk inside smiling at him was in the uniform of a Japanese Colonel. "Thought I'd fool you," he said.

Japanese, all right—although there was a certain occidental caste there, somewhere. The beard, for one thing, cut into a careful Van Dyke. And the large eyes. Something reptilian in the way they didn't seem to blink very much.

"Startling, isn't it?" said the bearded man. "But then they tell me my American accent's pretty good. Shut the door, will you?"

Claude complied without taking his stare away from the Jap colonel. He was small and slender and moved in a series of nervous jerks, as a tree lizard might move. His hair was coarse and thick, something like an American Indian's and the tint of his skin was more pinkish than yellow.

"You're thinking I don't look much like a Japanese, aren't you?" he smiled. "Well, if you guys would find out as much about us as we know about you, you wouldn't be so startled. I've a preponderance of Ainu blood. Ten to one you don't know what that is."

Claude continued to stare.

"Thought not," the Jap laughed. "They're our northern aborigines, the Ainus. Most Japs have some of the strain in them. Happens to show on me a little more. But I'm sure you're not interested in this little lecture on ethnology."

"I guess not," Claude said. "But, what next?"

"Oh, we've plenty of time. Relax. I'm Colonel Toki Sakana, by the way."

"Sakana?"

"You've heard the name? Good—I thought maybe I hadn't been getting too much publicity with you fellows. Now, what do I call you?"

"Cooper. Flight Officer Claude Cooper. Serial number oh, five . . ."

"The Geneva convention, eh?" Sakana laughed again. "Your little way of telling me that that's all the information you intend to give. Well, my friend, I think you've got a surprise or two coming. Here, sit down. No use either of us being unpleasant—yet."

Claude moved, almost in a daze, to the chair Sakana indicated. He dropped into it, and moved his head about, noting details of the room. It was evidently Sakana's living quarters as well as his office. An old horn phonograph stood in one corner and a waist-high pile of records behind it. Against the far wall, of all things, stood a massive, mahogany stained player piano, *circa* some time in another century.

"My treasures," Sakana said. "Brought the phonograph here myself. The piano came from a mission not far from here. At first they rather objected to our taking it."

"And?"

"And—well, you see it here, don't you? But, enough of that. Claude Cooper, eh?" He got up, moved to a wooden filing cabinet and pulled a small drawer from it. He rifled through a stack of filing cards.

"Here we are," he said. He held the card in front of his eyes. "Claude Cooper—Flight Officer. Serial number o-five-seven-two-eight-nine. Home town, Banksville, New Jersey. Attended Yale University. Qualified in C-47, C-46, C-45, P-40, P-51, B-25, B-26. Plays piano." Sakana looked up with interest. "Oh, you play the piano, do you?"

Claude shoved himself from the arms of the chair to a standing position. "Where'd you get that dope? How the hell did you find that out?"

"Sit down, Cooper. Please," smiled Sakana. He went back to the desk, then looked up, took a long breath and said quite slowly: "You might as well know right now that you haven't really a very long time to live."

VI

CLAUDE could do nothing but stare back open-mouthed. Sakana hadn't made that last statement as a joke, or a threat or a taunt. It had been simply a putting forth of the fact. Claude's head felt light and empty, as though he were just emerging from the effects of an anaesthetic. He listened while Sakana continued.

"Just a bad break, you'll have to call it—stumbling into my little establishment here. Understand the pilots call this Hirohito's Apple Orchard. Well, that's closer than you think—plum orchard might be appropriate. Because this is where some really juicy plums of information come from, and you can easily understand how anybody who has seen as much of it from the ground as you have, is well, something of a handicap to our security."

Claude shook his head impatiently. "I don't get it."

"It'll come to you," Sakana smiled. "You're due for quite a few surprises during your short stay here. I'll bet this file with your name in it gave you a jolt, didn't it? I've got almost every pilot in China filed away there. Ever listen to Tokyo Rose? They say it's amazing how she seems to know little details about American pilots. This is where they come from."

"Here?"

