FIGHTING ACES OF WAR SKIES

WINGS

WINTER

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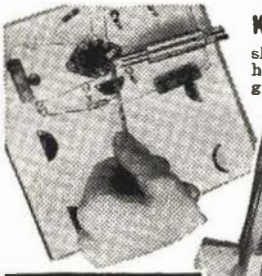
FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

TRADE MARK REG.

...e COCKPIT
... MY COFFIN"
... Epic of China Skies
WALT SHELDON

A full-length War-Air Novelet
by Llewellyn Hughes
CAPTAIN LUCK

"Stateside" read his orders. Hollywo



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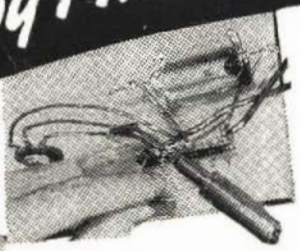
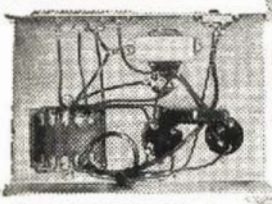
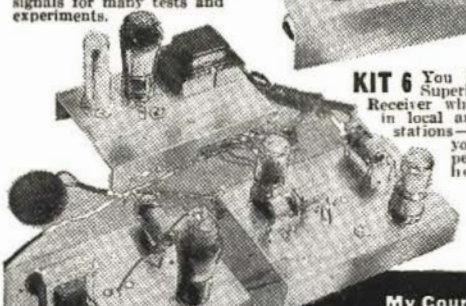


KIT 3 You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



KIT 4 You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.

KIT 5 Building this A. M. Signal Generator gives you more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.



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WINGS

DEDICATED TO AMERICA'S FIGHTING AIRMEN

T. T. SCOTT, President — MALCOLM REISS, Gen. Mgr. — PAUL L. PAYNE, Editor

Two Gripping Novels of Flying Fury

"MY COCKPIT IS MY COFFIN" . . . . . by WALT SHELDON 4

What was he fighting, this terrible, flak-scarred old man they called the Dragon? Still the hottest pilot in those China skies, was he lining his ring-sights on the slant-eyed sons of heaven—or on Lieutenant Gregory Jones, his own flesh and blood?

OPERATION OBLIVION . . . . . by MALCOLM MARTIN 64

Flying wing-to-wing with him, they glared their hatred, sneered their contempt. He made a fine art of avoiding combat. For what, they snarled, was this fancy fly-boy saving himself?

A Smashing Novelette

CAPTAIN LUCK . . . . . by LLEWELLYN HUGHES 104

Three engines conked and a pint of gas in her tanks . . . air screaming in and out of flak-holes and blood dribbling from the bomb-bay . . . only one thing could coax that staggering Lib home—the fierce heart of Steve Dillon!

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—Or how to fill the air with Hon. Imperial wreckage.

WINTER (Nov.-Jan.) Issue, 1947

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20c a copy

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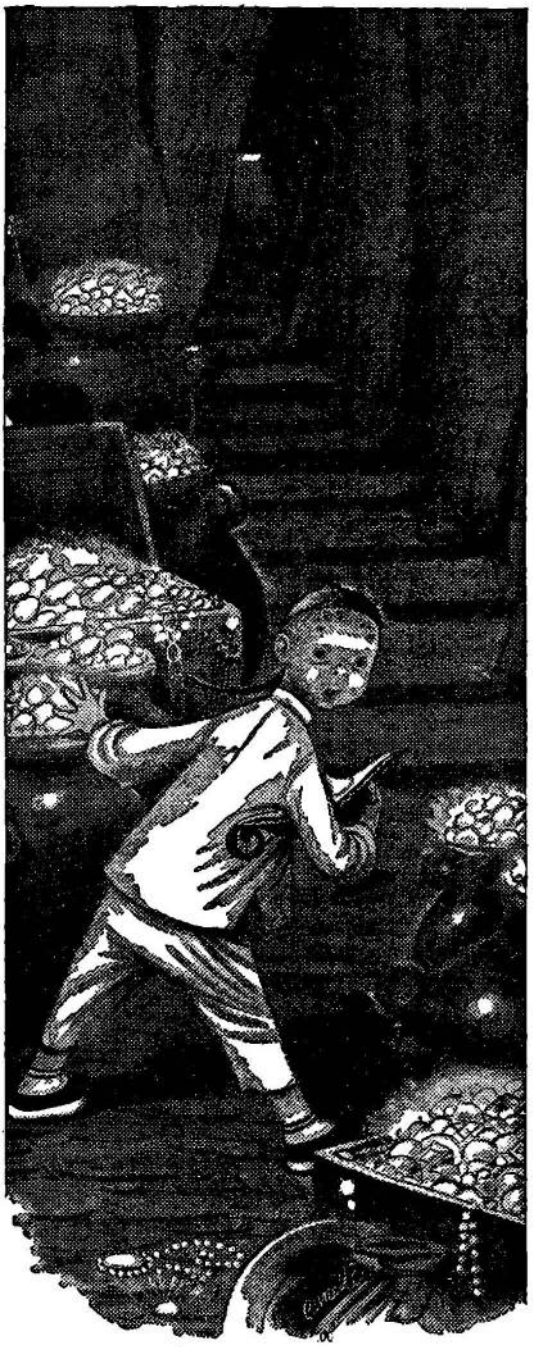

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- Their weakness
- Their unfilled promises

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- Their unfair practices
- Their unbusinesslike attitudes

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WOMEN AND THEIR DREAMS
- What they really dream about
- What they don't dream about

. . . . . and much more

WOMEN AND OTHER MEN
- Their two-penny tricks
- Their discourtesy when referring to them

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- Their refusal to accept rejection
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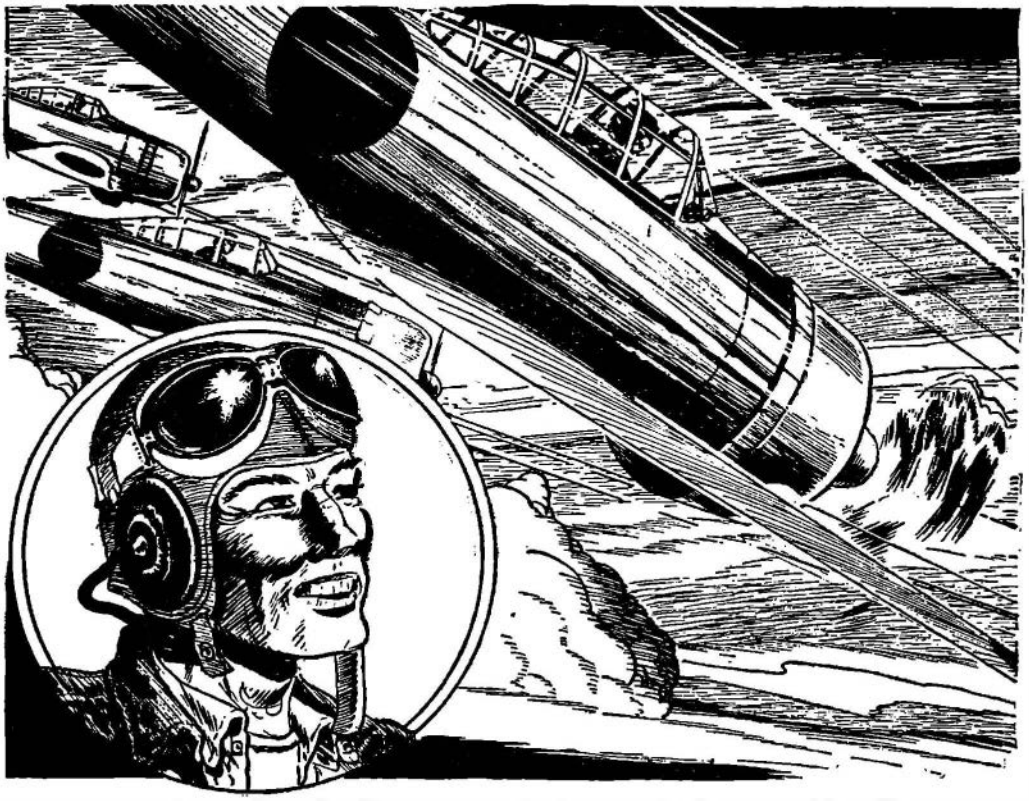


He keyed the mike. "Come on, Dad—let's get the hell out of here!"

"My Cockpit Is My Coffin"

By WALT SHELDON

What was he fighting, this terrible, flak-scarred old man they called the Dragon? Still the hottest pilot in those China skies, was he lining his ring-sights on the slant-eyed sons of heaven—or on Lieutenant Gregory Jones, his own flesh and blood?

THE OLD MAN SMILED. HE had not the slightest doubt that the diving Nakajima would become his twentieth kill—even though it wasn't yet in his sights. He swung his P-40 about in a lazy arc and pointed it toward where the Japanese fighter was plummeting toward a lone, unmarked B-25.

The Jap hadn't seen him yet, that was almost certain. If he had—and especially if he had noticed the dragon jaws painted on the P-40's scoop in place of the usual shark's mouth—he might have attacked the Mitchell a little less confidently. He might very well have picked out a convenient cloud and headed for it.

The small, wiry man of forty odd summers gently lowered a pair of scarred lids over two gunmetal-grey eyes, and sticked his Warhawk toward the Nakajima. The smile stayed on his lips.

The War Department listed him as Ferdinand Jones, Colonel, Air Corps Reserve. But to thousands of newspaper readers—and to all who fought in China—he was known by a name that bore out the P-40's unusual markings. They called him The Dragon. No one was certain how it had started; the current favorite explanation was that a guerrilla general had watched Colonel Jones squirm a fighter through a swarm of Zeros, and had announced that


W.B. VESTAL

even the Dragon of Peiping was less slippery, less fierce.

This was the man, then, who now held a Japanese pilot's life under the ball of his thumb. His hair was a tight skull cap of pepper and salt; the lines in his face were as deep and numerous as China's valleys. He was smiling because he hadn't expected the Nakajima. He had brought the Warhawk upstairs merely to test a new tail reinforcement.

The space between the Nakajima and the Mitchell closed. Buds of flame danced on the leading edges of the Jap's wings. The Mitchell's top turret swung around and its perforated barrels grew spearheads of flame. Tracer smoke embroidered the sky.

In the next instant, the Jap fighter swept over the B-25, its belly miraculously missing the twin tails. The turret guns swung with it.

The Dragon watched the Nakajima move toward the crossed lines in the center of his sight ring. He saw it had already begun to pull out from the dive, and he knew from long experience almost the exact degree of that pullout. He made the necessary hairline compensation with stick and rudder.

A flash glimpse from the corner of his eye showed him the B-25 already dipping away toward the deck, and he gave a little snort of contempt. The bomber's pilot was perfectly within his rights, of course, to avoid air combat like that—but at the same time a well-gunned Mitchell had more than a passing chance with such a lone Nakajima.

Probably the B-25 crew was more green timber. It was coming in every day now—it almost looked as though high brass had just awakened to the fact that there was a war in China.

AS THE two fighters converged, the Dragon's—a little larger and had been scheduled to report to the Eightieth Group—an experimental job being sent to try out some new kind of radio gadget the War Department was all excited about.

When the heralded trick B-25 had not made an appearance right away, the Dragon had shrugged and gone on about his business of running the Eightieth. As far as he was concerned they could shut off all communication except supply and he would be perfectly happy. He could go on doing what he was doing for the next hundred years, if he lived that long. And of all of his tasks in China none pleased him better than what he was doing now—getting an enemy plane in his sights and moving his thumb to the well-worn trigger button.

It may have been the Jap's ancestors who came to his aid at that moment or some especial astuteness on the part of the Jap—or just fool luck—that caused the Nakajima to wing over and drop its nose just as the Dragon pressed the trigger. It did so with almost unbelievable speed and maneuverability. The Dragon watched the tracers slam away toward the spot where the Nakajima had been. He tried to rudder the P-40 over and walk another burst into the target. But he had accumulated too much speed to turn quickly.

Other men might have sworn aloud; the Dragon only pressed his thin lips together. He had learned long ago to keep his emotions out of the cockpit. He fought with cool, deadly enjoyment.

Not long ago a particularly nosey correspondent—some fellow who had written a novel or something—had tried to probe into the darker parts of his mind. He remembered barring the correspondent from Kulung, and then not sleeping well for three nights. Damn them, they were all the same. They couldn't let him alone.

He was good at both fighting and flying, and he knew that. Now, for example . . . The Nakajima had gained speed, nosed up again into a half loop and started a hard, climbing turn. The book would have suggested turning toward it, trying to get on its tail. And that was probably what the Jap pilot expected.

The Dragon smiled just a little and turned *away* from the Nakajima. This was the longer chance on his own danger, but the better chance on his own victory. If he finished his turn quickly enough, the Jap would cross his bore-sight broadside, and then he would be inexorably on its tail. If his turn were a second too slow, he would be the target.

But the Dragon had never quite grasped the fact that one day tracers might bite into his own cockpit. For all he cared, *it*

could damned well happen any time. He was more than ready for it.

The others in the Eightieth sensed that their commander felt that way. Major Arnold, the chubby, pink-skinned exec was given to flashing snapshots of a pretty wife and three children as chubby as he—and once he had asked if the Dragon had any photos to show. The Dragon had growled negatively and moved off to gaze moodily out of a window. The Major had shrugged and looked troubled.

The pilots had bull sessions about it. Pro and con was argued on the question, "Is he human?" Nobody ever arrived at a satisfactory conclusion.

There were few known facts. The Dragon had turned up in China shortly after the organization of the American Volunteer Group, before the official U. S. entry in the war. Before that he had been knocking around the world, flying and fighting for anyone who would supply an airplane, guns and an enemy. He seemed to have begun his wanderings shortly after a private airplane crash, in which he had been the pilot. His wife had been killed in that crash. He had a full grown son somewhere in the war, but he never mentioned him, nor allowed anyone else to do so.

"Guilty complex," said some of the pilots who had a smattering of psychology. "Feels responsible for his wife's death. Has to punish himself."

But some of the others who had a smattering of practical human nature said, "It's more complicated than that."

The Dragon, urging his P-40 through its tourniquet turn with vertical wings and hard back stick, had less idea than any of them what made him the way he was. And he didn't want to find out.

A PAIR of grey eyes remarkably like the Dragon's—a little larger and clearer, perhaps—were at that moment watching the curving courses of the two fighter planes move inevitably toward an interception point. They looked from under the plexiglass dome of a B-25 top turret, along the line of two Browning machine guns. A moment ago those eyes had stared at their first enemy plane, and had watched tracer smoke embroider the sky, then had snapped about with the turret as the Nakajima passed overhead.

Now, as their owner watched the dragon-mouthed P-40 perform, he found himself toying with the fantasy that his own swinging turret was the cockpit of a fighter craft and that he was the pilot in that little crate.

His earphones crackled abruptly and interrupted his day dream. "Pilot to top turret," they said. The voice was a drawling one. "How you doin', boy? Still with us?"

"I'm okay, Mustang," he said, touching the mike button. He grinned and added, "Little shaky in the knees maybe. I hope that P-40 takes care of him."

"I do, too," the pilot's drawl answered. "That's what I called you about. We've spotted this Kulung outfit. Field's right under us. Soon's our slant eyed friend gets taken care of we'll be dropping down. Stick by them shootin' irons, meanwhile, will you, Greg?"

"Wilco," said the grey-eyed gunner. He turned his attention to the dogfight once more. The Jap was flashing down on the P-40 now and tracers were bobbling away from its slender wings. But they were missing—missing wide. It scudded along in the wake of its own burst, and the P-40 was already out of its turn. The Nakajima brought one wing up to begin a desperate, hopeless reverse.

Lieutenant Gregory Jones reached for the turret jack box and turned the switch to the "Command" position. He did that purely on a hunch—and the hunch turned out.

A thistle-edged voice sounded on the radio. It was low and mocking, and sounded as though it could belong to nobody else but the man who had just executed that impossible manuever in the Warhawk. "Hello, Tojo," it said. "Forgot that even a P-40 can make a tight turn—into the wind. Didn't you?"

"I kill! I kill Amerikani!" came the Jap's hoarse, high-pitched answer.

But Lieutenant Gregory Jones scarcely heard that last transmission. His grey eyes had widened to the size of silver rupees. His whole slender frame had stiffened, until it seemed it would no longer fit the turret.

There was no doubt of it. That soft, burred voice belonged to a man he hadn't seen in five years.

He watched, his breath all but exploding from his chest and the beat of his bloodstream hard on his temples. The Nakajima was off the P-40's nose now, aligned but much too far away. Too far? Eight hundred yards? For an ordinary pilot, perhaps too far. But this was a master. Steel jacketed spew came from six fifty-caliber machine guns in the P-40's wings. Far ahead it converged and bits of it seemed to float toward the Jap airplane. Then it connected. Greg saw one while hot slug bounce crazily from the Nakajima's engine mount and then go off into space.

The Jap's thin wings wavered. Smoke made a black, viscous trail in the slipstream.

This is the kill, thought Greg, half-rising from the bicycle-seat.

But it wasn't. The Nakajima was wobbly, but still flying. The P-40 crawled toward it, then seemed to rise like a balloon to a position just above it. The Jap pilot —plainly startled—dropped a wing and pulled away. The P-40 became a leech. It dropped in the wake of the Jap, and then floated above it again. It repeated the whole procedure a third time.

The pilot of the B-25 was drawling into the interphone again. "Greg—can you see what that waddy's up to?"

"Can't guess, Mustang," the lieutenant replied.

The bomber's wing dipped, to give its pilot a better view. Two thousand feet below them Greg saw crossed runways in the midst of rolling green hills and the dragon-scale pattern of rice paddies. Kulung—no doubt of it. The whole crew had waited long weeks for this moment; first an oil pump in Natal, then a monsoon in Calcutta. And, for all they knew, the same shoulder-starred gentry who had impressed them with the vast importance of their experimental mission had forgotten them by now.

But to Greg Jones, Second Lieutenant, Army of the United States, the mission was secondary. He had come to China for one great moment. That moment should take place within the next half hour, at the very least . . .

"Judas, look what he's doin'!" came the pilot's voice again. Greg looked. The pilot added a running commentary to what was already plain. "He's forcin' that rice-eater down on the Kulung strip! Gonna corral him all in one piece!"

It all happened very quickly, and almost unbelievably. The dragon-snouted P-40 flew magnificently, with utter sureness. The Nakajima dipped and dodged and jockeyed, and then suddenly it was headed for the runway, its damaged engine putting it into the equivalent of a power glide approach.

Vehicles scuttled like scared bugs across the tarp. The Nakajima skimmed for a moment across the first part of the strip, then settled down. Probably it was the pilot's instinct to land it, even in the teeth of certain capture; perhaps he was dazed; maybe he simply didn't choose the only form of suicide available. But he did land it. Greg saw the Jap airplane roll a ways, then swerve and plow off to one side. The P-40 came down and buzzed it, then chandelled away.

The Nakajima stood tail high, nose buried in the turf.

WHEN the B-25 landed, Lieutenant Gregory Jones scrambled from it even before the pilot gave the throttle a final blip to clear the cylinders. Even as he dropped from the belly hatch, he spotted the small, wiry man with the jaunty stride that was taking him from the P-40 revetments to the operations shack. The small man held his goggles in one hand and swung them as though they were a swagger stick.

"Hello!" called Greg, trotting toward him. The Dragon turned, and squinted. At twenty feet, Greg stopped. He held his smile as a stone is held in a slingshot—and he stared back. He was taking in the grey eyes so much like his own, the seamed face that looked as though it had been through every thunderstorm in China since the Tang dynasty.

"Dad," said Greg. "Dad—you old son of a gun!"