"Yup." Sakana dropped the card to the desk and leaned back in his chair. "You know I had an idea some overcurious pilot would come snooping around the wreck out there. We were going to remove it for salvage, until I radioed headquarters to have a couple of our fighters stand by. I watched them attack you. Not to be personal, or anything—but wasn't it just a bit cowardly of you to bail out without shooting back?"

"My guns were empty," Claude growled. Suddenly he ramrodded his torso. "The C-47—where . . ."

"Aha," said Sakana, clapping his hands together. "It's the girl you're interested in! Miss Alcott."

"How do you know that?"

"The dying calf look on your pan."

"Where is she?"

"Here."

"Here? Then . . ." he started to get up again.

"You'll see her. Sit down—I'm not finished yet." He lifted a brass letter opener from the desk and tapped the blade of it softly with his palm. "This piano playing of yours. It interests me. I hope you'll be able to play a little while you're here. Tell me, can you do this boogie-woogie stuff?"

"Look, just what is the set-up? Where do I stand? How long do I stay here—and why?"

Sakana shrugged. "You'll be here a few days. A week possibly. You see, when Colonel Dupue and Miss Alcott arrived, I notified headquarters. As soon as they make up their minds you'll be flown out to one of our prison camps for further interrogation. They're certain to execute you eventually because of what you've seen here."

"Mind telling me just what it is I've seen here?" asked Claude sarcastically.

"Well, my little file for one thing. And the antennas and wiring outside. You see this little camp—which your colleagues think is just an auxiliary air strip—is our forward intelligence echelon here in China. If you'll excuse the bragging—it was my idea from the beginning. The United States has always been a fascinating study to me, the same way some people like to watch insects, or poisonous snakes, I guess. Anyway, as you can tell from listening to me talk, I was brought up there and I'm pretty familiar with your mores and customs. I compiled most of the standard reference works on the United States that we now use in Tokyo. I think you'll admit we've got a pretty big advantage over you, there. We know what you're like. You think of us as a bunch of comic characters with buck teeth and pronounced lisps. Isn't that true?"

"Could be," Claude shrugged.

SAKANA dug little bits of blotting paper out with the point of his letter opener. Claude, staring at the object, felt an overwhelming savage desire to plunge it into Sakana's flesh as deeply as it would go.

"Know anything about military intelligence?" Sakana was asking. He didn't wait for an answer. "Probably not. As a

matter of fact, like any other product, it's manufactured from raw materials. Thousands—millions of facts are gathered about the enemy and then sent to a central point where they're boiled down to their essence. Evaluated. Now getting this raw material to the factory, as you might say, is always quite a problem. So I developed this station, here—a forward evaluation station—where we get the raw facts and process them partially, and discard at the beginning what is irrelevant and superfluous.

"By the way, did you notice our partial camouflage? That was my idea, too. If we tried to conceal this place completely, it'd be bound to leak out and make your counter intelligence quite suspicious. But by disguising it as an auxiliary air field we manage to get by with only an occasional air raid—none of them ever doing much damage."

Claude leaned forward. "How do you gather these facts—this raw material, as you call it?"

"Wonderful!" said Sakana, swinging his beard in an upward arc and laughing shortly.

"With as much chance of escaping as a snowball in hell, you sit there entertaining the idea of finding out as much as you can so you can report it. Not much of a realist, are you, Cooper? Well, never mind. I may show you our set-up before you leave. I enjoy showing off my own creations as much as anybody does. You might as well make your stay here as pleasant as possible. Would you like to play the piano for me this evening? I'm something of an amateur pianist and maybe I can pick up a little technique from you."

Claude shrugged. "I don't mind." He tried to make his assent sound as casual as possible. Actually, he couldn't have asked for a better opportunity to formulate plans for escape. Maybe a snowball in Hell did have a chance—if it could get to the Devil, himself.

"Fine," said Sakana. He came around from the back of the desk. "It's about time to eat. I'm going to take you down to the stockade where you can join the other prisoners. I'd ask you all to have dinner with me, except that my officers and I have some business to discuss. Uh—do you mind preceding me to the door?"

He patted the pistol which hung, holstered at his side, and smiled fatuously.

Claude smiled back and complied. On the porch he was put again into the custody of two soldiers who led him for a short distance through the shacks and trees until they came upon a small barbed wire stockade with a wattle barracks inside. At the gate another guard opened a simple padlock. At that moment Jan and Colonel Dupue appeared suddenly from around the corner of the building.

"Jan!" said Claude. He started to run.

The guard thrust a rifle between his legs and he felt the dirt come up and hit him in the face. He looked up, shaking his head, spitting dust. "Why, you . . ."

"Easy, Claude," Jan called hastily. "He's just looking for an excuse."

Claude stared back, then nodded. "Okay," he said. He got to his feet slowly.

He heard the gate shut and the padlock click again behind him as the guard stepped once more outside the fence. Then he grinned at Jan, sweeping his eyes over her, tasting every detail of the black lacquer hair, the pale skin, the tall, straight-shouldered carriage.

"Boy," he said, "I thought I'd never see you again."

Dupue came forward. His bush jacket had been ripped and hung lopsided. He held the heavy hornrims in one hand and raised a tufted eyebrow. "Mr. Cooper, isn't it?"

Claude stared at him. "You know damned well it is. This is no time to pull that stuff."

"He's right, Dupue," the girl said. "We'd better do some intensive sticking together from here on in. How on earth did you get here, Claude?"

He told them the story in essence, then asked, "And you?"

"They managed to decoy our fighter escort away and then jump the transport. Our pilot made a miraculous landing on one engine. Then we split up. The crew went in one direction and we took the other, looking for help. I guess the crew is still walking in somewhere."

DUPUE frowned, stroked a thin nostril with one finger. "They were deuced sure of what they were doing. Must have known Jan was being flown

to Junning. Can't imagine how the devil it leaked out."

Claude squirmed a little, but said nothing.

"The local Dalton boys jumped us," continued Jan, "just as they did you. The Fish keeps them happy by giving them Jap rifles and ammunition, apparently."

"The who?" asked Claude.

"The Fish. Sakana. It means fish in Japanese. Surely you've met him?"

"Oh, him. Yeah—we had quite a session."

"I hope," scowled Dupue, "you didn't mention anything of Jan's mission."

"What do you think I am?" Claude bristled.

Dupue shrugged. "You've been known to pull a boner or two, old boy."

"Now, look, you stuffed shirt . . ."

"Please!" Jan cut in. "Both of you. Haven't you any sense? As a matter of fact, Claude, Dupue has a right to be worried about that. I told Sakana I was a nurse. I don't know whether he suspects anything or not."

"What do you imagine he'd do if he did?" asked Claude.

She cocked her head and frowned. "It's hard to say. You see, I was to go to Junning to influence the Loto tribesman to work for us a little better. I was supposed to try to find out from them if Sakana was really around somewhere, and just what he was up to. Well, now we've found out, and it isn't doing us much good. At any rate, I expect that if they knew I was a counter-intelligence agent instead of a nurse, they'd kind of go overboard in questioning me." She dropped her voice. "I'm afraid of what I might tell them."

"You wouldn't tell 'em anything," said Claude grimly. "I know you wouldn't."

She smiled ruefully. "People in fiction keep secrets under torture," she said, "but I'm not so sure that it can be done in real life. I've seen the Japs work on Chinese when they first moved in. It's not pretty."

"We've simply got to get out of here," said Dupue, putting his hornrims on again. "The whole thing's incredible—fantastic."

The Jap guard at the gate began shouting, and several soldiers appeared, carrying two steaming five-gallon cans between them. "Supper," said Jan. "Stewed weevils with rice thrown in. Dishwater

consomme. Come on, let's go inside."

They ate in the shack. Claude saw that it had been divided in half by hanging some matting in the middle. Jan, seeing him notice, smiled. "Private rooms, you see. Not bad for a prison camp."

Dupue dug into his rice with chopsticks. "I suppose," he said, "we'll have to divide in three . . ."

"No need for that. I'll park in your half, Colonel," Claude said.

Dupue looked up, dangling his long jaw. "Of course. Yes, we can do that. I suppose under the circumstances we can overlook rank."