Colonel Ferdinand Jones—the Dragon —brought his small shoulders back. He looked as though a sudden tub of ice water had just been emptied over him. His thin mouth parted, and his eyes ringed out from the center. He drew a long, stiff breath—like a cold engine pulling for spark.

"Greg," he said hollowly, "Greg—"

The boy stepped forward and his long-fingered hand came out. The Dragon didn't seem to see it. An odd film came over the Dragon's eyes, making them dull. He held them like fixed guns on the younger man.

"It's me, Dad. It's me all right," grinned Greg.

The Dragon suddenly dropped his shoulders forward again. His lined face seemed to cave in on itself. He closed his mouth, almost with an audible snap. Then he spoke —and his voice had in it the latent iciness of supercooled air. "Lieutenant," he said, "have you been officially assigned to this command?"

Greg's hand dropped. "Why, sure, Dad. Had to pull a few strings, but I made it. Guess my orders haven't caught up yet—"

"Then, suppose," said the Dragon, "that you report in the customary manner. I'll be in my office tomorrow."

Greg's long head went to one side. Puzzlement made ruts in his forehead. Abruptly he was grinning again. It was a joke. Hell, yes—the old man's idea of humor. "Sure, Dad," he said. "Meanwhile, we'll have a drink together, eh? I brought a bottle of scotch just for—"

"Lieutenant," said the Dragon stiffly, "apparently you still don't understand what I mean."

Greg's smile faded once more. "No—I —I'm afraid I don't."

"All right, then, here it is—straight." The Dragon's voice was very low and very even. "I don't want you here. If I did, I'd have asked for you. I sent you to school when I left—and that takes care of my obligation. You've got your own life, now, and I've got mine—is that clear?"

"But, Dad—"

"Why do you think I returned all your letters unopened?"

Greg gestured with his palms. "Well, I thought maybe you were busy. Or didn't get them. Or—"

"And why do you think I left in the first place?"

"I don't know, Dad. I'd hoped to find out."

The Dragon made a brief, decisive nod. "I'll tell you right now, then. I don't want any ties with the past. I don't want to remember what happened. I don't want to love anybody. Is that clear? If you don't love anybody, you don't get hurt. And I'll tell you more. There's a war on out here and there's room only for people who fight it. I—"

The Dragon's voice had been rising steadily, and now he caught himself. He stopped, paused. His glance dropped to his son's shirt pocket, and he saw the technical observer's wings.

"You're not a pilot, eh?"

"No." Greg answered as though in a dream. He couldn't stop staring, gaping. "I washed out in Advanced. Eyes. They sent me to radar school."

"To *what?*"

"Radar. Radio detection and ranging. I'm on the specially equipped two-five that just pulled in—"

"Oh. *That.*" The Dragon shook his head. "I need pilots and gunners and they send me laboratory technicians."

"Aw, now, listen, Dad," said Greg, stepping forward, and trying another grin. The ice in the Dragon's eyes stopped him.

Greg's long form swayed for a moment. It seemed to him that he was suddenly looking at everything through a block of melting gelatin. He took a deep breath. He clipped his hands to his sides, cupping them slightly; he brought his heels hard together, and gave the Dragon a salute. It was a military salute exactly as prescribed in regulations.

"I'll report in the morning, sir," he said.

The Dragon nodded. He returned the salute carelessly and then, glowering at the ground, he moved off. His walk was slower than usual, and not quite as jaunty. Greg watched his back for a long time before he, too, turned and went back to join the other crew members of the B-25.

II

NOBODY AT BASE HEADQUARTERS paid much attention to the four new men who checked in. Everyone was too busy being excited about the Nakajima which had just been forced down by the Dragon, and the prisoner who had been captured alive. If the clerk who registered Greg noticed that his name was the same as the Colonel's, he didn't indicate it. And Greg was doing very little noticing himself—he felt as dazed as though he had

just spent fifteen rounds in the ring with a heavyweight champion.

There were several jeeps going from headquarters to the B.O.Q. Greg put his bags in one and climbed on top of them. He scarcely looked at the small, neat Chinese officer who got in beside him. He had only a vague impression that the man had his high, olive-drab collar buttoned in spite of the South China sun, and that he smelled strongly of shaving lotion.

After the jeep had started he realized that the Chinese officer was speaking to him. He spoke good American. "Just check in, lieutenant?" he asked pleasantly.

"Yes," Greg's answer and smile were both forced.

"Sing's my name." The Chinese offered a hand, which Greg shook routinely. "You'll like it here. Missions are rough sometimes, but the living's good. Swankiest B. O. Q. in China."

"That's good," said Greg absently. He supposed that this officer was one of the Chinese-American Wing, the group that had trained stateside and then returned to fly with AAF units.

Sing chattered on, evidently proud of his mastery of the breezy air corps idiom. "Yes, sir. We live in an old country estate. You'll see it in a minute. Belonged to a high mucky-muck war lord—I used to see him around in Shanghai long before the war. But now his ex-gal friend runs it for the pilots. Damn good deal. She's a White Russian—from Shanghai, of course, like all of 'em. Tanya Varinov, that's her name. And a gorgeous dish, too."

"I see," said Greg.

The Chinese officer looked at him closely for a moment. "Say, I might as well give you the usual warning, if you don't mind."

"Hmm?" said Greg. "No, I don't mind. What warning?"

"Keep all fangs retracted when you see her."

Greg shrugged disinterestedly.

"Okay," said Sing. "I just thought I'd mention it. You see, the Dragon is kind of sweet on her. He snorts fire if anybody else looks at her the wrong way."

Now it was Greg who turned his head slowly and stared. "You don't say?"

"Yup," nodded Sing. "And more power to him. He flies hard. Needs relaxation. Now he's got this supply dump on top of everything."

"What supply dump?"

Sing motioned vaguely. "Somebody at H. Q. decided that Kulung here is just the place for a big new service center."

"Service center? Isn't that pretty high echelon for this far forward?"

"I guess so," said Sing. "But the next big push is supposed to come in this sector. The Japs know it, and everybody else knows it. They just don't know when. And they don't know where or how those supplies are dumped around here. They give us hell every day trying to find out. There's a spy under every bed."

"Well, where *is* the supply dump?" Greg asked.

Sing laughed at that. "It might be any of nine places. It took 'em a long time, but they sure covered it up. I guess the Dragon and a couple of members of his staff are the only ones around here who know where it really is. And it's all the Dragon's baby. A rough deal."

"I think he likes it rough," said Greg.

"Yeah, maybe so." Sing cupped his hands a lighted a cigarette. He looked up again. "What'd you say your name was?"

"I didn't. But it's Jones."

"Same as the Dragon's, huh? Any relation."

"That," said Greg, "is what I'm beginning to wonder."

THE Bachelor Officer's Quarters turned out to be indeed swanky, as Sing had said. It was a converted country estate—a series of long, low buildings rambling over thoughtfully landscaped hillocks, brooks, and tree-shaded duck ponds. At the registration desk a grinning, moon-faced house boy took Greg's bags, and looked disappointed when Greg insisted on retaining one leather brief case with a brass lock on its flap. The houseboy, with a kind of India rubber waddle, led him through a series of corridors and breezeways.

He brought him finally to a small room with a table, chairs, and a string bunk in it. He put the bags on the bunk, then turned to Greg. "I Wally Hu," he announced, grinning. "You want, you call. Okay?"

"Okay. Thanks." Greg smiled. The house boy was round all over; round head, round

chest, round stomach. He wore cotton pants and a half open shirt. Greg asked, "Where do you wash?"

"In bass-loom," said Wally Hu blithely.

"I know. But where is it?"

Wally pointed down the hall. "You want, you call. Okay?"

"Okay," laughed Greg. Wally Hu waddled off. Greg stepped to the door, closed it, and began to unpack. From the top of his B-4 bag he took several books and placed them end up on the table. He smiled dryly as he did so, recalling the other things he'd had to leave behind to make up for the weight of those books. And he was thinking also that the Dragon—or the man the Dragon now seemed to be—wouldn't exactly approve of the slightest tendency toward bookishness.

He was unfolding some khaki trousers when the knock came on the door.

"Come in," he said, without looking up.

He supposed it might be Wally Hu, again, or one of the other houseboys. It was quite a surprise, therefor, when a low, purring feminine voice followed the sound of the door opening. "So you are his son."

GREG whirled. The woman who stood, leaning on the door jamb and smiling, was perhaps one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen in his life. She wore a tight gown of creamy silk, cut Chinese-style, sleeveless and with a high collar. She was slim, but there were enough curves in the right places. There was a suggestion of fullness, of flowering maturity even to her slimness. Her very dark eyes had the barest suggestion of a slant, the look that long residence in the Orient sometimes gives to Caucasians.

"Hello," he said, not knowing much else to say.

"I am Tanya Varinov," she said. "Forgive my coming so soon, yes? But I could not wait. I heard that you had come. You see, I manage the hostel here, and from my house boys I hear everything almost before it happens."

"Er—happy to know you," said Greg.

"You see," she went on airily, "your father and I are very—dear friends." He sensed that her light manner was merely a cover for a very close inspection of him. He heard her add, "I hope we shall be friends, too—yes?"

Tanya Varinov

"Er—yes. I'm sure we will," said Greg. He shuffled a chair for her and she sat down. He offered her a cigarette, she took it, and he lighted it for her.

When she was exhaling her first puff she saw the books on the desk. "Oh!" She made a little, delighted cry and leaned forward to tilt one, inspecting it more closely. "Oriental Philosophy. Japanese Ideographs. The Sociology of Shintoism," she read. She looked up at Greg. "You *are* different from your father, yes?"

Greg shrugged. He was annoyed. He didn't want to discuss his father with any one until he had thought a few things out very carefully.

"You speak Japanese?" she asked.

"A few words." He gestured off-handedly. "Had a Nisei friend in school. He got me interested in it."

"Your father will want to know that. I think he may be having a most difficult time with his new prisoner. He called on the base telephone to ask if I spoke any. I don't, of course."

Greg nodded, and then moved nervously to the other side of the table. "Look," he said, "if you don't mind, now, Miss Varinov, I—"

Her singing, skylark laugh cut him short. "Of course—you are busy," she said. "You must forgive me—perhaps I have been spoiled by too many men. But I will tell you the truth, now. I came here to help you. That is, if you will permit it."

"To help me?"

She nodded earnestly. "You see, I know how your father feels. I know what must have happened when you met him today. But he needs you. I understand these things. It is I who will bring you together again, yes?"

Greg was still uncomfortable. "I appreciate your interest, Miss Varinov—"

"You must call me Tanya."

"All right. Tanya. What I want to say is that I've got to think about the—er—situation some more before I can talk about it. Do you understand?"

She got up, then, with a soft rustle of her creamy silk gown. "Of course." He noticed that she appeared to swing her eyes about and give the room a final inspection. Then she turned them once more full upon him. "We will have dinner," she said. "Tomorrow evening. No—day after tomorrow. That will give you much time to think, yes?"

"Well, uh—"

"Of course. It is an engagement." She smiled and nodded decisively. "And I will be hostess. We will go to Wang Lei's—he is the best in Kulung and he cooks Peiping style."

"But, er—" said Greg.

"Seven o'clock," she smiled. She moved to the door. *"Au 'voir."* And then, with another rustle of silk, she was gone.

GREG closed the door and let out a long breath. He frowned mightily and shook his head several times. He kept frowning as he went back to his packing. Somewhere, in everything that had happened, he sensed a pattern, an overall scheme—but whatever it was, it kept eluding him. What annoyed him most was that his arrival in Kulung was to have been the end of a long trail—and now it seemed that it was only the beginning of a new, and more confusing one.

He thought back to the day that an odd chance had brought him the opportunity to get assigned to the Eightieth Group, commanded by the fabulous Colonel Ferdinand Jones. At a secret tactical center in Florida the same crew that had arrived at Kulung today had been training in the same specially equipped B-25. Greg—because of an engineering degree, he suspected—had been assigned to radar after flunking a routine eye check less than a week before he was to have won his pilot's wings.

On the day that he had accidentally discovered Kulung and the Eightieth Group on the unit assignment list, he had already become a firmly established member of Radar Team Ten. Lieutenants Mustang Morley and Swanee Hendricks flew the airplane. Sergeant Emidio Antonio acted as crew chief, and Greg operated the secret equipment. Although the four of them were as different in their backgrounds and interests as any four men picked at random, they all shared one almost fanatical belief. They were convinced that radar was the savior of civilization—or something close to it.

And now Greg reminded himself that he'd have to warn the others. Colonel Jones—the Dragon—was going to prove

something of an obstacle to their mission, if Greg guessed correctly.

He wrestled with his disturbing thoughts all through the rest of his unpacking. After a while, he stretched out on the bed, folded his hands behind his neck and stared at the ceiling.

THE KNOCK on the door, when it came, awakened him. He saw that there was darkness outside. He got up, yawning, went to the door and opened it. It was an orderly.

"The Colonel'd like to see you," he announced. "He's down in that old storage building where they've got the Jap prisoner. I'll drive you down there."

Greg let his heavy eyebrows hang for a second. Then he said, "The mills of the gods sure grind fast around here, don't they? Let's go."

Minutes later, Greg entered a long, low building near the air field. Guards had challenged them as they approached, and then escorted them toward one end of the structure where light made thin lines around drawn blinds.

The small room turned out to be a hotbed of oak leaves, both silver and gold. No less than five Lieutenant Colonels and Majors turned stares upon the tall lieutenant, ranging from curious interest to bald hostility. The Dragon was there, too. He sat with his booted legs swinging from the edge of the desk and looked flatly at Greg.

There were formal introductions, first. The only officer who said anything beyond a mumbled greeting was Major Arnold, the executive. When Greg shook hands with him he was conscious of twinkling blue eyes looking at him from a chubby, pink-skinned face. The Major said, "So you're bringing this radar stuff in, eh, lieutenant? You know, I haven't been able to find out enough about it—nobody knows. Maybe you could answer a couple of questions without giving away any deep, dark secrets, eh?"

The Dragon coughed to interrupt. "Not now, Major," he said. "We've got other more serious business." He turned to Greg. "It's—er—come to my attention that you speak some Japanese."

"A little," Greg admitted.

The Dragon nodded. He pointed his thumb toward a door at the other end of the room. "Our prisoner's two rooms away—we're keeping him in here for lack of better facilities. He'll go back to headquarters as soon as there's a flight ready. Meanwhile, I think it'll be valuable if we can get certain information out of him at the start."

Several of the oak-leafed officers nodded gravely.

"We've tried to talk to him," continued the Dragon, "but no soap. Won't even give his name. Doesn't wear any rank. We thought he might loosen up a little if someone talked to him in his own language."

"All right," said Greg, "I'll do what I can."

"Good." The Dragon nodded. "Mainly, we want to know about the photo equipment that was in his plane. We want to know just how much information the Japs have got on our supply dump. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Greg, without expression.

The Dragon got up from the desk and with a sweep of his hand indicated a small array of objects on it. "From his pockets," he said. "Maybe it'll mean something to you."

Greg examined the things. There was the usual Jap notebook with its cleverly attached miniature pencil. He flipped through it, and the few familiar ideographs that he saw meant nothing significant. There were several brass keys, some coins and bills, a box of matches. When he came to the silk handkerchief he picked it up and frowned at the small figure embroidered in the corner of it.

"Notice something?" asked the Dragon.

Greg pointed to the figure, a man in a long robe. "Binzuru," he said. "One of Bhudda's disciples. Supposed to heal sick people."

The Dragon made a look of martyred patience. "Mainly, lieutenant," he said, "we're interested in that photo equipment."

A GUARD escorted Greg to the prison room. He went in first, stood to one side, and let Greg enter. The Jap sat in the middle of the floor. He was big for a Jap. His shoulders looked as though his flying suit might have been stuffed with pillows; his hands were large and puffed, and one of his ears was cauliflowered. A downward slant to the outer edges of his

eyes gave him a sad, spaniel-like expression.

"Kon banwa," said Greg.

The Jap raised his head slowly. Awareness came over his face like the slow raising of a blind. He examined Greg for a moment. And then, hesitatingly, he answered in a harsh, high pitched voice. *"Kon banwa."*

Greg fumbled for his cigarettes. *"Togako?"*

The Jap shook his puffy face hastily, and tapped his stomach. *"Bioki,"* he explained.

Greg nodded with understanding. *Bioki.* Sick. That explained the image of Binzuru on the handkerchief. Ulcers, for a guess. He made his next remark very quickly, and very casually, hoping that the prisoner would answer automatically before he had a chance to think. *"Anatano nameiwa nan deska?"*

Without hesitation, the Jap replied, "Riki Dohara." And then immediately, he snapped his head up again, realizing what he had done.

"Riki Dohara," repeated Greg, smiling. He added, "My name is Gregory Jones."

Dohara stared queerly at Greg. "You say the Japanese very good."

"Aringato," said Greg. To his word of thanks he added the white lie that he deemed Dohara's English quite excellent.

The Jap seemed pleased at the compliment. He waved his large hand. "Oh, I go America one time. Have Eng-rish."

"Only a very strong man could have devils in the stomach, yet fly," Greg said.

Dohara patted his chest. *"Hai.* I am strong. Binzuru are good. Samurai not so strong rike man of earth."

"You're not a Samurai?"

Dohara patted his chest. *"Hai.* I am I have sword. I not write poem and make picture of frower. I are fighting man. *Hai."*

"You were once a wrestler," hazarded Greg.

The Jap nodded. "Ex-cerrent wresser. Number one. What Eng-rish word, Rike Babe Roos."

"Champion?" suggested Greg.

"Champion. Champion." Dohara repeated it and nodded to himself.

Again Greg tried the technique of slipping in a sudden, casual question. "When they gave you the sword, did they give you many men to command?"

Dohara looked up, and seemed about to answer, but a sudden gleam of caution came to his droopy eyes. He shut his mouth firmly and deliberately. He folded his fat arms across his chest and looked down at the floor again. It was quite clear —he would talk no more.

Greg gazed thoughtfully at the squatting Jap for a moment. He tried another question, then a second. The Jap continued to stare downward. Greg finally turned and signalled to the guard that he was ready to go.

Back in the ante-room ,the others pressed forward eagerly to hear Greg's report. He leaned against the desk, lighted a cigarette and frowned through the drifting smoke.

"Well," he began, "his name's Riki Dohara. He's an officer of some kind, but I think of peasant origin. He says he has the Samuarai sword, but doesn't seem to have much use for the Samurai.

"The photo equipment," interrupted the Dragon impatiently. "What did he say about the photo equipment?"

Greg shook his head. "Didn't get that far. He clammed up when he decided I was pumping him too much. I did find out, though, that he's been a wrestler, and that he's visited the States. And another peculiar thing—I think he's a hypochondriac. Looks to me like he enjoys being sick, kind of a habitual pill taker."

"For Pete's sake!" said the Dragon, "we don't give a hoot about his queer habits. We want to find out about that photo stuff. There's been a serious security leak around here for a long time, and they may know more than we think they know. We've got to find out. We're fighting a war, here, lieutenant—can't you get that through your head?"

Greg stiffened and held his hands tightly to his sides. He could feel his own breath getting too big for his chest. He met the Dragon's eyes for just a moment, and in that moment, he thought he was going to say something that perhaps he might have regretted.

But the Dragon turned his eyes away. "Thank you, lieutenant," he said coolly. "We won't be needing you any more tonight."

III

GREG SPENT A BAD NIGHT, IN spite of the fact that he found the Chinese string bed surprisingly comfortable, he tossed, turned, writhed, and awoke several times. He dreamed of a dark haired, alabaster-skinned woman in rustling silk who spread her wings and took off, and then sprouted radial engines and sounded like a B-25. He dreamed that he was in a deep wood trying to slay a huge dragon with nothing but a broken scotch bottle for a weapon.