"Big of you," said Claude. He shook his head. "Don't you ever forget that rank stuff, *Lieutenant Colonel*?"

"Now, boys," Jan warned.

Both men returned to their eating with studied concentration on it. Claude stopped presently and said quietly, almost casually: "Did Sakana . . . uh . . . foretell *your* futures, too?"

"The death warrant stuff?" asked Jan, just as casually, and without looking back at him.

"Yes."

"He did. Apparently it's too dangerous for them to have anyone around after he's seen Sakana's listening post here."

"You think he's saying it to scare us?"

"No."

CLAUDE put his rice bowl down, grimacing in disgust at it. "Look—what ideas have you two got on getting out of here? You've had a chance to look around. What's the set-up?"

Dupue shook his head. "We've gone over a hundred ideas in just the past twenty-four hours. None of them practical. The place isn't frightfully well-guarded, I daresay we could get past the gates. But then what?"

"Yes," Jan nodded. "Sakana's hill bil-lies could track us down in five minutes."

"If we could get to one of those air-planes out there," said Claude slowly, "we might . . ."

"I say, that's it, of course!" put in Dupue. "Now the only problem is how to get to them."

"In other words," Jan smiled, "if we had some eggs, we could have some ham and eggs—if we had some ham."

Dupue snapped his fingers. "A diversion. That would do it. Some kind of diversion so we could dash out without being noticed. We'd have to dream up a method of disposing of the stockade sentry and the one at the gate, what?"

"Listen," said Claude, leaning forward. "Sakana's invited me to play the piano for him tonight. I may be able to lay some groundwork—find out what I can. You two just sit tight until I come back."

"There isn't much time to spare," Dupue said. "We shall be moved out of here presently, according to Sakana. If we're going to escape at all, we damned well have to do it from here. They'll probably split us up afterwards."

The flimsy door of the shack flew open suddenly. The three of them looked up, saw the guard holding it open with one arm and the small, birdlike figure of Colonel Sakana came into the room.

"Good evening, folks!" he smiled. He wore black cavalry boots, glistening with a new shine. "Enjoy your supper?"

Claude nodded at the mess. "What do you think?"

"No, I guess not," Sakana answered. He clucked his tongue. "We ran out of pheasant and caviar, I'm afraid. Well, I have news for you."

"From that smirk on your face, I'll bet it isn't good," Claude said.

He laughed, and ran a thumb along the edge of his short goatee. "A matter of viewpoint," he said. "At any rate you'll be leaving here in about thirty-six hours."

The three of them exchanged glances momentarily and Claude felt suddenly as though someone had dropped an ice cube into the hollow of his chest.

"I imagine," Sakana continued, "that Miss Alcott will be taken directly to Tokyo. Not so sure about you two fellows. They'll be very interested in questioning her about the Loto tribesmen, among other things."

She looked up sharply. "What are you talking about?"

Sakana waved his small fingers. "Let's not keep up the pretense. You almost fooled me with that nurse story until Cooper here told me the truth about you."

Claude swung to his feet. "Until I told you? Hey . . ."

"It's all right, Cooper," Sakana said

reassuringly. "They might as well know." He turned to the others. "Mr. Cooper gave me the information in exchange for his own life. I think it was very sensible of him, don't you?"

"You didn't!" said Jan, staring at Claude.

"Of course I didn't! It's a trick of his, can't you see that? He found out some other way, but he's trying to make us suspicious of each other, the old divide and conquer stuff."

Sakana appeared quite unperturbed. "Ready, Cooper?" he asked.

"For what?"

"To play the piano. You promised. Remember?"

Claude turned back and forth, trying to think of something to say. The eyes of both Jan and Dupue were fastened on him, and uneasy suspicion marked both their faces. He shook his head suddenly in a quick, bitter gesture. "I'm ready," he said, "Let's go."

VII

AS HE sat in the chair in Sakana's room and stared at the little, bearded Jap, Claude had the idea that even his thoughts weren't safe from the man. He watched him light a cigarette and pour a cup of *sake*.