He was still rubbing his eyes and yawning when he showed up at the parking area the next morning. The others were already gathered around the drab, unmarked B-25.

A stocky, barrel-chested man in pilot's coveralls waved to him first. "Mornin', son. All ready to go up on a test hop?" He shifted a tobacco quid from one cheek to the other as he spoke.

"Mustang," grinned Greg, "you're a glutton for punishment. We just got here."

"We've got to save civilization, don't we?" said a well-upholstered blond lieutenant who had been inspecting the wheel wells. Swanee Hendricks liked to pretend that he took radar, and the war, and life itself sarcastically.

"Barring certain obstructionist tactics from guys who outrank us," Greg smiled "I guess we do."

The crew chief stepped to Greg's side, then. He was even taller than Greg, and from the smooth, olive skin of his face two very dark, intense eyes regarded the world and everything in it quite moodily. "Lieutenant" said Sergeant Antonio, "they don't seem to have much use for radar around these parts. Most of 'em don't even know what it is. They all got their money on the Chinese warning net—a lotta farmers sittin' out on the hills, and lookin' at the sky."

"I know," said reg. "I guess it's up to us to show 'em. The hell of it is, our stuff's so secret we can't even explain it to the boys with the rank."

"Well," said Hendricks, shaking a lock of blond hair back into place "we better get a-goin' if y'all want to fly this mo'nin'."

"We'll go," answered Mustang Morley, shifting his quid once more. "Soon's we gas her up."

But the ordinarily simple business of topping the bomber's tanks proved not so simple. The engineering officer looked doubtful and didn't want to do anything without authorization. At Operations every one was busy and didn't want to be bothered. It seemed that the Chinese warning net had been making uneasy reports all morning. There was a flight of six Nells airborne—but nobody seemed to know just where they were headed.

Mustang Morley wanted to go to the Colonel himself, but Greg assured him that that was the last place he'd get authorization.

"Man," commented Swanee Hendricks to nobody in particular, "we are the stepchildren of the whole C. B. I. Ah mean."

They finally managed to get a begrudgingly signed slip from S-3. But by that time Sergeant Antonio had discovered a bad solenoid on the battery-disconnect switches. The rest of them fumed while he went off to scrounge parts for it. They would have offered to help, but they were aware of a well known maxim of the military—no one above the rank of master sergeant can ever obtain parts when needed, and it certainly can't be done with the proper requisitions and through channels.

The sun was dropping somewhere behind the Himalayas before they finally got off the ground.

Morley began to fly a wide box around the field at about eight hundred, and Antonio crawled back over the bomb bays to where Greg was making a final connection on the radar equipment. Antonio shoved his thumbs into his belt and said, "Ready to cook, lieutenant?"

"Just about" said Greg. He snapped a switch in the lower corner of the large rack that housed the cathode ray tube. "As soon as we're sure it's working right, I'm going to maneuver some of these diehards up in the air for a demonstration."

"Yeah, I know," said the Sergeant, moving his moody, dark eyes in a slow azimuth. "What was good enough for their grandfathers is good enough for them. I tried to explain to some of them guys in the barracks about radar last night. I told 'em how a high frequency transmitter sends out a signal, and the signal bounces

back from anything solid and shows up on the 'scope. Just like an echo, I said. You know what those guys are callin' me now?"

"No. What?"

Antonio spat. "Little Sir Echo." He sighed heavily and reached for his cigarettes.

Greg backed away and watched the large, round dial as the power hummed. It began to glow with pale, green light. Scratchy vertical marks appeared on it. "Grass," he commented, and began to tune the visible static away. A moment later pulses began to appear, and then a definite, irregular outline across the bottom of the big plate. Greg put the interphone mike to his lips. "Mustang? . . . put her on a direct east heading, okay?"

"Gotcha," said Morley.

Greg and the sergeant watched the changing patterns on the 'scope as the airplane swung about. By using the dials, Greg made them larger or smaller, just as a pair of binoculars is focussed. He pointed. "There are the mountains. Now we can check the distance and calibrate this thing."

Antonio tapped his arm suddenly. "Hey —hold it," he said. "What's that?"

A NUMBER of little vertical dashes had appeared just above the line of the mountains. Greg frowned, puzzled. "They *look* like blips." He sharpened the tuning, and they appeared more clearly. He called off the reading. "Altitude five thousand, distance seventy miles. Unless this thing's set wrong—"

Antonio snapped his fingers. "Those Jap bombers! The Nells! The ones they been yappin' about all day!"

"Could be," said Greg. He took the mike again. "Mustang, listen, do you see anything out there?"

"Just an awful lot of China."

"No, no. I mean traffic. Any planes about seventy miles ahead."

"Can't see that far," the pilot answered. "Why?"

"Well, the 'scope is showing blips. About twenty. Five thousand at seventy miles. I'll give you their speed in another minute—"

"Brother," Morley came back, "there ain't gonna be another minute. We're goin' downstairs. And I'm callin' for pea shooters right now."

Mustang Morley was as good as his word. The floorboards pressed into Greg's feet as the pilot banked the B-25 and headed her for the traffic pattern again. Greg switched the interphone to "Command."

Morley was already telling the tower. "Condition three," he was saying in a remarkably unexcited voice. "Nine zero degrees. At five thousand, count two-zero. You got that? Over."

"Roger, roger," crackled the tower's answer. "Will alert, thank you. Over."

"And give us the wind when you've got time," Morley added. "We're comin' in."

"Stand by, said the tower.

Greg slipped the left earphone forward to his temple, and turned to the radar equipment again. He swung the antenna, and watched the blips reappear on the ninety degree heading. "Something awfully funny about them," he said.

Antonio was looking over his shoulder. "What?"

"I don't know exactly. The way they move. And they look big."

Antonio shrugged. "Maybe it's just the way a Jap plane shows up. Maybe they have jammers."

They stared at the 'scope for another minute, and then the tower was calling again. Greg heard it say, "Hello, Blimp, this is King George. There's a red light on that landing."

"What?" came Morley's voice.

"You'll have to stay up there, Blimp. We need runway clearance for Quaker flight. You're to hold over two seven on the tac chart. You'll be covered."

"Well of all the fuzzy headed, mean eyed, downright stupid—" Mustang Morley began.

"Sorry, Blimp," the tower cut in. "It's not my idea. Over."

"Over," Morley shouted back, managing to make a cuss word out of it by pure inflection. "Over and out."

Antonio scrambled for his battle station, then, and Greg turned on the main switch and climbed into the top turret. He swung her in both low and high and found her good. He charged his guns. The Mitchell was banking to find its new heading, and he could see the field below. A pair of P-40's, taking off as an element of two, was already scuttling down the runway. He

could imagine the scene down there, men and machines all over the field. Coolies with carrying sticks would be quickening the tempo of their odd, swaying steps and disappearing from the open places. Men would be popping from buildings and adjusting tin hats and casting anxious looks at the sky. Warhawks would be poking their big spinners from the alert revetments, then beetling to take-off position with dust and pebbles kicking out behind them.

The first element of two banked broadly to the left and circled the field in a steep, climbing turn. They leveled off at about five hundred, then roared eastward, climbing on course.

Greg heard the chatter of the interceptors in his headsets. It came in static bits, almost unintelligible unless you knew the terms, and it was a sort of impressionistic sound picture of what was happening.

"Hello, hello, Quaker Flight. This is Quaker Leader. Anybody see anything?"

"Nope. Blue skies. And dark. Where are you, Eddie?"

"Right behind you, you dope. Don't jink. I don't see anything, either."

"This is Quaker Four. Maybe they dropped low."

"What, and went skiing? Don't be stupid. Watch the clouds."

"Hell, those clouds wouldn't hide a Piper Cub."

"Well, watch 'em anyway."

Greg moistened his lips thoughtfully and rubbed his long chin with the edge of his thumb. His eyebrows seemed to be playing tug-o'-war with each other. He swung the turret in low so that it faced east. He squinted, seeing nothing but gloom and the very dim outline of the hills.

The radio sounded off again. "Listen, you guys—there's something screwy. There's nothing up here. Absolutely nothing. All I see are a few broken clouds. And they're dissipating."

Greg's head came up as though spring-activated. There was a strange expression of sudden, sad understanding on his face. He put the box on "Inter" again, and swallowed heavily before he spoke. "Hello, Mustang," he said, "This is Greg. Look—I—er—have a little suspicion. Not a happy one."

"What's eatin' you, son?" Morley wanted to know.

Greg swallowed again. "Those blips. I don't think they were airplanes at all. Remember what happened once back in Florida? When they alerted the whole coast?"

"You mean—" Morley's voice was hollow—*"clouds?"*

"Must be. Those little broken ones. A fluke. They sent back an echo that looked just like a flight of airplanes—"

"I'll tell 'em," sighed Morley. Greg could imagine that the stocky pilot at this moment was giving his tobacco quid a hard time. He heard him add, "But it'll be a long time before anybody believes a radar signal around here again."

GREG was sure it was rank petulancy on the part of the tower—but he could hardly blame them for it. They refused to clear the radar-equipped B-25 until all of the fighter planes came home to roost. Mustang Morley, swearing softly, made wide circles as the P-40s rode in one by one.

It was late, now. The night of South China was settling like a black cape on the green shoulders of the land. The stars and a melon slice of moon were showing. When they finally got clearance they used the landing lights and came in on a long, cautious approach.

After they had chugged to a camouflaged parking area, Morley gave the throttle a final *brrp,* and then put the brakes on. The four of them met under the wing. Everybody wore a grave, worried expression, and nobody said anything. Hendricks broke out with cigarettes and passed them. They set off slowly toward the Operations shack, and Sergeant Antonio brought up the rear, mournfully whistling the Sextet from Lucia.

They went fifty yards, and then it happened.

The *ching bao* gong began its racket with a suddenness that made the heart leap. They stopped and stared at each other.

"Do y'all suppose . . ." began Hendricks.

"Sh" Greg put his hand up.

The *ching bao* stopped for a moment, long enough for them to hear the other sound—a harsh, whining sound. Engines,

but off-phase. Greg took Hendricks' arm. "Come on, lad—"

"Where?"

"The nearest slit trench," said Greg.

By the time they made it to the edge of the field, one of the P-40s had come from its revetment again and was chugging toward the north end. There should have been others, Greg knew—but he could guess why there weren't. Their tanks hadn't been refilled yet; there hadn't been time.

The four of them dropped into a zigzag ditch and several other people dropped in with them. Somebody growled, "Can't they leave us alone? Probably another fake."

"Fake, hell." Somebody else pointed.

In the south there was moonglint on canopy and propeller arc. Once the eyes were adjusted the silhouettes of the twin engine bombers could be seen.

The lone P-40 started its take-off run from the north end.

A long drawn-out, singing whine began —softly at first, after that, louder, rising in pitch.

"That's it!"

Everybody ducked.

The explosion came at the high point of the whine. The earth shook, and there were bright, momentary curtains of fire. Rocks and bits of things fell all about. A bomb fragment went by with a short, harsh buzz.

Greg looked up again, blinking to take the brightness out of his eyes. The P-40 that had been trying to take off was at a sharp, crazy angle. Fire was licking around it. The pilot was scrambling for a trench.

The singing noise began again, a chorus this time, a chorus of strident, hellish harmony. A parachute flare burst above and everything became stark white. There was the hanging, unreal picture of a group of ground crewman trying to wing-tip an airplane back into its revetment.

The bombs went *brr-ump, brr-ump, brr-ump,* and the slit trench shook. Behind it all there was the *ch'fum, ch'fum, ch'fum* of a Bofors and the stutter of ground fifty calibers. Flashes began to mark the sky around the bombers. There was a grove of bomb bursts out on the field, black specks turning lazy arcs in the center of each one.

It was all over quite suddenly. There was abruptly nothing but the sound of those off-phase engines fading away. They scrambled from the trench—moving in a mild daze, and shaking the concussion from their ears. The all clear sounded and the lights went on at the Operations shack, making two yellow cut-outs in the night.

"You reckon they'll really want to see us tonight?" Swanee Hendricks was asking.

"Let's take our medicine now," Greg answered grimly. "Get it over with."

It was a sad and slightly pale expression that Greg brought into the Operations shack with him. He took one step inside the door, then pulled up short and stared. The battery of oak leaves he had faced the previous night was there, and the bantam figure of the Dragon was pacing among them. Before Greg could withdraw, the Dragon spotted him. He whirled. His finger came out like a lance.

"*You!* You, lieutenant!"

"Sir?" said Greg, trying to keep his voice quiet and calm.

"A perfectly good P-40 demolished," said the Dragon, biting each word. "The runway damaged. They caught us just fine —just as we were getting back from your little false alarm. It couldn't be worse. It couldn't—"

Running steps approached the door. Greg moved aside to make room for a man in a combat helmet. The soldier made an anxious, hasty salute, and didn't wait to have it returned. "Colonel," he said, "somebody got at the guards—the prisoner's escaped!"

IV

THE DRAGON WAS COLDLY POlite the next morning. In his office, Greg stood and squirmed for a full five minutes before the little grey-haired commander looked up. Gunmetal eyes bored into Greg. "All right," said the Dragon finally. "Maybe I've calmed down enough to listen to you now. That's why I waited until this morning. Let's hear what you've got to say—and it'd better believable."

"You know what happened," Greg shrugged. "I can't add anything."

The Dragon frowned, then motioned to a chair. Greg sat down. The Dragon moved his own chair around to face him. "Now, look," he said, "you didn't do anything wrong, or against regulations—I understand that. If you had, I'd court

martial you without hesitation. But you know, don't you, that because of your false alarm we lost a prisoner? And we have four guards in the hospital?"

"They haven't found him yet?"

"No, and they won't. He had outside help. In the confusion of the air raid about six men managed to get near enough to attack the guards. Dohara's probably well on his way back to the Jap lines, now—"

"He might have escaped then, even if there hadn't been a raid. And there would have been a raid anyway—"

"If we'd had our interceptors ready they wouldn't have come that close." The Dragon tapped the desk with his finger. "Anyway, there's no use arguing about it. Here's what I want to give you—straight. Get this. You fancy technicians, with your fancy gadgets, only get in our hair out here. Maybe this radar of yours is all right in other theatres. But, as far as I'm concerned, here it's a waste of gas and maintenance."

"Your Chinese warning net didn't call it either last night," Greg pointed out.

"But it works most of the time. What's more important, we understand it. The point is—I'm running the Eightieth one way. On guts and flying—not gadgets. Which brings us to a little change I'm about to make in your status."

"Wait a minute, Dad," Greg said. "I don't know if I can make this clear to you, or not, but it's important and I'm going to try. I've been doing a lot of thinking ever since that brush-off on the parking ramp, and I think I've got a few things figured out. They come under the heading of psychology, I guess."

"Psychology!" The Dragon's slightly lifted nostrils showed what he thought of it.

Greg went on, undaunted. "You know how people dislike things sometimes, and don't know why? Colors—different tunes—places?"

"I think you read too many books," said the Dragon.

"All right. Maybe I do. But think this over. Could it be that radar is, to you, a symbol of what you're trying to get away from?"

"What in the hell are you talking about?"

"You were hurt deeply, Dad, I know that. You'd made a lot of wonderful plans—and then all of a sudden the whole world blew up in your face. That airplane accident wasn't your fault, you know that. The investigation proved it was a bad engine. It was just pure chance that you weren't killed, and—and—mother—"

"Greg, I don't want to hear about it," said the Dragon, softly, tightly—

Greg leaned forward and went on. "You decided you weren't going to be hurt again. You admitted that. So, ever since you've been chasing around to the farthest corners of the globe, flying and fighting as much as anybody would let you. It's like dope, or drink—"

"Dammit, Greg," said the Dragon, "if you—"

"And then I come along to remind you of it. I—and the radar equipment. Radar—a scientific gadget. A product of that very civilization you're trying to get away from. Don't you see what I mean, Dad?"

"I don't see!" shouted the older man angrily. He rose to his feet. "I don't know what in the hell you're talking about. All I know is I'm cut out for what I'm doing. You can fiddle with your gadgets and stay out of combat and die in bed like the rest of 'em, if you want to. But not for me. The cockpit of an airplane's the only coffin I want—"

"Think it over, Dad," said Greg quietly

THE Dragon sat down. His eyes smoldered. Then suddenly he flicked his hand in a gesture that was a dismissal of the whole subject. "I called you here to tell you that your M. O. S. is being changed. You're no longer a radar officer."

"What?"

"You're a rated gunner, aren't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"All right. You're a gunnery officer from now on. They usually stay on the ground, but you don't. You'll fly missions in the same B-25 you came over in. The gadgets'll come out of it today and we'll strip it for combat."

"Dad, you ought to give this radar another—"

"You're not afraid to fly combat missions, are you?"

"Hell, no. But—"

"Then you'd better report to S-3 pronto.

You're just in time for a mine-laying mission he's got set up tomorrow."

"But, Dad—"

"That's all, lieutenant," said the Dragon, icily. He turned to a pile of papers on his desk and began to leaf through them. Greg stared for a second, then got up and out of the office slowly.

THE next morning the sharp odor of raw gas and the intermittent snarling of double-row Cyclones took the sleep out of Greg's head. He walked briskly past the warming planes on the line to where his own drab, unmarked B-25 squatted. A ground crew had worked far into the night to alter it to combat specifications—and the job had provided the excuse he'd needed to break the dinner date with Tanya Varinov. He almost wished, now, that he'd kept it. A good dinner—company—a little wine—these might have relaxed him more.

It was four A. M. now, the coolest hour of the twenty four, but the coolness was only relative. A huge stale air mass hung over the area—viscous stuff that seemed to hamper the very flight of birds, and the sounds of insects.

As Greg approached, a slender, well-tailored Chinese officer stepped out of the gloom. He was smiling, and there was a strong whiff of shaving lotion. "Hi,' said Lieutenant Sing, "glad to see you again."

"Hello," said Greg, recognizing him. "You going along on this thing?"

"Sure am," Sing grinned, waving his hand at the airplane. "Best bombardier in China, that's me. 'Course,, my ancestors would hit about fifteen hundred r.p.m. in their graves to hear such modesty. But you might as well know the facts."

"Okay," smiled Greg. "Glad to have you aboard. The others around yet?"

"Getting last minute weather and poop up at the shack," Sing said. "I though I'd come down and meet the airplane, She's a nice job."

"Fine. Glad you like her," He moved toward the belly hatch.

"Uh—I owe you a little apology," Sing said, falling into step beside him. "I didn't know the Dragon was your old man when I shot off my mouth a couple of days ago."

"That's all right," Greg said. "Forget it."

"And I'm sorry about you two not clicking."

"Forget that, too."

Sing shrugged. "I was just going to mention that maybe the Dragon's had a little change of heart."

Greg looked sharply at the Chinese airman's delicate features. They reminded him somehow of the quick brush strokes on Chinese prints—and it seemed that they might cleverly deceive the eye, as the brush strokes did. Greg said, "What are you talking about?"

"The Dragon was here a few minutes ago. In the airplane. He asked if I'd seen you."

"He was looking for me?"

"Possibly. He was worried about you, anyway."

"He was like hell."

"It's a fact. He checked over the whole airplane. Asked me if I thought the right landing gear looked okay. Wanted to know about the rest of the crew."

Greg reached the fuselage, now, bent and opened the hatch. "Well— we'll see," he said.

The other three crew members arrived then, and Mustang Morley called Greg's name and crooked a finger at him. "Come on, boy. We're havin' a pow-wow. Just got back from the alert shack, and there are a couple of changes."

The five men squatted in a circle. The barrel-chested westerner sat on the heels of his cowboy boots and began to scratch lines in the ground with a stick. "Just to go over it again," said Morley, "here's the road from Hoyang to Tuwangping. They're buildin' a string of bomber strips in this area. Aim to shoot up Kulung's supply dump if they ever locate it, I guess. Well, the road supplies these here bomber strips. As you know we're droppin' mines on the road."

"Man, I know all that," piped Swanee Hendricks impatiently. "What are the changes?"

"We're gettin' an escort of two fighters. They're supposed to take care of anything in the air, and the ground fire is our baby."

Hendricks wrinkled his nose suspiciously. "What ground fire?"

"Well—" Morley coughed a little to clear his throat. "they think maybe the

slant-eyed sons got a little anti-aircraft in since last time."

"Great," said Antonio bitterly. "I need the practice. Haven't been shot at in ages."

Morley ignored him and continued. "We hope we don't get shot down, but if we do, keep on the east side of the road. Plenty of guerillas in that territory. Don't try to make it back yourself without help." He looked up. "Any questions?"

"Yeah," said Sergeant Antonio. "Who ever talked me into this good radar deal I was to have with you guys?"

Morley laughed, slapped the crew chief on the shoulder and said, "Come on—let's go, then."

IN THE airplane, Greg busied himself setting up the equipment at the radio desk and beginning the entries in his log. As a rated radio operator and gunner he was now holding down that job instead of radar-observing. He switched on both liaison and command equipment, and checked the dynamotors. He felt the B-25 rumble under his feet as it taxied to the runway.

He heard Mustang Morley's last minute roll call on the interphone. "Pilot to bombardier—how's it in the nose, Sing?"

"Okay here, lieutenant." answered Sing.

"Greg—everything set back there?"

"All set."

"Roger," drawled Morley. "Guess we'll go a-flyin', then."

Each engine sounded off in turn as it was run up for a check in magneto drop, and then the big bomber swung clumsily about into take-off position. Three thousand horses began to roar. Momentum came out of space and began to carry the Mitchell forward. Metal skin, longerons and floor boards trembled. The roar grew in Greg's ears.

It was very smooth suddenly, and he knew they were airborne. The propellers changed pitch with the climb, and there was the slight see-sawing of nose and tail and Morley trimmed the craft for level flight. The drone of the engines became a steady, eternal thing. It had been going on —Greg felt—since the beginning of time, and it would go on until the end.

For most of the long haul to the target area Greg simply sat, stared at the transmitter and tuning units, and let the thoughts dribble through his mind. They weren't orderly thoughts. They came in bits and spurts, crossed each other and backtracked, and made a jumble of ideas that was worse than no ideas at all.

Still—there was one thought that kept coming back. It was about the Dragon, about all the things he did and believed—and Greg kept thinking that somehow the Dragon had to be snapped out of it.

It wasn't only because the Dragon was his father. It was more because, in front of his eyes, a perfectly good man was going all to hell. And when he got there, maybe the Eightieth Group would be with him, and after that the other units and China, and pretty soon—who knew?—the whole blasted AAF. It was like that old one about the lost horseshoe nail losing a kingdom,

Hours later, Mustang Morley's drawl finally brought Greg back again. "Pilot to top turret. Hi, pardner—all set? Guns charged?"

"Hello," said Greg, adjusting his headset. "No—haven't done a thing. Getting into the turret, now."

"Well, hurry it up, son," Morley answered." the road's about twenty-five miles off. We're goin' down on the deck, now."

Greg turned the main power switch on, then climbed into the top turret. He charged the guns by raising the footsteps. He took the safety off. He manipulated the control handles and swung the contraption this way and that, both in normal and high speed. So far, so good.

It was light outside, now. The sun was already breaking from the eastern horizon and throwing a pale wash of gold over the Mitchell's wings. To the rear and several hundred feet above were the two P-40s of their escort, each with a long-range belly-tank looking like a huge egg in a hawk's talons. Greg could just about make out the silhouetted head of the pilot in the lead fighter—a head that he knew was grey and weather beaten. One that was probably at this moment staring at the B-25 turret in silent distaste.

Then the two fighters seemed to float up and away as the bomber dipped toward the deck. Greg heard the purring interference of the auxiliary electric motors, and knew the bomb bays were opening. Sing in the nose and Mustang in the

pilot's seat began their operational chatter. The gunner's saddle seemed to press into Greg as the airplane leveled off—the treetops began flashing past not too far below the turret.

The Mitchell nosed in on her run. Greg rubbernecked, watching as much of the sky in as little time as possible.

At first, when he felt the airplane rocking a little, he wondered how they had come to run into light turbulence so close to the ground. His next thought was that Morley was doing a sloppy job of lining up the airplane for Sing's cross hairs.

Even when the first white puff went by, Greg thought it odd for a cloud to be so low.

The second white puff appeared magically—developing out of nothing—right there, in front of his eyes. Something clattered on the wing tip and there were small, jagged holes.

The Mustang was airing his drawl. "Hello, Quaker Leader—we're gettin' flak down here!"

The Dragon answered immediately, and his thistle-edged voice sounded maddeningly casual. He might have been apologizing for breaking a luncheon engagement. "Sorry, Blimp. Can't help. We've just spotted three bogies up here."

Surprised, Greg arced his chin up, and swept his eyes across that quarter of the sky. He saw them almost immediately. They were to the south, and they were high, in a tight V. The two P-40s were already buzzarding about to meet them.

THE Mitchell took a half-needle turn and its shallow bank brought it far across the flat valley. Greg saw that they had flown just over the line of a yellow dirt road which parallelled a narrow river. There were sparse, scattered wooded patches on one side of the road. Back there—where they had passed—Greg could see the ghosts of flak bursts drifting.

The Mustang was on the interphone again. "Listen, you guys," he said, "we're gonna get that gun emplacement."

Greg looked up. The P-40s and the attacking Jap fighters were only specks in the sky far to the southwest; the mountain looming there almost cut them from view. Greg saw that the two formations had begun to circle each other like wary dogs —wide circles at the moment, but circles that would tighten to bring one or the other group on its opponent's tail.

The Mustang was still talking. "That gun's in a patch of trees on a little hill back there. I saw it flashin'. We'll come in and spray it from the nose, then I'll bank around and Greg'll take a pot-shot from the top turret. Everybody got that?"

"Roger," said Greg absently. He was still watching the fighters.

The circling had stopped already. Probably the Dragon had found a way to stop it—circling was the Zero's game, and the light, maneuverable fighters could turn tightly enough, legend had it, to cut a small biscuit from a pan of dough with one wingtip. Now the fighters seemed to be swirling, flopping and corkscrewing all over the sky—no plan, no sense to it.

The hedgehopping bomber had crossed the valley with its turn, now. Its wing tips barely avoided scraping the hillside as they came out of it. Greg swung the turret toward the nose. They were at right angles to the line of the road—the spot where they had met the flak was near a short, straight segment just ahead. Greg saw the wooded hill, and squinted at its crest, hoping to see the gun emplacement.

The Mitchell hugged the ground, now. Each time a treetop came toward them, Greg fully expected it to catch a propeller tip, and in spite of himself he would wince. They were actually below the level of the small hill's crown. Thin puffs of smoke and intermittent flashes were beginning to show there. Greg brought his head around for a quick glimpse to the rear, and saw that the bursts were indeed appearing back there. The Jap gunners were way off on their timing. That wouldn't, however, prevent the B-25 from running into a shell that was still traveling, unexploded. And from the positions of those bursts in their wake, both elevation and azimuth seemed to Greg too nearly correct for comfort.

Now he heard the Mitchell's nose guns slobber away. He saw a shower of tracers fly ahead and sink into the hill. He felt the airplane yaw as Morley swept the deadly spray back and forth. Almost before his senses could register that sight, they were upon the hill—flashing over it —it was disappearing under the nose and wings. The airplane squirmed for sky; the

engines changed their roar. Greg felt that he was suspended in space, with the world being slowly tilted around him. He swung the turret to port, and there, framed between the snouts of his fifties was a small, green patch of China. He aimed—allowing for his own speed—and tripped three short bursts.

The target backed away as they climbed. A moment later Greg felt a bitter shudder run through the entire airplane. On the heels of it he heard coughing and shuttering from the left engine. When Mustang Morley spoke on the interphone a moment later, he was only saying what everybody already knew—with a cold, chest-gripping certainty.

"Left engine out," drawled Morley. "If we can get high enough—bail."

Greg swung a long leg from the footrest. He was getting out, fast. He looked up as he did so. He saw something at about a thousand yards that quite surprised him. He saw a round cowling, painted red, with razor thin wings sprouting from either side of it.

IN THE time that it took Greg to look at it, and realize he had seen it, the apparition came perhaps a hundred yards nearer. He guessed immediately what the Zero had done; it had hopped across the mountain-top keeping itself invisible until this moment.

Greg put his hands back on the gun handles.

The Zero hung dead in his sights, looking queerly motionless, yet growing, growing with dreamlike speed. He tightened his lips. No lead to calculate here. Hang the snouts on that round dial and squeeze. He did that—confident of scoring a hit.

The guns did nothing, absolutely nothing; they were cold and lifeless in his hands.

An old hand wouldn't have tried to think, he would have acted automatically. He would have yanked at the charging handle until the weapon cleared, or until something happened. Greg wasn't quite that experienced. He thought first, *What in hell's happened?* He frowned and stared at the guns—but the Zero was still coming on.

The airplane banked sharply at that moment. Greg had a kaleidoscopic glimpse of the river below. Just behind the track of the Mitchell—on the surface of the water—deadly litle splashes were showing. It was an old Zero trick, and a lethally effective one. The splashes of the thirty-caliber gun would walk right up to the bomber's tail, giving the exact range—and then the Zero would open up with his heavy guns.

Greg heard it when it came. It pressed into his senses so sharply that he wouldn't have heard Gabriel's trumpet if it had been blowing at the same time. It was like a vast avalanche of rocky soil engulfing the twin engined bomber.

"Hang on! Hang on!" somebody was saying in his ears. Morley on the interphone again, he supposed. He couldn't imagine how the stocky westerner had found time to pick up the interphone and talk into it. But he felt the airplane dropping, and he knew what was happening. No altitude—no bail out. Ride her down and hope for the best. In a few moments they would be bellying into the soil; metal would be grinding and crashing and the shock of it would go through flesh and bone.

The Zero wooshed past.

Suddenly there was another shadow—it was difficult for Greg to know whether he actually glimpsed it, or whether some strange animal sense told him about it. Whatever it was, his head came up sharply and he knew that the oval wings and bulbous nose of a P-40 had hurled themselves in the wake of that Zero. The Warhawk had incredible speed; it must have been diving.

The Mitchell's wings rocked sickeningly. The engine cylinders sputtered their death rattle.

Men do odd things when they believe that the next moment will be oblivion. There is little reason for them. There was no particular reason why at that instant Greg should decide to manipulate the charging handles of his guns. He simply did. He jerked them back and forth and the guns were still jammed. He held one handle back and looked at the trunnion block. The airplane dipped crazily again.

Before the crash came there was one sharp, crystal clear impression on Greg's mind. It was an overwhelming idea, and

it pushed every other possible thought and feeling aside.

There was, on the gun mechanism, the unmistakable mark of a file.

Vast, terrifying sounds were like thick vapor around his ears; the world was a gourd, shaken, and he was one of the seeds inside it. There were strange rhythms beating against a high, singing note. A sudden, red flash came just before the final blackness.

AT FIRST, waking, he thought he might be falling thorugh space. His hearing returned a moment later, and he heard a steady, crackling sound. It seemed another few moments before he remembered that flames made a noise like that. He opened his eyes. He was still in the turret—facing the wrong way.

He extricated himself, not sure just how he did it. He moved his shoulders back and forth, stretched his arms, and shook his head unhappily as he staggered to the floor hatch. When he dropped through he noticed the warm, wet feel of blood on his chin. He wiped it away, and lurched forward.

There were footsteps near him, running footsteps. A vaguely familiar voice with a Brooklyn accent was calling his name. Antonio's "Lieutenant—come on, sir. Make it fast!"

That was it. Had to get away. There was some very important reason for getting away from the airplane. Don't bother to figure it out. Be like the Dragon. Don't think. Just get. Fast. Faster.

He knew that the next noise was an explosion, yet it sounded far away. And it was drawn out—it lasted longer than an explosion should. He felt that he might be falling through space again. Something that might have been a huge plank struck him across the shoulders.

"Over here, Greg—this way!"

Another familiar voice. A kind of a soft drawl, not loud, but penetrating. Morley. His pilot. They had to get somewhere. They were both running there together. That was funny, he could have sworn he was falling through space, and here he was running somewhere.

This time awareness came slowly through a period of grey haze, and presently he knew that five of them were running slightly uphill and keeping within the concealment of a patch of stunted trees. Running away from something. An enemy, maybe. Sure—that was it. This was enemy territory. Mustang Morley was beside him, short legs and cowboy boots doing remarkably well in keeping pace. Hendricks and the little Chinese bombardier were on the other side. Sergeant Antonio had forged ahead, and he was occasionally throwing glances over his shoulder to be certain that the others were still with him.

They came to some rocks atop a small knoll.

"Here!" called Mustang, puffing a bit. "We got a good view here!"

They dropped and lay there panting. Greg saw Morley take his .45 automatic from its shoulder holster and slide the chamber back and forth. After that he held it in his hand—ready.

"What happened?" asked Greg. He was happy to find his voice still with him.

Morley looked at him queerly. "You were with us."

Greg shook his head and frowned. "Can't remember. Must have been punchy." He took some of the blood from his chin and stared at the mark it made on his fingers.

"She blew up," said Morley. There was a helpless bitterness in his voice. "We got out just in time."

Greg nodded slowly. "I thought I heard an explosion. What—what caused it?"

"I bellied her in. Split the tanks to hell. Tore an engine off."

"That's right." Greg kept nodding. "I remember, now. The flak caught us. We were pulling for altitude when that Zero came in and finished us off."

"You saw that Zero, Greg." There was a strange, flat tone to Mustang Morley's voice.

"Yes, I saw it."

"Right after it passed us," Morley went on, "a P-40 came in on its tail. It was the Dragon's airplane. He got the Zero. And then—"

"Then what?" Greg turned his head slowly.

"The flak got him."

Greg kept an iron face. "For good?"

"Don't know." Morley shrugged. "Last I saw he pulled high and caught fire. I was too busy after that. I was too busy

because—" and again he spaced his words heavily, evenly—"because somebody didn't even try to shoot a Zero on our tail. What was it, Greg—buck fever?"

Greg's head jarred upward. "That's it! The guns!" he said. He punched his palm. "I knew there was something I was trying to remember!"

"What are you talkin' about?"

"My guns. They jammed—they'd been tampered with—filed!"

There was a long silence while the others stared quietly at Greg, and Greg stared quietly off into space. Lieutenant Sing finally broke it. "Well, Greg," he said, "your father checked those guns before take off. In fact—*the Dragon was the only one near the plane.*"

"Shut up, Sing," said Morley, snapping his eyes around. "Be plenty o' time to talk about that when we get back. We got to look around for some guerillas, now—and walk out o' this mess."

Sing said immediately. "I'm sorry. I won't bring it up again."

But Greg, looking at the narrow-faced Chinese, knew that the man hadn't forgotten it. Greg found it hard to forget, too—

V.

COLONEL FERDINAND JONES looked between the toes of his cordovan flight boots and saw the good earth of Kwangsi province some twenty feet below. It was moving slowly back and forth. After a while he realized that it was not the earth which moved, but the parachute harness from which he hung, and which in turn hung from a number of shroud lines and a silken canopy inextricably caught in the branches of a large tree.

The Dragon swore very softly and very expertly.

It seemed as though his annoyance increased by the second. Now there was a pain in his hip and thigh. It hadn't been there a few minutes ago when he was descending in a wondrous, dreamy silence beneath the big white umbrella. Nor had he noticed the large blood stain on his flying suit, then. Everything had happened too quickly for him to notice much of anything.

He remembered the first stages of the dogfight quite clearly, however. That had been old stuff. With his wing man he had turned to meet the three enemy fighters, and everybody had begun making three-sixties, tightening them each time.

After a bit of that, they had suddenly been all over the sky. The P-40s dove and chandelled, climbed again, and the Zeroes tried to make rings around them. Once in a while one of the Japanese planes would break away and go into one or two acrobatic maneuvers. It was a strange habit they had, and was probably meant to be confusing. To the Dragon it was plain damfoolishness.

Coming out of an Immelman, one of the Zeroes crossed his line of flight, he remembered that. He pressed the trigger—and his wing man must have fired, too, because bright, wobbly things floated past him. Both of them must have scored a hit. The Zero had come apart like a Fourth of July firecracker and had fallen to earth in as many smoking pieces.

That had left two. The Dragon remembered touching his throat mike and telling his wingman that he thought it would be safe for them to break it up temporarily. The two remaining Zeroes were split, traveling in opposite direction. The wingman had taken off after one, the Dragon after the other.

Just why his quarry apparently had never seen him hadn't been quite clear to the Dragon, and still wasn't. The Jap may have been confused, his mirror may have been damaged, or it may have been ordinary carelessness. It would be forever simply one of the hundreds of explanations that die with twisted metal and smoldering fabric. At any rate, he hadn't seen the Dragon. He had skimmed across the backbone of a mountain, dropped down the other side, and had entered a long, murderous pursuit curve toward the B-25. The Mitchell had been smoking from one engine and pulling for altitude, apparently. The Dragon had pushed the throttle to the end of the quadrant and had plummeted down on the Jap.

Just before coming into range he had noticed that the Mitchell's top turret swing to meet the Jap. He didn't remember its firing. Guns jammed, he supposed—or the gunner frightened into immobility. The Jap had slapped tracers into the bomber,

had careened past, and he had leeched on to it. He remembered giving it just two short bursts and seeing it practically disintegrate.

It was after that that things weren't clear. First his controls had become mush, and he had felt a sharp acceleration in the pit of his stomach. There was a bright flash somewhere nearby. He didn't remember getting out of the cockpit at all—just floating down, suddenly.

And here he was, swinging in a tree.

A frown deepened the score of wrinkles in his air-beaten face. He reached for the leg buckles. He unsnapped them, and hung with the other arm to the risers. Then he undid the chest fasteners, let go, and dropped.

Unbearable pain tore like hot iron through his side when he hit the ground. An involuntary cry of agony burst through his clenched teeth. Bright zig-zag lines crossed his eyelids, and there was a sharp, steady buzz in his ears. He heard voices—he couldn't understand what they were saying. He was sure that footsteps were coming toward him.

Then there was the deepest, softest blackness he had ever known. He relaxed. He let the blackness carry him away. For the first time in a long time he felt like a very tired and very old man.

THE DRAGON woke up in bed. It wasn't too much of a surprise—it had happened this way before. Blackness, and then cool, clean sheets and white walls. He lay quietly and let feeling flow back into his limbs. He took in his new surroundings gradually; his eyes roved about the room dwelling long enough on each object to establish it firmly in his mind.

It was a small, square room with a scrubbed look. It had a scrubbed odor, too—and an overtone of hospital smell. The sheets were crisp against his chin. His arms lay atop them, palm down. Light came through a small, high window, and it looked like morning light.

One by one he recalled the things that had happened. He brought his eyes down slowly and looked at his own form beneath the covers. It seemed all there. He felt. Yes—both legs, thank God for that.

There were bandages, though. And now he was beginning to feel a dull, throbbing pain in his hip. He had been hurt, then—how badly, he couldn't guess.

The door faced the foot of the bed and it opened suddenly. A small Chinese in G.I. khakis entered. "Goo' morning, sah!" he said in a shrill, cheerful voice. He was very bowlegged. He carried a basin and some towels.

The Dragon struggled to his elbows. "Well—here's the usual question: where am I?"