"Sorry," said Sakana, puffing smoke, "to pull such a dirty trick on you. But it's a necessary precaution to reduce your chances of escaping. You'll be able to convince 'em I was lying, I suppose. But that small suspicion will always be there. That's what I'm banking on."

"How did you find out about Miss Alcott, anyway?"

Sakana shrugged. "Putting things together. Her nurse story sounded phoney from the start. I checked up on her through an agent in Kunming. Oh, yes—I'm in communication with Kunming every day. I'll show you a little later on. But suppose we relax now, and have some music. Like a drink?"

He extended the *sake* bottle, and Claude shook his head. Sakana shrugged and poured himself another one. "Your peculiarly American art of swing fascinates me," he said.

Claude suppressed a groan. People who

discussed swing in terms of "art" always made him itch a little. Maybe it needed analysis and explanation to some, but as far as he was concerned, either you were hep, or you weren't.

"Degenerate and primitive at the same time," mused Sakana. "And yet the art of swing has a definite therapeutic value. An outlet for the more animal instincts."

Claude shook his head, slowly. Oh, brother. Put on a swing record, Duchess, it's time to go slumming. I simply adore peasants, don't you?

"I have some swing records, here," Sakana continued, pointing to the pile by the gramophone, "and I've listened to them very carefully, trying to get just what makes the rhythm. I've tried it on the piano, but I don't think I've found the knack yet. You see, my piano study has been—well—I'll show you."

He made several quick steps to the battered player piano, sat down and ran his small fingers though the first few bars of a Chopin prelude. "You see? Very formal—done by rote. But the basis of swing appears to be improvisation."

Claude felt like yawning.

"Now that calls for a perfection of technique so that one is free of mental struggle for it. You'll agree, I think, that my technique is adequate. Why is it, then, that I can't play what you call a 'hot chorus'?"

"Don't know," said Claude. "If you have to ask about it, you just haven't got the word."

"I doubt that," said Sakana. "Well, suppose you play for a while."

Claude played for the next hour. The action of the old payer piano was somewhat stiff and his fingers were considerably out of practice, but Claude's natural musicianship would have shone through worse handicaps. He went through all of the old standard tunes, and his own versions of a few semi-classics. He demonstrated boogie-woogie, barrelhouse and a peculiar, lilting lazy style of his own which he called "sticky keyboard".

Sakana, he noticed, could really lap up the *sake*. Two bottles disappeared in the time that Claude played—and, as far as Claude could tell, they had no more effect on the ex-professor than lemonade would have had.

It was sometime later that knuckles rapped on the door.

"Koi!" said Sakana, looking up.

It opened, with a creak of protest and a squat, puff-cheeked soldier stepped inside and saluted. "*Kudasai*—" he began.

SAKANA took off from the desk chair. He hopped with his peculiar bird gait across the room, swung his arm viciously and backhanded the soldier across the face. A torrent of Japanese came from him. The soldier bowed several times, terror in his eyes, managed to get a few words out, then backed away hastily. He shut the door behind him.

Claude had stopped playing. "What was that all about?"

He noticed that Sakana was all smiles again. There was something unwholesome about the way his face could make a sudden transition from fury to affability, with nothing at all in between.

"Matter of discipline," he said. "I gave strict instructions not to be interrupted. But those morons at the monitor station need me for some detail, or other."

"Why take it out on the soldier?"

"Why not?" Sakana shrugged.

Claude turned back to the piano slowly and thoughtfully. He began to play again. Even though Sakana kept perfect control over his speech, his steps were beginning to wobble a little bit. And the *sake* was bringing something else out, too—Claude wasn't quite sure what to call it, unless it might be the basic Jap character.

Sakana was a clever character, smooth, urbane and a Main Street accent to his English. Yet, in a moment like this, he'd take out his annoyance on a perfectly innocent party and not even think it illogical. Claude wasn't sure just what the psychology of the thing might be, but he recognized in it the reasons that Japs were such mysteries to the occidental mind.

After he had played a few more selections, Claude turned again stretching his fingers. "A little tired," he said. "Mind if I knock off?"

Sakana burped through his beard. "Of course not. I'd like you to come to the monitor station with me. Think you'll be interested."