"Oh—sah! Please, sah!" cried the Chinese, seeing him rise. He rushed forward and deposited the basin on a bedside table. "Doctah say no get up! Not get up, sah!"

"All right, all right," growled the Dragon, dropping back to the pillow.

The other grinned, then, and backed away a little. He made a kind of bow with his head. "I Corporal Lee Chung flom San Flancisco," he announced proudly. "I ward boy this-a place."

"It *is* a hospital, then," nodded the Dragon.

"Yes-sah. Hossa-pital. Givee you bath, now." He began to soak and wring one of the towels.

"What hospital, Corporal?" asked the Dragon.

"Tuyeh base hossa-pital."

"Tuyeh?" The Dragon tried to sit up again, and the grinning ward boy pushed him back gently. He pulled down the covers, opened the cotton pajamas and began to bathe the Dragon's chest.

"Tuyeh's way the hell up north," scowled the Dragon.

"Oh, no, sah," said Lee Chung cheerfully. "Fella go south flom lotta places go Tuyeh."

"All right, then, it's all relative," grinned the Dragon. He shook his head. "But I still wish I knew how the hell I got here."

"You sleep velly much," Lee Chung told him.

"How long?"

Lee Chung made an admonitory frown. "Doctah come. He tell you allee thing. You gotta be quiet, sah."

"Okay, okay." The Dragon grinned again. That was one of the troubles with hospitals—taking orders from corporals.

Lee Chung worked quietly and efficiently, then, and the Dragon lay there enjoying the alternate warmth and coolness of the bath. When the ward boy had finished, the

Dragon sighed deeply. "I'm hungry," he said.

"I tell doctah," Lee Chung promised. He went to the window and pulled down the shades, dimming the room. For a moment the Dragon wondered why, but he was too weary to keep on wondering.

It was perhaps a quarter hour after Lee Chung left that the door opened again. A man in a white gown came in. Looking at him from an angle, and in the dimness of the room, the Dragon saw that he was a very short man.

He was also breezy. "Well, well—decided to open the old eyes finally, eh, Colonel?"

The bedside manner always had irritated the Dragon. He said, "If you're a doctor, when do I get out of here?"

The man in white laughed. He moved to the other side of the bed pulled a chair across the floor and sat there, just out of the Dragon's line of vision. The Dragon saw, as he passed, that he wore not only a white gown, but a surgical face mask and white skull cap besides. "Take it easy," he was saying. "There's plenty of time. You'll be hobbling around in a day or two. It's mostly shock and loss of blood that are giving you the trouble. Luckily that bullet missed your hip bone."

"Well," muttered the Dragon, "hurry it up if you can, will you? There's a war on—and I've got things to do with it."

The doctor chuckled heartily. "My, my, you crusty old colonels are all the same. I'm Captain Howard, by the way—supposed to be the base surgeon here. You'll excuse my working clothes, won't you? Just finished an amputation, and don't want to breathe bugs on anybody. By the way, I ordered some chow for you. It'll be here in a minute."

"Thanks." The Dragon wiggled to a more comfortable position. "Now, maybe you can tell me how I got here."

"That's easy," Captain Howard laughed. "Some guerillas found you half-dead under a tree. They built a litter and walked you out. You were delirious most of the time."

"How long have I been out?"

Howard shrugged. "Couple of weeks. We kept you drugged when you got here. Pretty nasty picking that stuff out of your hip."

The Dragon groaned. "Two weeks." He shook his head testily. Then he looked up again. "What's the idea of bringing me way up north here to Tuyeh?"

"The guerillas got you into Hofao. No facilities there, and the weather was socked in, so they couldn't fly you back to your own base. Brought you here instead. Kind of quiet in these parts. Plenty of room, plenty of beds."

"But I get out soon, eh?"

"We'll see," chuckled the doctor, getting up. He turned at the door." By the way, do you feel well enough to make a report to the I.O.? He's been pestering me about it."

"The intelligence officer? What in hell do I have to report to him for?"

"Damned if I know," shrugged Captain Howard. "All I gather is that they're interested in that territory you were shot down in. Been sending radios from headquarters all week asking about it."

"All right, I'll see him," said the Dragon. "But I want to eat first. And cigarettes, too."

"Coming right up," said Captain Howard. Then he went out and shut the door behind him.

LATER, when the Dragon was putting down soft-boiled eggs and toast, he heard the sound of distant engines. He listened to them absently, the way airmen do. They came a little nearer and he noticed the sharp, off-phase overtone to their sound. He crinkled his brows. Queer. Sounded almost like Jap bombers. But they weren't giving a three-ball alarm. He tried to listen some more, and then the sound faded again. He thought about it for a moment, and shrugged. His imagination probably.

The I.O. came in in the midst of the Dragon's coffee and cigarette. He wore the golden wings with the blue sun of China, and the triangular pips of a Captain adorned his open khaki collar. He was very lean and had a long, slightly hooked nose, which made him look North Chinese, or Korean.

"Hello, sir," he said, smiling quietly and coming forward. "I hope this won't bother you too much. I'm Jasper Kuo, Chinese-American Wing. Major Potter, our regular intelligence officer, is at the rest camp, and I'm substituting."

"Glad to see you," said the Dragon, perfunctorily.

Captain Kuo sat down, carefully arranging his trouser creases. "Well," he said, "frankly, sir, I think I have bad news."

"Bad news?"

"Yes, sir. The Japanese came over and made a surprisingly accurate strike at the supply dump. You know the one I'm referring to, don't you, sir? The one in Kulung?"

"Certainly I know it," said the Dragon. He frowned. "Much damage?"

"Not too much. But Headquarters thinks they've got the location of the place pretty well in mind now. What's more, they believe the Japanese intelligence center is in the area where you were shot down. You didn't spot anything there, did you, sir?"

The Dragon shook his weather-beaten head. "Not a thing. Just a new flak emplacement."

"I see," Kuo nodded. He crossed his legs. "Well, Headquarters would like to have your opinion on moving the supply dump to another location before the Japs cook up another raid."

"Hell, that's impossible," snorted the Dragon. "They can't get all that stuff back over Cloud Mountain again in less than three weeks. They know that. They—"

He stopped suddenly. The myriad lines of his face hung in shocked stillness. He turned his head very, very slowly and narrowed his eyes upon Captain Kuo.

"Go ahead, sir, continue." The earnest young intelligence officer was smiling encouragingly.

The Dragon turned his head several ways, then, in choppy, almost panicky motion. He struggled to his elbows. He leaned to one side and tried to see out of the window. All that he could make out were the yellow green edges of some banana palms. He then turned and fixed his gunmetal eyes on Kuo again.

"By heaven," he said softly and bitterly, "it almost worked, didn't it?"

"Sir?" said the intelligence officer.

The Dragon was smiling now. There wasn't much humor in the smile. "The ward boy from San Francisco. The doc with the face mask—and a good, American accent, too. To say nothing of picking a northern base and making a long explanation. I'd be less likely to know the names of people and the general set-up at a northern base. Pretty clever."

"Sir, I don't quite grasp what you mean." Captain Kuo was all wide-eyed innocence.

"It's no use trying," the Dragon told him grimly. "The jig's up, brother. In the first place, you don't hear off-phase engines around an AAF base. In the second place, there aren't any banana palms around Tuyeh. And in the third place—*headquarters wouldn't be thinking of moving that supply dump.* So now, Captain Kuo — which isn't your real name, of course— do you mind telling me where I *actually* am?"

The door burst open. A huge man with pillow-stuffed shoulders and a strangely sad, drooping expression came in. He wore the uniform of a Japanese colonel.

"Well, we meet again!" said the Dragon, staring at him.

"Oh, yes," smiled Riki Dohara. "And now I not your prisoner. Now are other way." He flicked his huge hand to order the spurious Chinese captain out of the room.

The Dragon tried to keep his jaw from hanging too far in surprise.

A slow, gloating smile spread over Dohara's puffy face. He folded his arms across his chest. "I so sorry you are not fooled." His voice was still husky. "I know you are be stubborn. Now is necessary we use other way to make you talking."

"Dohara," said the Dragon, softy, "I'm giving out nothing but my name and serial number. And you already know that."

The Japanese colonel chuckled. Abruptly, he raised his huge hand above his left shoulder and brought it down in a swift, chopping motion. The edge of it caught the Dragon on the bridge of the nose. Red dots appeared in front of his eyes and he felt warm blood trickle over his upper lip. He spat it away. He glared at Dohara defiantly.

"What the hell," said the Dragon. "My nose has been broken before."

VI

MAJOR ARNOLD HAD BECOME no less chubby and pink-skinned upon his promotion to Lieutenant-Colonel and his elevation to the temporary com-

mand of the Eightieth Group. He had, however, become just a shade less cheerful about everything. He was discovering that Group Commanders are plagued—from morning to night—with many things more than the mere routine of group command.

He looked up, sighing, as Lieutenant Gregory Jones entered his office for perhaps the sixth time in three days. "Are you going to pester me about the same thing again?" he asked.

Greg nodded. "You know it's important to me, sir."

"My boy," Colonel Arnold said, "I'm darned glad you managed to get back with the others, and all that—but I've got a piece of this war on my hands, now. I wish you'd simmer down some."

Greg draped his long legs over the edge of the desk. "I know," he nodded. His heavy brows were holding down a deep, troubled frown. "And I appreciate the fact that I never had it so good, as they say."

Mentally, he was going over the long days of tramping through the Chinese countryside. None of it was very clear. After the guerrillas had found the B-25 crew among the rocks they had taken over, quite efficiently. Most of it had been one long night hike—they had been hidden in the daytime, in rice paddies, shacks, even dugouts in the ground. Following a few days of hospital check-up they had then been returned to Kulung.

Both Greg and Sergeant Antonio had been assigned once more to radar duties. With the equipment that had been removed from the B-25 they had busied themselves setting up a ground detection station. The new commander was a little more kindly disposed toward the stuff than the Dragon had been.

But Greg continued his argument. "Look, sir, I know this sounds crazy, but I've got a *feeling* my father's alive. You know they can't kill the Dragon off. He's indestructible—"

"Greg," the chubby Colonel said, "we're doing all we can. Every mission gets a secondary alert on it. We can't send out special search planes. We haven't got 'em to spare."

"Then let *me* go." Greg brought his palm down hard on the desk. "I'm not rated, I know that—but I can fly. I wasn't washed out until the last week of advanced."

"I can't spare a combat plane," said Arnold, shaking his head.

"Then I won't take one. Not a regular operational plane. How about the two seater utility job? The AT-6 they made over? I know that airplane backwards."

"Too dangerous. You'd be shot down."

"It carries two fifties. That's enough for protection. Anyway, I'd keep out of trouble. I'd head the other way if—"

"Look, Greg," interrupted Arnold. "You get in an accident. Maybe you just botch up a wing-tip landing. The Form 14 says: 'Pilot, Jones, Gregory, Lieutenant, no rating.' Where does that leave me? Right behind the well-known ebony ball. A commanding officer is responsible for that stuff, Greg—and they don't take excuses."

Greg sighed unhappily and unwound his legs from the desk. "All right, Colonel," he said, "all right."

As he headed toward the door, Arnold came from behind the desk, fell in step with him and put a hand on his shoulder. "I know how you feel, kid. It's your own father and it makes a difference. But if he's alive—as you say—he'll turn up sooner or later."

"I can't wait," said Greg.

"Can't wait for what?"

"Something I've got to find out. Something I've got to hear him deny in person."

"What?"

Greg made a tight little laugh. "Oh, hell, nothing. Forget it, sir."

"*You* forget it, Greg," said Arnold, patting his shoulder. "And get busy in that radar. If the Dragon *does* come back, maybe you'll have something to show him. Maybe he will change his mind, then."

THE new radar shack was at the north end of the runway. It had been used for tool and parts storage but Sergeant Antonio's deft broom and vigorous elbow was rapidly giving it the look of a place of science. Some new equipment had arrived and this, with the airborne sets, was making the beginnings of a passable warning and location center.

The Sergeant was sweeping the steps as Greg arrived. He grunted in greeting.

Greg sat on the step, picked up a stick and drew meaningless lines in the dirt. He

studied them as though they formed the battle plan for the invasion of Japan, itself. He asked, "How'd the impedances work out between the receiver and the 'scope?" He knew they were probably working out, but it seemed one way of making conversation. Conversation would keep him from thinking.

Antonio kept sweeping. "They'll do." He lifted his dark eyes just slightly for an oblique glance at the lieutenant. "Sir—uh—you mind if I get a little personal?"

"Hm?" said Greg. He turned and stared at the Sergeant for a moment. Then he said quietly, "No, go ahead."

"Lieutenant—" Antonio's voice had the same dark, brooding quality as his eyes—"you're kinda heading for a crack-up."

"I'm *what?*"

"I guess I oughta keep my big mouth shut. Maybe it's none of my business. But, anyway, I can't help sounding off about it. Ever since that Slopie bombardier made that crack, you been going down hill. With the throttle up to the firewall." Antonio touched his forehead. "Up here, I mean."

"What crack, Antonio? What are you talking about?"

"I think maybe you know what I'm talking about, sir," the Sergeant said evenly. He was leaning on the broom, now. "I was watching you when Lieutenant Sing said your father had been messing around with your turret guns before we took off. That was sure a queer expression you got, then."

"I suppose it was," said Greg stiffly. "Doesn't that seem natural?"

"Yeah. Only from the way you looked, I knew what you were thinking. You were thinking maybe he was right. You were thinking maybe your own old man did louse up those guns."

Greg fought back the bristling feeling. He made himself shrug. He drew another triangle in the dirt.

Antonio went on; the words came faster and more heatedly, as though, having got this far, he would go all the way. "Personally, sir, I don't believe the Dragon did a job like that. And you don't either—not really. But you're not going to be satisfied until you know for sure. And you're thinking about it all the time. I can tell. When we're working on this here equipment I sometimes got to ask you a question three, four times before you even know I'm talking. *Lieutenant—you got to do something about it.*"

"All right," Greg said slowly. "That's the way it is. But there's nothing I can do. They won't give me an airplane to look for him. And—you can't blame 'em. There's no real evidence he's alive."

"That Russian dame was here," said the Sergeant, with a peculiar off-handedness.

"Tanya?" Greg brought his head around sharply. "What was *she* here for?"

"Asking questions," said Antonio. He began to sweep again. "I couldn't swear it, but from the questions she asked, I'd say she was trying to get a line on this radar stuff."

"What are you getting at?"

The Sergeant maintained his casual air. "Well, I'll tell you, sir. I guess I'm kind of a nosey guy. Maybe it was the neighborhood in Astoria I was brought up in. Everybody liked to know about everybody else. Sometimes that's good—sometimes it ain't. But I got into the habit of noticing and remembering things about people, if you know what I mean."

"Come to the point," said Greg.

"Well, it's no secret that the Dragon and the Russian dame were—good friends, sort of. And everybody knows that nobody can keep a military secret more than two minutes around Kulung. So, when this Tanya comes around—lookin' for you, she said—and starts asking a lot of questions about the radar, with the accent on the secret parts, I get to thinking." He looked up. "I guess I ought to keep my big mouth shut, lieutenant. You ain't sore, are you?"

"It's all right," said Greg. "I had a feeling like that about Tanya from the beginning. But I figured it was just an emotional reaction. However—it's not going to do any good just to report Tanya, or breeze our suspicions, without real evidence. And there's one gal who's not going to let anybody get the goods on her very easily."

"You still don't get what I'm driving at, Lieutenant."

"Hm?"

Antonio leaned the broom against the door, sat down, and very slowly and deliberately lighted a cigarette before he spoke. He turned toward Greg and blew thin smoke as he talked. "If this Tanya is working for the Japs, or somebody—if she's been a plant to get information out of

the Colonel all along—*she might have a better idea than anybody else what happened to him.*"

Greg stared at the Sergeant open-mouthed for a long, silent several seconds. Finally he rose. He nodded slowly. Then he stood back and regarded Antonio with frank admiration. "Sergeant," he said, "you're a genius."

"Yeah," sighed Antonio, going back to his sweeping. "I've always suspected it."

IT WAS always evening befoe Greg finally called on Tanya Varinov at the hostel. He spent most of the intervening time in the engineering office near the Operations shack. There was no one there, and Greg worked at the drawing board for a number of hours putting scores of lines and mysterious little marks on an old aeronautical chart.

Tanya's quarters were in a small, separate building. As Greg crossed the lawn and the little, carved bridge over the duck pond to get to them, he thought he saw the blinds in her window shimmer momentarily, as though someone had been looking through them and then drawn away hastily.

She responded almost immediately when he knocked. He heard her call softly, "Come in."

He opened the door. She was seated behind a desk, and her eyebrows rose in mild surprise when she saw him. "Hello," he said. Her eyebrows dropped again and a dazzling smile crossed her face. She rose. Greg's eyes swiftly took in the room—a medium-sized one furnished in North Chinese style. Embroidered Changsha tapestries hung on the walls, and most of the tables and chairs were of teakwood inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

"Well, I have not seen you for many days," she said, coming forward. She gave Greg her long, graceful fingers.

He thought for a moment of bending to kiss her hand, continental style, but decided against it rather quickly. He pressed her fingers briefly instead. He placed his bundles on the table and saw the slight flicker of her eyelids as she noticed them. One was a brief-case, the other was a package shaped unmistakably like a bottle. He answered her greeting. "Been busy," he said. "You know how it is."

"Of course. I understand." She floated toward the wall, found a bell cord and pulled it. "You will have tea?"

"Well, no—thanks. Not tea."

Tanya moved an eyebrow. "Not tea? Something else, perhaps?"

Greg rubbed a fingertip on the space just above his chin. "I never did keep that dinner date with you—"

"But that is perfectly all right." She added a fluttering gesture to her words.

"Well, I owe you amends," he grinned. He picked up the bottle-shaped package and hefted it. "I decided to bring this as a kind of present. I—er—thought maybe we could sit here and talk awhile. This is scotch—good scotch. Pretty rare in China." He laughed rather ruefully. "I brought it originally for the Dragon."

She folded her hands together, held them in front of her, and looked upward from a forward-tilted head. "It is very charming of you, Greg. Please sit down, then, and stay for a while. I will have my wine —I prefer it. Would you like water? Soda?"

"Water, thanks."

A servant entered, listened carefully as Tanya instructed him in Chinese, left, then reappeared a few moments later with a tray of bottles and pitchers. Tanya chattered away about the landscaping of the hostel as Greg took his first drink. He made a great show of gulping it. He poured another before she had more than tested her wine. It wasn't until he'd emptied the third glass that he brought up the subject of the Dragon.

"You know, I can't help feeling he's alive somewhere," he said. "They'd have reported him before this if he were dead, or a prisoner."

Tanya made the appropriate sympathetic expression. "You must not worry so. Perhaps when all this is done you two will meet again, yes? In the meantime—you must relax—"

This time it was Tanya who poured his drink. Her own first cup of wine was still no more than three quarters gone.

During the fifth drink, Tanya gestured at the small portfolio, and sounded very casual as she spoke. "It is true," she said, "you have been working too hard. You were bringing papers home to work in your room tonight, yes?"

"Oh, that," said Greg, looking at the brief case. He flicked his finger at it carelessly. His speech seemed to be getting a little thicker, now. "Jus' an old map I found when we were cleanin' out the radar shack. Jus' an old map of Kulung and some o' the country around here. I was gonna turn it over to the intelligence officer, and forgot."

"The intelligence officer? But he is not concerned with maps. That is operations, is it not?"

"Ha, ha," Greg laughed, wiggling his finger. He looked very sly. "Not that little ol' map. 'S got Secret stamped all over it." He wolfed the rest of his drink.

Tanya smiled sweetly, took his glass, and poured the sixth one.

It became dark outside at about the same rate at which the contents of the scotch bottle disappeared. It wasn't long before there was much less than half of the amber liquid left, and Greg was sprawled in an ungainly attitude across one of the teakwood armchairs, half sitting, half reclining. He was talking as though leaden weights were on his lips. His eyes were nearly closed, his face was flushed and his breathing was loud and heavy. His talk didn't make much sense.

Mainly, he was involved in proving by a strange brand of logic that the air corps song was the greatest piece of music ever written. Then, abruptly, in the middle of a sentence, he gave a peculiar little giggle, closed his eyes completely, and pressed his cheek to the back of the chair.

"G'night, Tanya—shweet dreamsh," he said.

Thirty seconds later he was snoring softly.

With a decisive motion, Tanya put her still unfinished wine on the desk, and moved swiftly to the chair. She reached under Greg's sprawled form, being careful not to disturb him. She wiggled the small brief-case from its position. She stepped back quickly, went to the other end of the room and opened it, then she took the folded map from it and gave it a hasty appraisal. She nodded with hard satisfaction as she put it back again.

The woman tossed a final glance at Greg before she left the cottage. He was still snoring, and that happy, fatuous smile was still on his face.

The door slammed behind Tanya. A remarkable change came over Greg. He swung to his feet and stood on them quite steadily. The fatuous grin faded, and his expression became very serious. He relaxed it only for a moment when his eye caught the near empty scotch bottle on the table. "Lukewarm tea!" he grimaced.

Now he stepped cautiously toward the door, in Tanya's wake.

VII

THE TELEPHONE WAS IN THE main hall and Tanya was talking into it in low tones. Greg, crouched around the corner, could hear very little. He did catch one sentence however, when Tanya raised her voice.

"No, no," she said, "do as I say! And quickly. Fifteen minutes . . . yes . . . I will meet you at the east end of the field."

After a few more softly spoken sentences she re-cradled the receiver. Greg drew back, and moved toward a doorway into which he could melt. But his caution wasn't needed; Tanya moved hurriedly toward the main entrance. He circled back, exited by a side door and trotted to a vantage point behind a cassia tree. Tanya had walked a short distance down the road to the air base, and now suddenly she was leaving the road and setting a direct course across the rice paddies. This would act as a short cut to the east end of the field.

Greg crouched and trotted along about a hundred yards behind her. The low dikes took them both on a zig-zag course; once Tanya stopped, and turned to look behind her, but Greg had anticipated the movement and dropped to his hands and knees.

Ten minutes later the moonlit runways were in sight. There were the hillocks of old Chinese graves here, and Greg had little difficulty concealing himself, now. He squatted and watched over the top of one of the mounds. Tanya stood at the field's edge, glanced anxiously in several directions, and intermittently made short, impatient steps.

There was the grumbling sound of an airplane taxiing. The moon glinted on a wing and helped Greg's eyes to pick out the silhouette that was beetling toward them. When it was halfway across the clearing he recognized the round nose and

long canopy over two cockpits. It was the utility AT-6.

Tanya ran toward it. Greg narrowed his eyes and unconsciously clawed his fingers into a clump of grass. Tanya wasn't alone in her efforts, apparently. And her colleague, in order to have taken the airplane that easily, must have been one of the military personnel at the air base. That was the incredible part of it—but here it was, happening in front of his eyes.

Tanya reached the fuselage and the slipstream of the idling engine whipped her tight gown to her, and sent her black hair streaming from its lacquered setting. The canopy slid back. She struggled to the wing, and climbed into the cockpit.

Greg backed down from the mound hastily. His frown was the expression of a man who had a plan, and was already on the way to carry it out. He was hoping for just a modicum of luck to make it work. He headed for the revetments at a fast trot.

The sound of the AT-6 being gunned for take-off came to his ears as he reached the first bedded P-40. The Warhawk looked strangely homely and content as it squatted before him with moon-silvered wings and a highlighted spinner cone. He hoped that its engine wouldn't be cold. A number of revetted interceptors were always kept warm for emergency flights—and this was the chance he was taking.

He scrambled into the cockpit. He fastened the 'chute straps, but didn't waste time with the Sutton harness.

His only check before starting was to glance at the fuel indicator. It was full. He pulled the energizer and tripped the main ignition switch. She whirred several times, then caught and sputtered. He nodded in satisfaction—no cold engine would have started without priming like that.

He taxied away from the revetment, then set the flaps for take-off and made a hasty appraisal of the controls, the oil and engine temperature.

At the end of the runway he kicked her around, using one toe-brake and gunning the throttle. He thought for a moment of running her up and checking the magneto drop, and then glanced into the sky where the bright exhaust flash of the AT-6 was already disappearing. "What the hell," he said. He pushed the throttle forward.

The big maw of the Curtiss fighter gulped air, and her wheels put yards of runway behind her. Greg felt the surge of all her power in his back, and saw the dim shapes of trees and buildings blur past. He inched the stick forward and brought the tail up. The tension increased as she gained airspeed; the controls came alive.

GREG didn't know the take-off speed of a P-40, or very much else about the ship, for that matter. He was flying purely by feel—with a little prayer thrown in, perhaps. It was old-style flying, and he had a mad idea that the Dragon would have approved of it. At any rate, it was good to be flying again. There was a tingle in the pit of his stomach that was certainly more intoxicating than the weak tea he had consumed back in Tanya's cottage. The airplane felt sweet. She stayed on her take-off course with only the barest rudder-corrections—a fortunate characteristic of faster airplanes. Greg could sense when her leading edges bit the air; when she all but coaxed him in plain words to take her from the ground.

He eased the stick back. She responded swiftly and surely. He was airborne, then, in the still, smooth air. It was like floating in a vast vat of cream. He leaned back and let out a deep breath. It had been a long time since he had flown alone, but it had seemed easy and familiar, every minute of it. Flying, apparently, was like swimming or riding a bicycle. It came back.

He looked around the cockpit, found the landing-gear control and worked it. The wheels came up and she surged forward with added speed.

Greg put her in a steep climb to the left. He upped her nose until he felt the first buffeting of a near stall, then dropped it again to a better angle. He held her that way and corkscrewed for altitude. All the time he angled his head this way and that, sweeping the skies. Four times he saw the faint exhaust flash to the east, and once the AT-6's canopy sent back the moonlight.

At three thousand he leveled off. He swung the airplane in the direction where he'd last seen the exhaust, and noted the heading. Then he experimented with mix-

ture and propeller pitch until she hummed at a steady cruising r.p.m.

Now Greg had time to reflect upon a few things—most of which added up to damfoolishness. He had taken off, without so much as a magneto check, after a little more than a year's absence from flying. He knew nothing of the weather ahead, the proximity or strength of enemy aircraft, or the exact destination of the airplane he was following. On top of everything else, he'd be lucky to escape court martial when he got back. *When* he got back? He laughed acidly. *If* he got back.

His laugh was soft, yet with a kind of rough, thistle-edge. There were mocking overtones to it.

A lot of China went by. The ungainly spinner of the P-40 bored its way into the air mass, and the Allison engine purred confidently and steadily. High cirrus mackereled the sky after a while, and fuzzed the perimeter of the moon. Several times Greg looked off one wing and saw mountain tops a little too close for comfort. He took a little more altitude then and hoped that he wouldn't pass over the AT-6 ahead. He had already lost and found its exhaust light several times.

He had a sudden idea and turned on the radio. There was nothing but a noise like the frying of eggs in his headsets. He looked up out of the cockpit then once more, to re-accustom his eyes to the darkness, and reduced throttle.

In perhaps twenty minutes he noticed that the exhaust flash was beginning to lose altitude. He throttled back some more, and glided along with it. He saw it turn, and he banked, too. As his wing dipped he examined the terrain once more, and saw that his quarry was taking him into a long, narrow valley. The pattern of its turning suggested that it was making a landing approach. Greg switched on the radio again.

He had more success this time; there were voices. The signal was loud and clear which meant that they were transmitting from a nearby point. The language was Japanese. Greg listened intently and wished that his knowledge covered more than a good smattering of the tongue. He recognized numbers and heard the words for wind and velocity. A tower somewhere was giving landing instructions, that much was clear.

The next voice was a woman's voice—a low, familiar one. It responded in the same language, and her Japanese appeared to be excellent. Greg would guess that she had spent some time in the divine isles, or perhaps had lived in a Japanese household in Shanghai. He made the soft, mocking laugh again. It was becoming quite natural with him.

There was another trait of the Dragon's that his son was beginning to acquire. It was an intense degree of caution combined with a souped-up reaction time that makes what is sometimes called combat sense. Many combat pilots owe their lives to a sudden, apparently reasonless decision to look over their shoulders or past their wings. Greg did that now. He simply—not knowing quite why—turned his head and looked up, and to the right.

He saw three fast-moving shapes coming toward him.

EVEN as the thought of danger formed in his mind, Greg was dipping the airplane hard to the left and bringing her nose about to peel away. The bluish-grey earth swung in under him, and then came toward his windshield. It came at three hundred miles an hour. It was close, much too close. He began as tight a pull-out as he dared. He felt the weight of gravity and the pull of a thousand horses on the stick; he felt his body crush into the seat, and he felt his insides crush into his body. There was a sudden thin red film before his eyes.

The red-out passed suddenly, and then the horizon was dropping like a plummet below the line of his cowling. The P-40, leveling off, mushed along in a nose-high attitude for a split second before she began to climb again.

All of this transpired in just a few seconds, yet Greg was able to separate these hair-dimensions of time in distinct episodes, and to anticipate them as they came. This was part of combat sense, too. He knew, for instance, that the next thing would be three shapes flashing past him, above and a little to the rear. He knew that they were probably tripping their guns right now.

They were. He heard the slugs strike the tail of his own ship, and felt the rudder pedals become suddenly soft and flabby on the balls of his feet. He swore. Ailerons alone would still turn the ship, but only

rudder pedals gave it that fine, precise degree of control. And in combat, maneuvers had to be clean ones.

It might have been the Dragon himself who made the next maneuver. It was exactly the sort of thing the battle-wise, air-scarred old man would have done. The three Zeroes were off to the left, biscuit turning. The normal thing for a lone P-40 would have been a right turn of ninety degrees—one that would get it away as fast as possible. Greg, instead, went to the left. When the Zeroes finished skidding about, he was approaching them, head on.

Distance disappeared at the double speed of closure. Greg set the sights and saw the wing tips of the lead Zero puff toward the range lines. He pressed the trigger button.

The guns didn't answer.

Panic stabbed him. Little winks of flame bejeweled the wings of the Zeroes even as he guessed what was wrong. They'd come on him too quickly. He'd never had time to charge the guns, or trip the safety. It was too late, now. Much too late. He felt the P-40 tremble under the impact of Zero fire.

Only one thing to do, now. He slammed the stick to the left, hard and fast. The P-40 lobbed over, slipping a little without her rudder control. He yanked the canopy back with one hand, and flipped the buckle of his safety belt with the other. He pushed with his feet and felt the headsets jerk free. In the next instant he was falling, and the only thing he could hear was the air rushing past his ears.

He yanked the ripcord. There was another taut moment of fall, the silk fluttered away and billowed out with a sudden popping noise. The risers slapped his chest, and the leg straps dug into him.

He was swinging and descending gently, then. He looked down and saw the ground quite near. A dim blob took the shape of a patch of trees, a field lost its flat look and became sharply sloped. As he made himself go limp for the landing he heard the Zeroes overhead. The ground came up and belted him; he tumbled head over heels.

Before it collapsed, the parachute dragged him perhaps twenty feet. He felt his body pass over rocks and the sharp ends of scrub. He unfastened his harness and slipped out of it. He stood, then. And his right ankle gave way as though it were rubber.

The pain began as he sat there staring at it dumbly. The sound of Jap engines rose to a sudden roar; he looked up. They were diving at him, still in tight formation. Greg bunched himself into the smallest possible space and hugged the ground, face down.

He heard the guns. He heard the slugs run across the earth like steel raindrops. Without consulting his brain, his body shook with fear. The apex of fire passed less than five feet from where he lay.

Greg reached back for the parachute harness he had just left. Yanking desperately, he ripped the small canvas first-aid kit from the chest riser and stuffed it into his pocket. He got to his feet again. He felt the pain increase in his ankle, bit his lower lip, and stayed upright. A few hundred feet upslope was the patch of woods—he ran for it. Each step of his right foot felt like the jab of a white hot bayonet, but he kept on.

The engines crescendoed again. Once more the guns chattered harshly and the noise came in short, overlapping bursts. There was the smell of burnt powder. But this time none of the slugs came near, and Greg supposed that they were shooting, in the dim light, at the visible form of the white parachute instead of at him. And now he had reached the wooded patch.

He sat down and propped his back on a tree trunk. He breathed hard and listened while the Zeroes came twice again. There was no third time. After a while there was only the China night and the passing of a soft, cool wind on his cheek.

Greg unrolled the first aid kit and took the morphine syrette from it. He used all of it.

HE HAD no idea how long he slept. Just before he opened his eyes he was dreaming that he was trying to cross a carved Chinese bridge and that an old, battered, stress-wrinkled P-40 with a mocking grin painted on its scoop barred the way. The funny thing was that he knew he was dreaming. This half-state continued for some seconds, and then he was suddenly fully awake.

He was in a bed of some kind—a string bunk with a straw mattress. A very round face in a globular head floated above him. This wasn't a dream, this was real. There

was a wide grin and merry, black-shoe-button eyes. The room was small, with walls of bamboo matting. Others stood around, some with cartridge-belts across their shoulders. They were all dirty and ragged. And grinning.

The man with the round face said, "Okay, okay. I Wally Hu—happy seeing you one time again!"

For a cockeyed moment, Greg thought he might be back in the hostel at Kulung—this was surely the same house boy. He pointed at him. "You're—you're—Wally Hu!"

"Sure." The man nodded happily. "How you feel?"

Greg shook his head roughly, partly to express his disbelief, partly to clear his head. He looked around the room again, saw a door and a window with burlap covering, and supposed he could be in any of a hundred little wattled houses dotting the Kwangsi hills. Most of the Chinese standing about had the squat, fragile figures and moon faces of the border province.

He sat upright. He saw that his right shoe and stocking had been removed, and that the ankle was bandaged.

Wally Hu chuckled. "We pretty good doctor, okay?"

Greg nodded. "But what are you doing here? When did you leave Kulung? And where is this, anyway?"

The round-headed native reached into the pocket of his khaki trousers, extracted a monkey skin billfold and took a creased square of paper from it. He unfolded this and handed it to Greg. The Chinese ideographs were roughly similar to the Japanese writing with which Greg was already familiar, and he could make out enough of them to recognize this paper as a military commission—General in the guerrilla forces.

Wally beamed and rubbed his hands. "I in Kulung try find Japanese agent. But come back here. This my job."

Greg handed the document back. "I'll be damned," was all he could say. He shook his head slowly and swung his legs from the bed. He managed to stand reasonably well on the bad ankle. There was infinitely less pain. At that point a thin Chinese in a long, blue gown and huge horn-rimmed glasses stepped forward and spoke in a carefully modulated sing-song.

Wally Hu translated. "This Doctor Tao," he explained, indicating the thin man. Dr. Tao had very black eyes with little pin-points of light in them; he sported a sparse beard and mustache. "Doctor trying new medicine on foot. He asking how is feel, okay?"

"Better. Much better," said Greg. He demonstrated with a few steps.

That seemed to please the cadaverous physician immensely. He nodded and grinned and folded his hands together in front of him. Then he took Greg by the arm quite abruptly and steered him across the room. The others standing about laughed and made comments in Chinese. Greg wasn't sure what the joke was, but then, with the Chinese, he never was.

"Dr. Tao is big doctor in Peiping before Japanese come. Is chief of hospital," Wally said.

Tao pulled aside a curtain on the other wall of the room. There were shelves stocked with scores of bottles; the labels were in Chinese, German, Russian and languages which Greg didn't immediately recognize.

Again Wally Hu translated, and explained that Dr. Tao was being proud of his medical supplies. The Guerrilla detachment had small, innocent-looking houses such as this one all over the countryside, each serving a different phase of the military organization. They operated every day under the very noses of the Japanese, who supposedly occupied the territory. From headquarters itself, the movements of the main Jap bomber strip and the installation around it could be closely watched with binoculars.

At that point Greg had been holding one of the bottles with an English label. He replaced it, and turned to Wally Hu swiftly. "Colonel Jones—the Dragon," he said anxiously. "Has anybody seen him? He was shot down in this area when—"

Wally nodded. A frown replaced the grin on his round face. "Yes. We know. This why I come back. Hsian-hsieng is plisoner in same Japanese camp."

"The same one? The one you can see from your headquarters?" Greg pressed forward.

"Same one," said Wally.

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's go and—"

"Oh, is not easy. Nobody getting inside."

"There *must* be a way. There's got to be." Greg knew that he was looking desperate and a little foolish—but he couldn't help it. He swung his worried glance back and forth between Wally Hu and Doctor Tao.

Wally shrugged and looked away.

Greg's face brightened suddenly and he turned slowly once more to face the rows of bottles on the shelves. "By Heaven," he said softly—sounding amazingly like the Dragon—"it might work. It might just work—"

"What you say?" asked Wally.

"Listen," said Greg, motioning both men together. "Listen carefully. And, Wally, translate this for the doctor as carefully as you can—"

VIII

A STRANGE PROCESSION APpeared on the dusty road before the main gate of Air Base Number 29, Imperial Japanese Air Force in Kwangsi, China. The sentry who turned and stared at it had heard the chanting and jingling of glass strips some moments ago. Now, as it came around the bend, he saw that some of the men in the procession were carrying silken banners hanging from cross-pieces on long poles; others carried burning incense sticks, and the central figure, an exceptionally tall man walked forward very slowly, seemingly oblivious to all of it. This man was dressed in a blue mandarin gown and a sun helmet such as the missionaries wore. A veil of mosquito netting hung from the sun helmet and covered his face, making it invisible.

"Tomare!" said the sentry, readying his rifle and bayonet.

Most of the men in the queer company were sun-browned and raggedly clad—typical peasants. One of them stepped forward, now; one very small and round who moved in a choppy, rolling stride. He spoke to the sentry in the local Cantonese dialect. The sentry shook his head and motioned with the rifle for the little, round man to keep his distance.

The tall one in the mandarin gown and the mosquito mask came forward, then. His Japanese came slowly, but was better than that of most of the Chinese the sentry had heard.

"Illustrious guardian of the Emperor," said the tall man, bowing and sucking in his breath politely, "worthless ones seek to assist the warriors who build Asia Coprosperity Sphere."

The soldier's eyes widened a little. "Explain further," he commanded.

"All in village know that honored Japanese commander suffers from devils in stomach. This poor doctor begs to drive them away. From the mountains come wondrous herbs."

The sentry looked doubtful for a moment.

"Exalted commander will be proud of soldier who sends him doctor to cure the stomach," prodded the tall mandarin.

At that the sentry turned his head and shouted toward the camp. He kept his eyes on the queer group before him, however, and held his weapon still at guard. A few seconds later a sergeant and several other soldiers appeared. The sergeant was brusque and overbearing, but the tall mandarin doctor patiently repeated his request.

The sergeant thought it over a while. There was discussion among all of them. One or two of the soldiers eyed the blue-clad doctor as though they would have enjoyed using him for bayonet practice. Presently, however, the burly sergeant gave some orders and gestured. Two of the soldiers trotted back into the camp.

There was another wait. The Chinese peasants began their ceremonious chanting and jingling of glass strips and swinging of incense sticks again. The soldiers stared, some in distaste, others in superstitious fear. In the midst of it all, the tall doctor stood with his arms folded and his head at a serene, upward tilt.

When the messengers finally returned it was to say that the tall doctor was to be admitted.