With Claude in the lead they picked

their way through the camp to a shack slightly taller than the rest. Sakana, Claude noticed, loosened a flap of his holster and kept his hand near his pistol grip as they walked. And he appeared to have even less control over his legs than before. Powerful stuff, that *sake*. One moment you were perfectly all right, the next it was morning and they were throwing water in your face.

A guard with a submachine gun challenged them at the door, then recognized the colonel. Claude stared curiously at his weapon in passing and saw that it was either a copied or captured Thompson, model 1928A.

Inside, he gaped about him. The place was lined with radio receivers, racks, jack boards and all kinds of auxiliary equipment. Three operators, earphones on, sat at receiving desks, scribbling busily. Sakana staggered to one of the receivers. "You wondered how I had a file of American flyers," he smiled, looking at his watch. He picked up a headset and handed it to Claude. "Listen."

There was static and a few tuning wails, then a voice began speaking in Chinese—a high pitched, breathy voice. "Recognize it?" Sakana asked.

"No."

"That's Tung Lichien. Right from his little wine shop on the outskirts of Kunning. I believe you and Miss Alcott were there the other night."

"I'll be damned!" said Claude. He felt a sudden vacuum in his stomach. His flannel mouth had been responsible for Jan's capture, after all.

SAKANA motioned Claude to another corner. A large turntable already covered with a blank acetate record stood there. "We record a lot of your voice transmissions for study," he beamed. He started the turntable whirling and let the cutting needle down on the disk. "I'll show you . . ." he began.

There were sudden, deafening explosions outside—the shack rocked with the concussion.

Sakana spun about, jabbering so that the goatee appeared to dance on his chin. The radio operators stood up and jabbered, too. They ran about the room, getting in each other's way. Sakana picked

up a microphone and sputtered something into it; outside, his amplified orders rang in the public address system.

Someone turned out the light. Claude tensed himself for an immediate leap, but a flashlight blinked upon him, glaring into his eyes and Sakana's voice said: "Outside—you first, Mr. Cooper."

There was a slit trench adjacent to the monitor shack, Claude and Sakana crawled into this together. "They'll go away in a moment," the Jap colonel said, locking into the air. "They only come over here and drop what they've got left. The idiots."

More explosions were sounding, now, near enough so that their flashes made wierd, momentary patterns on the trees and watted structures. Jap soldiers ran about aimlessly, sometimes bumping into each other, chattering, shouting, waving their arms. A diversion, Dupue had said—they would never get a better one than this.

He looked sideways at the bearded Colonel, measuring the distance between them. Sakana must have sensed it. He drew the pistol from the holster and said: "I wouldn't try it, my friend."

He kept the pistol out until the sound of departing engines followed the last explosion. Sakana motioned him back into the monitoring shack, turned on the light and kept him to one side while he stepped a second time to the public address microphone. He spoke into it; calling the rats back out of their holes, Claude imagined.

"I'm afraid," Sakana said, "that discipline isn't what it might be around here. You see, most of the men are expert technicians, cryptographers and so forth."

"They looked like a bunch of chickens with their heads cut off," Claude said.

"Don't let it give you any ideas," Sakana smiled. The others returned, including the guard with the submachine gun. Sakana spoke to him, then turned back to Claude. "We can have one last concert tomorrow night, eh?"

"That's up to you."

"I enjoyed it very much, Cooper. Too bad you're leaving. Well, the fortunes of war. The guard here'll take you back to the stockade. Good night."

"Good night," Claude said. There was

a faint smile on his face, more from his eyes than his lips. Too bad he was leaving, Sakana had said. Well, with any luck at all, he'd leave by quite a different route than that Sakana had in mind. It had just occurred to him how to do it.

IT WAS nearly dawn when, in the prisoners' stockade, Claude finally persuaded Jan and Dupue to listen to him. Sakana had planted his little seed of suspicion very neatly, and it was Jan, finally, who came from behind the matting and said: "Well, it *could* have been a trick of Sakana's, just to make us distrust Claude. He'd be capable of it."