The first sentry stepped back and made a rough gesture for the mandarin to proceed. The round-headed peasant—the one who had first spoken—fell in behind him. This brought action from the sentry. With a sharp word, the stock of his rifle was placed against the round peasant's chest, and he was sent sprawling into the dust of the road. There was a good deal of laughter from the other soldiers.

Alone, then, the gowned and helmeted doctor was led through the Japanese camp. He moved with a slow, erect dignity, and the two Japanese soldiers who were his escort came along on either side of him, pointing, laughing and making remarks about his ancestry and habits among other things. Most of the camp was dispersed in haphazard fashion through the trees, and the road wound aimlessly past barracks, huts, humming generators and fuel drums. It wasn't a large installation and it must have been well-camouflaged from the air.

Through the trees at one point the tall mandarin saw the airfield, saw the outlines of parked Nell bombers and heard the muttering of taxiing aircraft. He sensed that a mass take-off was in preparation, and his heart quickened a little.

They came, after a while, to a small house as plain as the others, but set apart in an open space. Rice paddies were near it, undoubtedly for the purpose of making it look like any farmhouse from the air. Another sentry stood at the door, here.

The two soldiers chattered for a moment; then the house sentry stepped inside. The man in the mandarin gown was prodded toward the door. A moment later the sentry reappeared, and directly behind him came a huge, hunch-shouldered Japanese in the uniform of a colonel.

FROM behind the mosquito netting Lieutenant Gregory Jones narrowed his eyes at the man who now loomed over him. Riki Dohara's face was still puffy, and his eyes had that same drooping expression, but there was more confidence in them now —and more cruelty. Greg hoped that the furious pounding of the blood in his temples wouldn't somehow show. He stood perfectly still as Dohara looked him up and down. The drooping eyes were calculating. Dohara finally gestured to the sentry and said in Japanese, "Search him."

Both soldiers jumped to obey; patted Greg down and turned him about roughly. At one point Greg was certain that they were about to lift the mosquito netting, but instead one of them merely peered through it at the vague outline of Greg's face. Apparently he saw nothing to alarm him. When they had finished, they turned and told the Colonel that the blue-gowned man carried no weapons. The Colonel nodded.

Greg expelled a long sigh of relief and tried not to make it audible. He had wanted to take a weapon with him, but Wally Hu had counseled against that. He was glad, now, that he had taken the guerrilla leader's advice.

Now Dohara was speaking to him in a husky voice. "The solder says you speak the tongue of heaven."

This was the crucial test. All morning Greg had been practicing speaking in a high, reedy voice that was not his own. The fact that he was supposed to be a Chinese would account for his broken Japanese—he hoped. He stood there and wished that he could wipe his cold, wet palms on the mandarin gown to dry them. He said, "I speak to please honorable commander."

Dohara grunted. "You claim to cure the stomach pains?"

Greg brought his sleeves together and bowed, backing away one step as was proper before an august personage. "The hills and the herbs hold many secrets, sun-favored commander."

Dohara looked at Greg queerly for a moment, tilting his head as though he detected something familiar in the man's voice, but couldn't quite place it. Greg's heart took several extra, irregular beats. "Come in," Dohara finally said. He turned and stepped into the house. Greg followed, passing the sentry at a distance of not more than two feet. The sentry seemed quite disinterested and gazed off toward some trees.

Greg was led through a hallway to a room in the rear. It was cool and dim inside. The Colonel left the door open for him and, entering, Greg saw tiered bunks at one end of the room, a table in the middle and a door at the far end. Dohara sat at the table. There was amusement in his eyes as he looked up, now—cold, vicious amusement. "Now—what is this cure, man of medicine?"

Without answering, Greg brought a small bottle from his gown and placed it on the table. He moved it carefully, as though it were very delicate.

Riki Dohara slapped the table with his ham-like hand and broke into sudden, harsh laughter. "Chinese dog. Fool. Do you think I am stupid?" He picked the bottle up and examined it closely. Then he put it

down again with a sudden motion and pushed it back toward Greg. He pointed to it. "Drink. Drink from it."

"But it is the glorious commander who possesses the devils in the stomach."

Dohara stopped laughing. His face became hard. The eyes narrowed until they were two swift brush-strokes in the puffy face. "Drink," he said coldly.

Greg spread his hands and shrugged. He took the small bottle from the table and uncorked it. The edge of the mosquito netting came well beyond his chin and he was able to put the bottle to his lips without exposing his face. He sipped, and put it back on the table again.

"Dog," shouted Dohara. "You did not drink."

Silently, Greg pointed to the line of liquid in the bottle. There was some gone from the top.

Dohara snorted again. He picked up the bottle once more, and this time rolled it about in his hand, looking at it. There was puzzlement etched in the fat of his brow. He uncorked the vial, smelled it and made a grimace. "I do not believe it cures the stomach," he said finally.

"Drink once," Greg piped. "The devils will be gone forever."

Dohara stared at him. "If it does not cure my pains you will be executed."

Greg bowed. "The noble warrior commands."

Still watching Greg closely, Dohara lifted the bottle to his mouth. Greg, in spite of himself, stiffened. And then Dohara banged the bottle to the table. "Chinese dog," he growled. "it is nothing. It is leaves boiled in water. Is that not true?"

"The secrets of the hills—" Greg began patiently.

"*Hai.* Talk of a fool." Dohara's eyes had all but disappeared into razor slits. He rose and went to the tiered bunks across the room. From behind them he took a sheathed, slightly curved, hiltless sword. He pulled it by the ivory handle, withdrew it from the scabbard. His puffy face turned toward Greg once more, and now there were a faint smile on it. Soft, rasping chuckles came from the deep fat of his neck.

"Rieutenant," he said in English, "your Japanese very good. But now I preferring talk your ranguage."

GREG could hear the sudden surge of blood in his ears. His stomach became abruptly sick and hollow and twisted upon itself. He knew that in a moment his knees would probably be unsteady. That was the stuff of fear. But the greatest agony was in knowing, now, that he'd failed. He should have known better. It was a cockeyed plan to begin with—and he should never have tried to adapt himself to the kind of a bold, mad tactic that the Dragon would have carried off so successfully. More than that, he'd probably been a fool to come to China in the first place. This wasn't his kind of war. They were in another age, another world, here—the sword was still mightier than the cathode ray tube. Maybe that was why the Dragon had singled it out for himself—

"Talk! Answer!" said Dohara. "Take off hat from face! You are not fooring me"

Greg removed the sun helmet and the netting. He heard his own voice as though from a distance—and he was grateful to hear that it sounded steady. "Okay. You win," he said.

The beefy-shouldered Jap pointed to the bottle on the table. "Is crazy! Give reason!"

Greg shrugged. Somehow, his glands or something were compensating for the way he really felt, and giving him an exterior that was fantastically cool and controlled. "It's oil of mirbane," he said. "Poisonous as hell. Sinks to the bottom—that's why I could drink off the top."

"You—you try murder me?" Dohara's eyes blazed as he opened the slits somewhat.

"Why not?" said Greg.

The Jap stared for a sharp, taut moment. Finally, his faint smile returned. "You rike meet your friend?"

"What friend?"

"*Hai,*" said Dohara, drawing one short laugh out of the smile. He moved the sword in an arc and pointed it to the door at the far end of the room. "Go. Go that prace."

"In that door?"

"Go!" Dohara's voice rose and became strident.

Greg began a half-step toward the door. In the tenth of a second that was needed for that half-step he saw, evaluated and

decided upon a sudden chance. Perhaps it was his taste of air combat which helped him to think and act that quickly. He noticed that Dohara was across the table from him, and that the table was light enough to lift, but heavy enough to do damage.

He whirled suddenly, grasped the edge of the table and flung it upward into Dohara's puffy face.

He flung himself across the up-ended table, scarcely feeling it dig into his midsection. As he struck it, he rolled over it. He reached for Dohara with one hand, and got him by the throat, the fat throat. The man had already stumbled backward, his sword had clattered to the floor.

Only one idea broke the torrent of Greg's killing lust. If he were to hurt Dohara he would have to do it now—fast—while the ex-wrestler was still hampered by surprise. In a moment he would be no match for the beefy man's judo.

It was no time for ethics. Greg had neither the balance, nor the skill to use a good, clean Marquis of Queensberry punch to the jaw. Instead, he spread two fingers of his right hand and put the tips of them just as far as he could into Dohara's droopy, slitted eyes. He felt them sink, and he felt the warm blood. He knew that he would probably be violently ill in a moment, but he kept pushing those fingers. He twisted them, too.

Dohara made a horrible, choking, indrawn gasp. He forgot everything else and brought his hands up to pull those tormenting fingers from his eyes. Greg withdrew them, then, and stepped away. His palm touched the chair that had been at the table. He grabbed it, raised it high and brought it down with all the force he could muster, brought it down on Dohara's skull. It broke into several pieces. Dohara held his hands over his eyes and stood there swaying. There was still some chair left in Greg's hand—part of a rung—hard, stout wood. He struck Dohara over the head again and again, four times. The Jap finally dropped to his knees. Greg was going to hit him a fifth time, but Dohara suddenly sprawled flat on his face and lay there still.

Greg took the naked samurai sword from the floor, ran to the door at the far end and yanked it open.

IT LOOKED exactly like a hospital room. The walls were white, and there was one small window, and beside that, a bed. A man lay face down on the bed. He was clad in cotton pajamas and the regulation red corduroy robe of the U. S. Medical Corps. He was a small, wiry man with closely cropped grey hair and a face that was all lines and wrinkles.

"Dad!" Greg leaned over him and shook him.

The Dragon mumbled something rather thickly. There were welts and cuts, and caked blood on his face.

"Dad! Wake up—it's me—Greg!"

The Dragon opened one eye slowly. It looked dull. He opened the other one. He stared for a full moment, and then some of the dull film seemed to go away. "Greg—where'd you come from? Where . . ." His voice trailed off weakly.

"Come on," Greg said. "We've got to get out of here. Can you walk? Try it."

"I can walk," said the Dragon, nodding dazedly. He brushed Greg's hand away, rolled himself from the bed and stood. He swayed uncertainly, but he kept standing. Now his grey eyes were getting clearer; Greg saw that they darted about, seeing things and remembering them and bringing it all back. Now his mind was clicking and snapping again behind those eyes. The Dragon didn't waste time asking more questions. He nodded at the door. "Anybody out there?"

"Dohara. I knocked him out. Guard outside the door—maybe others."

"Let's go, then," said the Dragon grimly.

They went into the other room, the older man limping just slightly. He gave Dohara's crumpled form one cold, incurious looked as they passed. They came to the door that led into the hall; Greg shifted his grip on the samurai sword, and reached with his other hand toward the doorknob.

The doorknob began to turn before he touched it—

Greg twisted his hips and jumped to a position behind the door even as it opened. He heard the exclamation of surprise, first, then saw the khaki clad back of the sentry move before him. The Dragon was standing before the Jap soldier, meeting his eyes, not an eyelash betraying Greg's presence behind the door.

Greg swung the samurai sword. It was

a quick, vicious swing, and it caught the sentry directly below the ear. The man made a gurgling noise and ran forward. He ran all the way across the room before he dropped. He stopped kicking by the time the Dragon had picked up the man's bayoneted rifle.

For the second time the two oddly clad men stepped toward the door. For the second time, they were interrupted. Two figures suddenly appeared before them—and two faces lengthened in utter surprise. One was a Chinese face, very slender and faintly hook-nosed. The other was alabaster-skinned, beautiful and framed in tightly drawn black hair.

"Hello, Tanya," said the Dragon quietly. In those two words was his whole bitter grasp of her treachery.

Tanya seemed shocked into immobility. But Lieutenant Sing dropped his hand toward the holster at his side.

"No. I wouldn't," said the Dragon. The Jap rifle in his hands was very level and very steady. He moved his eyes back and forth between the Chinese officer and the White Russian girl. "Come inside," he said.

They obeyed dumbly. The Dragon nodded to Greg and Greg removed Sing's holstered weapon.

Tanya was speaking suddenly, her voice as low and purring as she could make it. "Please—you do not understand. We came to help. Both Lieutenant Sing and I—"

"She's lying," Greg interrupted. His voice was strangely quiet, too. "I made a phony map and stamped it secret and she lost no time in grabbing it. That was tea in that scotch bottle, Tanya. I figured you'd drink your own stuff."

"Never mind the post mortem," said the Dragon. He ran a dry tongue across dry lips. "I wish I could turn both of you over to the Chinese. You, Sing—they wouldn't be happy with you, one of their own people."

Sing's slender head came up and his eyes flashed. "I'm half Japanese," he said. "Go ahead and shoot. There are others after me. You white people think you can come here to Asia and make slaves of us. Well, let me tell you something. You'll never do it. Not here in China. Do you know what's happening to your precious

supply dump? The bombers are taking off right now. They know where it is. The map Greg gave Tanya didn't fool anyone. You told 'em, Colonel. You—yourself. When you said they couldn't move it over Cloud Mountain, a child could have guessed it."

"You must be quiet, Sing," sighed Tanya. She had stopped purring, now, and her voice was matter-of-fact, hard, and resigned. She looked steadily at the Dragon. "You will not kill me? You cannot escape from here, you know—unless I help—"

"Wait a minute," said Greg. "Dad—they came here in the AT-6. It must be down there on the field, now."

"I will tell you where it is," said Tanya hastily. "A bargain. Do not kill me, and I take you to it." She stepped forward.

"We can find it," said the Dragon coldly. Without changing expression, then, he pulled the trigger of the Jap rifle. He worked the bolt and pulled it again. He did it four times. He did it so abruptly and so calmly that the smoke and the acrid bite of gunpowder in the nostrils was already passing Greg before he realized what had happened. Sing went backward a few steps before he fell, and Tanya sank to her knees, her eyes wide open. She stayed that way for an instant before she dropped on her face.

Greg began to get sick.

"We're wasting time," said the Dragon.

IX

SOMEHOW, THEY MADE THEIR way through trees and around buildings to the air field. The sound of engines roaring in take-off gave them direction. The sun had gone down, now, and a thin layer of clouds obscured the moon. That helped. It also made them waste several precious minutes finding the silhouette of the AT-6 on the field. When they did discover it, they saw it parked just off the end of a runway. Several gasoline drums stood by it; the Dragon tapped one with the butt of the Jap rifle as they ran past it. It gave off a clanging sound. "Empty," he said. "Let's hope they filled the crate."

They scrambled into the airplane, Greg in the forward cockpit, the Dragon in the rear. "Tanks are topped," Greg yelled over his shoulder.

"Watch that Jap stuff," cautioned the Dragon. "No power."

"Right," said Greg.

That was the extent of their cockpit check. Greg ground her over, ticked the switch; she sputtered, hacked and then started. They took off cross-wind. There were gun flashes in the darkness and bullets thudded into the airplane. The AT-6 traveled almost the entire length of the field before she wobbled into the air. Greg slammed her wheels up. He went into an immediate climbing turn, and tossed a few silent prayers into the slipstream.

When they had gained enough altitude and set a compass course that would take them somewhere into the vicinity of Kulung, the Dragon got on the interphone. He said, "They'll blast hell out of the supply dump. Nothing we can do. It's my fault, too—I botched this thing up from the beginning."

"Maybe there *is* something we can do," Greg called back.

"What?"

"It'll depend on the radio and guns. Better check them." He tried the radio and found it working; he charged the guns and made a test burst.

"Okay, now what?" said the Dragon.

"The rest," Greg answered, "depends on luck. Let's hope yours holds out as usual. First we monitor the Kulung frequency. And hope we get there before that flight of bombers does."

"What if we do? asked the Dragon. "We'll never find a blacked-out field on a night like this. The bombers won't have the same trouble with the supply dump. Cloud mountain stands out like a sore thumb."

"We'll make trouble for the bombers," Greg said.

"In this darkness? Don't be silly."

"Dad—stick with me, will you? I'll explain in a minute."

The AT-6 droned on into the night. The black air over Kwangsi was a vast hole in space, it seemed. As they flew through it, Greg talked long and earnestly on the interphone. He told the Dragon everything that had happened since the mine-laying mission. He mentioned his original scheme of trying to poison Dohara. "I guess that long chance stuff isn't for me," he said. "You would have pulled it off better."

"Seems to me," said the Dragon, "that

you did all right. It wouldn't have worked out if you hadn't taken that long chance—even though your break came from a different direction. That's the way luck works, sometimes."

"That sounds suspiciously like fatherly advice," said Greg, smiling.

"You can expect lots of it," answered the Dragon, "from now on. If we get out of this mess, that is."

Greg turned the radio on and monitored it closely when he judged that they were nearing Kulung. He repeatedly called the ground station. At about the ninth call he raised an answer. It was faint, but intelligible.

"Hello, seven seven zero. This is King George. We read you S-three, R-three. Over."

"Okay, King George. Roger." Greg responded. "Now get this carefully. Colonel Jones and I have just escaped from an enemy base. We're in the AT-6 somewhere east of the field. Do you understand that?"

"Roger, roger—we've got it!" There was unconcealed excitement in the operator's voice.

"All right," said Greg. "Here's the rest. There's a flight of Japanese aircraft headed for Kulung right now to bomb a very important target in the vicinity—"

Greg outlined the rest of the plan in a mixture of military code, double-talk and slang. There was a possibility that the bombers, themselves, were listening.

AFTER THAT, the wait seemed interminable. The background noise of the headsets crackled away, and the radial engine of the AT-6 kept up its steady snarl. The mackerel clouds were still hazing the moon. Several times when Greg banked steeply they could see the dim shapes of mountains and valleys, but still no recognizable check points.

The message they awaited was in their ears suddenly. "Seven seven zero—this is Swami, calling seven seven zero." Greg smiled as he recognized the bored, offhand voice of Sergeant Antonio.

"Hello, Swami," he answered. "What's our position? Can you see us?"

"Yeah. A blip at sixty two that might be you. And a whole flock of blips at eight."

"What's our position?"

There was a short pause while Antonio made his calculations. "You're twenty miles east northeast, true heading."

After a few more transmissions, Greg swung the nose of the airplane toward the south. He called the Dragon once more on the interphone. "This is the pay-off," he said, "watch for exhaust flashes."

"I don't have to," the Dragon answered quietly, "I see 'em already. Just off the right wing. It's all yours, son."

Now the familiar intercept chatter of Quaker Flight filled the air. And along with it came Sergeant Antonio's matter-of-fact directions.

"Quaker Flight ten degrees right," he would say.

"Wilco," the interceptor leader would answer.

"Climb two thousand. Hold it—bogies changing course. Bogies now at two six seven. Two six seven—"

At ten thousand, Greg could make out the shapes of twin-engined bombers below. The Jap flight was headed toward Cloud Mountain, slightly south of the field. From the northwest, four three-plane elements of P-40s were bearing down upon it. This was the picture that Sergeant Antonio's transmissions gave—making the tactical situation as clear as if the noon sun were shining.

Greg keyed the microphone again. "Hello, Quaker Flight. This is seven-seven zero. I'm going in, now. I'm right over them."

He swung the stick far to the left and touched the rudder pedal lightly. The AT-6 peeled off. It plummeted toward the Jap formation. The wind made a banshee wail in the canopy cracks.

It seemed incredible, but the Jap Nells were still in perfect formation. Fifteen of them were strung out in a V of Vs. Either they had not bothered to monitor the command frequencies and had not heard Greg's in-the-clear plans—or they were too far gone on their bombing approach to break it up. Greg picked out the tailmost silhouette and held it steady in his sights.

He felt no animal thrill at the prospect of shooting down another airplane, even an enemy craft. In fact, he had to concentrate on the cold business at hand to keep from reflecting on the fact that as soon as

he moved his thumb a quarter of an inch, five or six men would die in flames. He wasn't yet entirely like the Dragon—

And then the old man's voice was suddenly in his ears. "Pull out, Greg! Pull out! Jink away—you hear?"