Moonlight came through the square window and through some of the cracks, touching her waxen skin with pale high-lights. Dupue sat straight up on his sleeping mat, fumbled for his hornrims and put them on. "I dare say," he said. "But can we take a chance?"

"We have to," Jan said. "We're not in a spot to weigh possibilities. If Claude here is working for Sakana to save his own neck—well, what can happen to us that's any worse than what's bound to happen to us, anyway?"

"Perhaps so, perhaps so." Dupue focussed a frown on the floor.

Claude brought his tousled hair down in a sharp nod. "Now we're getting somewhere. Look, Dupue, you thought we could make it if we had a diversion, right?"

"Right."

"Okay, tomorrow night that diversion will come."

"It will?"

"Barring accidents," said Claude grimly. He squatted on the floor. "Now here's how it works . . ."

Colonel Sakana, from behind his desk, blinked his oddly reptilian blink. "Well, I suppose this is the last time we'll see each other, Cooper," he said. "You'll be leaving in the morning."

Claude ran his fingers across the keys. "Uh huh," he said.

Sakana seemed very well satisfied with himself and with the world in general this evening. He had been extra lavish in his praise of Claude's piano playing. He tossed down what Claude thought must be at least his tenth cup of *sake*.

"By the way, Cooper—I've got to agree with you on Miss Alcott. She really is a knockout, isn't she? Have you noticed the bland smoothness of her skin, and the way her hair shines, like polished basalt? Almost like a Japanese girl. It's a considerable temptation."

Claude turned his head sharply. "You wouldn't dare—"

"Oh, calm down," Sakana told him. "Don't be so damned emotional about it. A typical red-blooded American, aren't you? About as emotionally mature as a spaniel puppy. How can people like you ever expect to get anywhere? Here—I'll give you a perfect example. Your file card says that you have quite an accident record. Crack ups—carelessness. I'll bet you don't know why, eh?"

"Do you?"

Sakana laughed. "It's simple psychology. You have no more belief in what you're fighting for than an Eskimo. All you really want to do is get home, right? So your subconscious mind keeps pushing you into accidents, with the hope that an injury of some sort will force them to send you home. The self destruction complex. As simple as that."

"Maybe," said Claude.

"You're an archetype, Cooper. You're why the United States can't win."

"We haven't been doing so bad," Claude reminded him.

"Yes, but we're counting on something."

"What?"

"The typical attitude of which you're a shining example. It's made up of a lot of things. One is that most of you still don't believe in your war, deep down."

"Because we don't spend half our time shooting the breeze about it?" Claude asked. "No—I think you're wrong there. Ever listen to a bunch of pilots hangar flying? The guy who has the most complicated theories about flying is usually the guy who knows the least. By talking so much about it, he's groping—trying to convince himself."

SAKANA brought his lids down sharply over his eyes. He slammed a palm to the table top. "We're getting nowhere," he said. "And the conversation's irritating me." There it was, that crazy change of

mood again. "Suppose you stick to your piano playing."

"Okay by me," shrugged Claude. "By the way, you wanted to learn to improvise, didn't you?"

"Well, yes, I had thought of it. But since you're leaving so soon . . ." His smile was back again.

"Think you could do this?" Claude made a simplified base pattern.

"Does sound easy, doesn't it?" Sakana slid his *sake* cup to one side and rose from the desk. "I'm sure I could do the fingering. It's the rhythm. A certain lag to it. Perhaps you're right when you say one either has it to begin with, or else he doesn't."

"Why don't you try it?"

"No, I . . ."

"Go ahead. It's the only way you'll learn."

"Hm. Well . . ." Sakana moved a little unsteadily to the piano bench.

Claude slid from the seat as casually as he could, and motioned at the keyboard. "Key of F," he said. "Just make a simple tenth in the base on your first beat, then a chord, an octave and a chord again. You'll get the rhythm."

"Perhaps, perhaps." Sakana lowered himself to the seat and spread his small, neatly tapered fingers before him.

Claude made a swift motion at the desk top. In the next instant he had hooked his forearm about the man's neck. He heard the cry which Sakana had intended to make change into a startled gasp. The little Jap began to struggle. He reached for the pistol at his side, but Claude's hand beat him to it. Still holding the strangle grip with one hand, Claude with the other began to beat the stock of the weapon as heavily as he could at the man's head. The blows were hard and made an unexpectedly loud noise, not unlike banging a table top with a hammer. It was more difficult to knock out a man than Claude had supposed. He hit Sakana at least six times before the Jap fell limp. He let him drop, then, and stood over him breathing heavily.

Claude took the brass letter opener from the blotter. He glanced at it, then at the unconscious man. This was the moment—this was the part of the job he knew he'd have to come to sooner or

later. If he didn't do this, Sakana might regain consciousness in time to upset everything.

Claude raised the knife and held it, point downward, over Sakana's back. He shut his eyes tight and pumped it up and down, feeling it plunge into flesh, feeling the warm blood on the heel of his hand. He wanted to retch.

Carefully, Claude wiped the knife on Sakana's uniform, dropped it into the pocket of his own flying suit, then scooped up the pistol and walked to the door. His head was light, almost dizzy. He peered through the loose crack next to the jamb and saw that the guard was still pacing up and down outside, alert enough to the area beyond, but in general, keeping his back to the door. Claude backed slightly from the door, turned the latch and pushed it gently. It creaked, as he had known it would.

THE GUARD turned abruptly and peered at the low porch. Claude swung the door back and forth a bit, keeping well behind it. The guard brought his rifle across his midriff, then, and trotted forward. Claude's mind went back to pre-flight school and one or two lectures on judo and dirty fighting—stuff he'd never dreamed he'd have to use. But he remembered it with considerable pleasure now. There were very specific instructions on how to stab a man so that he wouldn't cry out.

The Jap soldier stuck his head inside. Claude saw the sudden jolt of his eyebrows as he spotted Sakana, limp and bloody, lying by the piano stool. He shot his palm out, then, caught the Jap's shoulder and spun him in a half circle. Immediately he thrust the knife, upward, sinking it into the man's kidneys. The soldier looked very, very surprised and his short legs folded under him letting him down with incongruous ease to the floor. He lay there with one leg jerking spasmodically.

Claude trotted through the camp in a series of short dashes from one shadowed area to another. He saw no one, but occasionally sounds of talking came to his ears as he passed various buildings. The hum of the power generator and the chirping of tree frogs were the only other

IRON clanged on iron, voices jabbered and the sickening crump of bombs blasted through the night. Men began running in all directions, shouting, howling, bumping into each other. Claude pumped his long legs in the direction of the prison stockade.

He didn't have to be silent this time. He ran to within ten feet of the guard there, saw the astounded opening of the man's face then ripped him in half with forty-five caliber slugs from the sub-machine gun.

Jan and Dupue were already coming to the gate. "The key—it's in the guard's pocket!" she called to him.

Claude bent over the man and found the small piece of metal. A moment later he had the padlock open and the three of them were crouched, running. The thump of bombs and the snarl of engines continued, filling the whole camp.

They were halfway to the air strip when the noise stopped abruptly.

"What the hell?" panted Dupue, throwing a glance over his shoulder.

"Come on," said Claude, "try that plane over there. And let's hope to hell it flies."

A moment later they were in the cabin. There was a painful moment of uncertainty while the starters moaned, then the engine caught and the whirling propeller made a sheen in front of their eyes.

"Hang on," muttered Claude.

IT WAS a great day at the 14th Air Forces' base at Jinnung in Kwangsi province. The General stepped from a C-47, trailed by his staff officer in charge of operations and training and a couple of camera slingers from the public relations office. He waved aside the tactical inspection set up for him by Jinnung's base commander and said, "Wheeah's Cooper?"

They found Flight Officer Claude D. Cooper in the operations shack with Miss Jan Alcott and Lieutenant Colonel Salton Dupue. He was animatedly discussing something that sounded suspiciously like psychology. Colonel Banstetter Kegg wrinkled his nose dubiously and kept it wrinkled all during the preliminary amenities. He waited patiently while the

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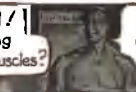
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