GREG obeyed without thinking. It was only when the airplane was nosing up again and centrifugal force was mashing him in the seat that he wondered what could have happened. He wasn't long in finding out. The nose of the AT-6 passed the horizon and reached for the sky—and there, coming at him, head on, were the clock cowlings and matchstick wings of two Japanese fighters.

They must have been as surprised as Greg. Again, he didn't bother to think about it—he acted. He thumbed the trigger and fishtailed the deadly spray with his rudders. In that moment, he heard Antonio's voice calling from the ground station again. "Hello, seven seven zero—two of the blips broke away from the main formation. They may be fighters—watch it!"

Tracers came toward Greg, too. They sprouted from the golden flowers of flame planted on the Zeroe's wings, their bluish green color making them easily distinguishable from his own glowing yellow fire. There was a fleeting impression of the battle hanging still in time and space, as though someone had held a colored photograph of it before his eyes for a split second. He saw the Zeroes, exactly in range, and he saw the cowling of his own airplane resting just under them. In the space between the yellow tracers and the greenish tracers made the pattern of a cat's cradle.

The next two things happened simultaneously, too. The AT-6 shook as though a giant hand had grasped it by the tail assembly and snapped it, trying to break its neck. The engine made one loud explosion and a sheet of flame covered the exhausts. At the same time the Zero on the left virtually disappeared — exploded — disintegrated—before his eyes. The one on the right fell off on one wing, and flame spurted out along its uppermost plane.

The AT-6 wobbled and her tail shuddered with lost lift. Greg slammed the stick forward and brought her nose down. She whined toward the deck. The engine somehow caught again, and roared as though it might run away. He yanked the throttle back.

He took a moment to key the mike. "Dad—come on—let's get the hell out of here—"

"On what?" came the Dragon's low, thistle-edged voice. "Water wings? We haven't any parachutes."

Greg felt dazed, slapped dumb. He sat and stared about him in the cockpit. He still had a lot to learn about combat flying before he could keep cool enough to remember everything. Stupid of him to forget about the 'chutes—

"Hand her over, son," the Dragon was saying calmly, easily. The tone of his voice made Greg feel better. "I'll bring her in, if she can be brought. Find out if that new-fangled gadget of yours can bring us into the field—"

The AT-6 spiralled eathward in long, flat curves, and it was some time before Greg could get a word in edgewise on the air. Apparently Quaker Fight was having a turkey shoot. He could hear their comment crackling back and forth as fast as their tracers.

"Got another one, Eddie—look out, I'm coming toward you."

"I see you. There's one in my sights. Lay off—it's mine."

"Over this way, Joe. Draw that gunner's fire off, will you?"

"Did you see that baby explode? These things are made of balsa wood and folded newspaper!"

The sky, too, was streaked with red plumes and on the terrain below there were scattered, red, glowing spots where the fallen Nells were cremating themselves.

Greg finally made contact with the radar station. "Hello, Swami—this is seven seven zero. We're coming in, we hope. Engine's liable to bust out any minute. Where are we? Can you see us on the 'scope?"

"Been watching you all the time, sir," came Antonio's dry voice. "You're five miles southeast of the field right now. Keep your heading."

"Roger, roger," Greg said. He added, "You might notify the meat wagon."

Greg sat, then, with his hands in his lap. The artificial horizon on the instrument panel showed that they were gliding earth-

ward at an angle of about twenty degrees. But ahead, over the rim of the cowling, there was nothing but blackness.

He heard the ground station give altitude on the 'scope, and the altimeter setting as a double check. He heard the Dragon's soft, polite, "Thank you," as though he had merely borrowed a match, or asked the time. The engine was at back throttle now, not fully in a power-off glide, and occasionally it would stutter. It sounded as though it were trying to warn them that it couldn't turn over much longer.

SUDDENLY the shapes of trees and houses were blurring past one wing. That wing had been low. Greg stiffened in the cockpit and felt the Dragon right it violently. He saw the dashboard light blink on, heard the warning horn, and felt the ship buck with added resistance as the wheels dropped. The Dragon dipped her nose another mite for added speed.

The Kulung air field loomed at their nose as abruptly as if a magician had drawn a black curtain. The end of the runway whooshed under them—Greg knew they would overshoot, now. And he wondered how, in the eerie, deceiving light of the clouded moon, the Dragon would ever be able to make the fine estimation of distance necessary for a landing. As he sat there still wondering about it, and thinking that they were yet at least twenty feet from the ground, he heard the tires go *brrp* . . . *brrp* on the runway and felt the jolt.

The AT-6 swerved violently, and jerked back into line again. It rocketed down the strip on two wheels and then the tail began to settle. Just when Greg leaned back, finally, to relax, it took a sudden, perverse change of direction and ground looped. Greg slammed forward into the instrument panel.

It didn't knock him out. But it dazed him enough so that he never did quite remember throwing the canopy back and legging it from the cockpit. It seemed to him as his feet touched the walk-way on the wing that he must have reached forward instinctively to shut off the switch. He hoped so.

He was sliding back the rear canopy, then. An automobile engine was growling somewhere behind him and he supposed it was the meat wagon. He stared at the small, wiry grey haired man in the rear cockpit, took in the strangely relaxed wrinkles of his battered face, and the queer flying costume of cotton pajamas and a corduroy hospital robe.

The Dragon's face was a peculiar ashen grey. At first Greg thought it might be the cloud-diffused moonlight. And then when he saw the slow, pained smile break over that air-scarred countenance, he knew differently. He looked at the Dragon's legs and saw the blood stains.

"Dad—you're hurt! Why didn't you say so?"

The smile stiffened. "Had to get you home, son. Your radar gadget's all right—but it needs an old fool like me to fill in for it sometimes." He shook his head and blinked his eyes.

"Take it easy, Dad. The ambulance is coming up."

"Don't—think—I'll need it." The Dragon coughed violently. A thin line of blood marked the edge of his jaw.

"You'll be all right, Dad—"

"The hell I will. Anyway—I wanted—wanted it this way. In a cockpit. Been a damn fool, son. Thought the war . . . was my own personal hobby." He took two deep breaths before he could continue. "Can't run . . . away from things . . . anymore. World's getting too small. I'm an old man. Don't . . . fit . . ."

"Don't talk like that, Dad. Hell, you sensed that the bombers had a fighter escort before the radar even spotted it—"

"That . . . comes after a while." He looked up. "Pretend I'm having that drink with you, will you Greg?"

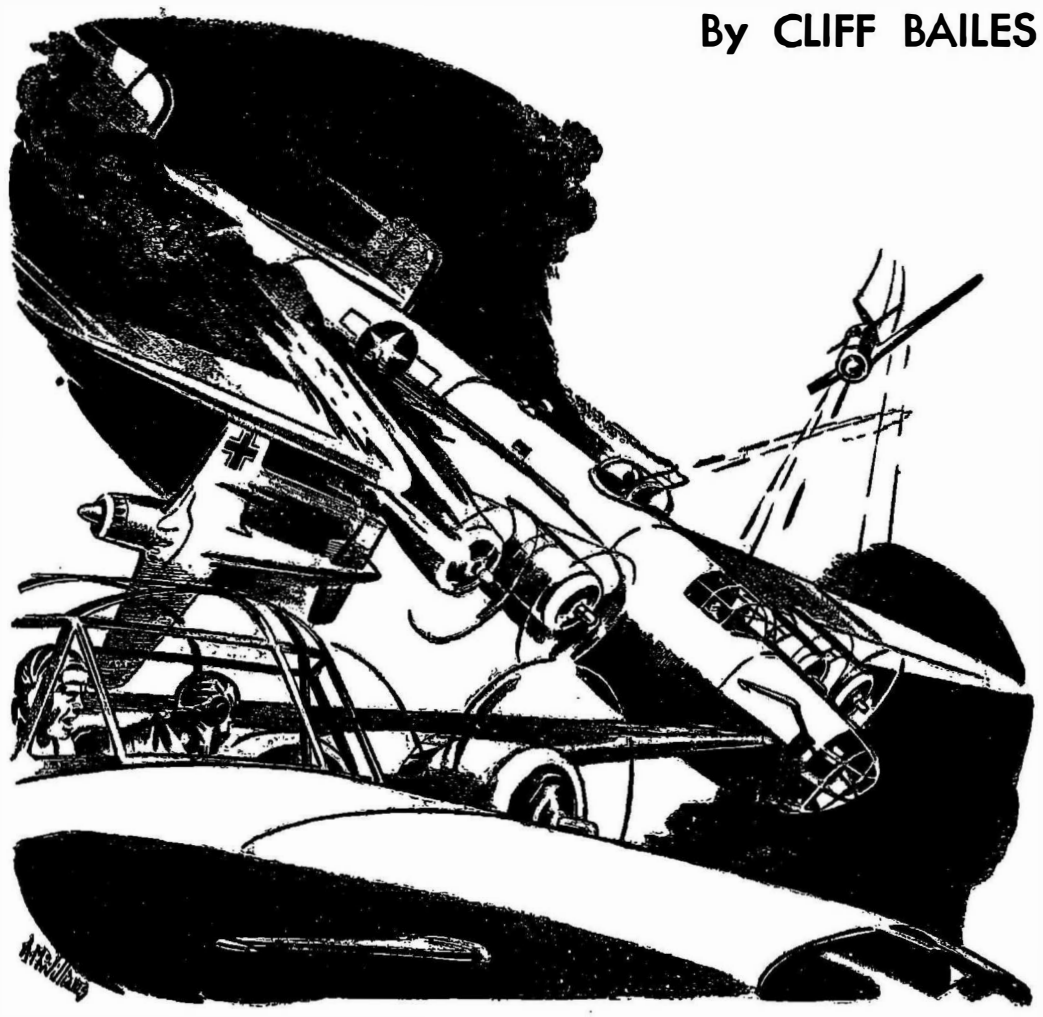
The Dragon's eyes were suddenly quite mellow and happy, and the smile on his battered face widened just a little, and then stayed that way. It was some seconds before Greg realized that the old man wasn't moving any more.

The ambulance pulled up to the wing tip. The driver scrambled from the front seat and took two running steps toward the cockpit of the AT-6. He stopped short and stared at what he saw.

A tall, young man in a blue mandarin gown was standing at stiff attention by the cockpit and his hand was to his forehead in rigid salute.

SINGED WINGS

By CLIFF BAILES



Ten men would die now, now, now . . . as Riemer watched.

Neither crash landings, bursting flak nor tearing slugs could faze Captain Joe Riemer . . . yet every man has some one thing that can drive him gibbering from his post of duty.

ONE ACT OF COWARDICE during a lifetime can eat into a man's heart. He lives with it, dreading its recurrence and the lonely passage of the nights when it will haunt him. There is only one alternative—to force the recurrence of the act until he breaks its grip on him—or be broken himself . . .

Captain Joe Riemer tightened his jaw muscles, his lean, gloved fingers gripping the wheel of the B-24 so that he felt the muscles stretch taut across his broad back. Adjusting the shoe-button throat-mike under the curve of his chin, he pressed the mike button with his left thumb. The circuit crackled.

"Pilot to navigator," he snapped. "How's the course?"

"We've dropped Alexandria off our left wing, Captain," the answer came back. "Should hit Tobruk at correct target time."

"Good old Tobruk," the bombardier grunted. "I hope Rommel has the docks loaded with supplies."

The navigator chuckled harshly. " 'The fox of the desert' they call him. If Montgomery holds him at El Alamein, we'll be all right."

"If he doesn't, we can kiss the Middle East Air Force goodbye. Palestine would be their next stop."

"Fighter escort is what I want to see," a waist gunner said. "I want that old blue covered with a couple hundred Kittyhawks, and me hunched under a flak suit shoving out chaff."

"Cut it, you guys," Riemer grated. He liked his crew. It was a good crew, these boys who were the vanguard of the U.S. Air Force in Africa. Based in Palestine, they had been going out day after day to smash at Rommel's supply lines, shipping, harbor installations and fuel dumps. Riemer was sure that within months a vast sky-marching army of bombers and fighters would arrive to augment the thirty odd sand-colored Liberators that made up the Middle Eastern Air Force.

But right now he didn't want to think about that.

He hunched his shoulders, motioning Bix, his co-pilot, to take over. He looked through the side plexi-glass window at the brilliance of the Mediterranean sparkling into endless distance. His eyes touched the dozen bombers riding in tight formation, swept up and almost reluctantly flickered across the burning belly of the sun.

Sudden reflex action brought his arms in a protective gesture along the length of his thighs, hands gripping the knee caps. And then he felt a quiver of inward anger at the motion. He thought about last night. He should never have lost control of himself like that. What was it, coincidence that the one man who had guessed should be covering the Middle Eastern Theatre? The bitter thought brought back the scene that had ripped wide open the inward agony of his own doubts concerning his courage . . .

RIEMER had been sitting in a small, crowded cabaret. Couples packed the dance floor to the accompaniment of a Hungarian string orchestra. Yugoslav Partisans, wearing baggy British lend-lease uniforms, danced with green-uniformed Greek Wacs. British Tommies paired off with Free French refugees. Jews who had carved the dream city of Tel Aviv from the wastes of Palestine fingered half-filled coffee cups and conversed with other Jews who days before had escaped the onslaught of Rommel's desert army. At the next table sat two civilians. Riemer gave them a casual glance. Probably war correspondents. The one with his back turned was speaking.

". . . happened in the states. He was one of the lads who just couldn't take it in a pinch. I was down around the field getting some local color, and I'd been talking to him. Seemed a fine lad. Typical American boy. He'd just finished his first solo, and was waiting for his roommate, chap by the name of Carter, to land. He walked out there to the edge of the strip, and then this Carter came in for a landing. It was a mess. He creamed that trainer all over the runway, and she started to burn not thirty feet from where this other lad was standing. Do you know that boy just stood there? He was frozen, I tell you. Didn't make a move. By the time the meat wagon got there, this Carter was burned to a crisp. But I'll always think that if this other lad hadn't turned yellow, he'd have had time to haul Carter out of the wreck and probably save his life."

"Not many of 'em like that," the other civilian said. "Remember the fellow's name?"

"No one took much notice of him, but I remember calling him 'Killer' because I felt pretty disgusted and he looked so frightened that I thought perhaps I could snap him out of it. Don't know what ever happened to him."

Riemer shoved his chair back, his throat tight with anger. He grabbed the newsman by the shoulders and spun him around.

"Tell him," he said thickly. "You know so damned much about it, Mawson, tell him it was me. Tell him I turned yellow when I saw Carter fighting the canopy and screaming when the flames hit him."

Mawson's lips were a pale line across his face. "What?" he muttered. Then his face relaxed. "Hello, Riemer," he said softly. "No need for you to spout off, you know. I had no intentions—"

"The hell you didn't," Riemer snapped. "You and your rotten newspaper talk. Maybe they wouldn't allow you to print it, eh? Morale for the home folks and all

that rot. Let me tell you something, Mawson. Maybe I was yellow, but only a coward would admit that he wasn't. And listen, mister. Maybe sometimes a guy has reasons for his acts. But you wouldn't know about that, would you?"

"All right, Riemer," the correspondent said. "Maybe I wouldn't. Maybe I wouldn't know about a lot of the things you guys go through."

Riemer towered over the newsman. "You could learn, mister," he snarled. "You could get a blanket permission to go on a raid, if you're not afraid to use it."

Mawson shrugged his shoulders, his face pale. "We'll see, Riemer. We'll see."

Riemer had felt the ugliness creep into his guts. He had picked up Mawson's unfinished drink and smashed the glass to the floor. Not satisfied, he had upset their table. The orchestra had stopped playing, women screamed, men crowded eagerly forward. Riemer had shouted, "Just tell 'em the Killer was here", and walked blindly from the club.

A childish act, he told himself now, but one he hadn't been able to control. He caught the inquiring eye of the co-pilot and reached up to take over the controls. Damn that Mawson, anyway! And yet a stirring of doubt told Riemer that the corespondent wasn't to blame. But who was to blame? Riemer shrugged it off and concentrated on the job at hand.

The lead box fired a flare and turned on the bomb run. From the corner of his eye Riemer saw the engineer sliding out of his top turret to roll up the bomb bay doors. The radio man was already at his waist gun.

The hazy, yellow coast line of Africa stretched in the distance. They could expect fighters at any moment. The cream of the Luftwaffe was operating on the Libyan front. Strangely enough, the thought of fighters or flak didn't bother Riemer. There was always the tense nervousness that you had before going over the target, and he felt that now. But it wasn't like this gnawing fear he had of fire.

An inward bulge in the coast line showed them the harbor of Tobruk. Ack ack was pouring up from the ships and shore batteries. Long, white sausages, attached to steel cables, floated hundreds of feet above the ships. Riemer chuckled grimly. They wouldn't go down low enough to let those babies bother them.

"It ain't Salonika," the nose gunner groaned, "but it'll be tough enough."

"Watch it," Riemer snapped. "Get your guns snapping on those fighters coming in at two o'clock high."

"F.W. 190s!" top turret yelled. "Staggered formation and making for the lead box. My aching back. Sing it sweet and sing it low, you beauties," and Riemer felt the slight shudder as the Martin upper scratched a warning burst across the sky. "Oh, tell me daddy," top turret continued, "why we're fighting for that hellish chunk of country. Take me back to Texas."

Tracers and 20 mm. cannon shells ripped through the formation. The armor plate shuddered across Riemer's back as a half-dozen fifties broke their silence and sprayed a wall of fire toward the Nazi fighters. Two well-spaced cannon shells caught the tail ship of the lead box. A red flame leaped from the open belly of the Liberator. Riemer closed his eyes, the sight of the flames rasping across his backbone. When he next looked, the bomber had broken in half. The wing section was plummeting straight toward the harbor below. The great tail seemed to float lazily, slip streaming in huge circles in its descent.

"They're leaving us," a waist gunner said.

"I blew one and scratched another," the tail gunner announced calmly. "Anybody beat that?"

Somebody emitted a bronx cheer, yelled, "The winna and new champion. Now we'll have a little rendezvous in flak alley. Open up the chaff box, Mabel. We're gonna decorate the town tonight."

THE first black stuff was getting to them. Riemer could hear it rip through the sides of the aluminum ship. There were giants beating at them with sledge hammers.

"I'll take over," the bombardier announced tensely. "This is gonna be one time I earn my pay. We've got the docks, and, brother, they're loaded."

Riemer forced himself to look at the deep, red bursting of flame as the flak exploded at wing tip height. He rubbed both hands along his leg muscles, feeling their almost grooved tenseness beneath

the layers of flight clothing. And that terrible itching started again. A lot of rot. It was nerves, nothing but nerves.

"Bombs away," and the red warning lights blinked out on the instrument panel. Riemer reached up and grasped the wheel, the weight of the bombs gone now from the belly of the ship. Bix was already working handfuls of throttles to maximum. Flak was still coming up from the hell below where, for over three blistering months during 1941 the Australian 9th division, dubbed the "Rats of Tobruk", had held out against night and day bombing of the Luftwaffe and the pounding of Rommel's best divisions.

Below, the docks were a raging mass of yellow flames. Dense black smoke mushrooming up from one side of the harbor designated burning oil. Ships listed at their moorings. An oil tanker was burning, and as he looked over on the breakaway, Riemer saw it bulge like an overtaxed wine skin and tear itself to bits with a concussion that threw a mad sea of waves across the harbor.

The chatter of machine guns started up again. Riemer pulled his eyes from the target and closed formation, almost flying his left wing tip into the right waist window of the next bomber. The sharp break away was taking them across the dazzling white buildings of the city. Bursts of flak still followed in their wake as stubborn ground gunners traced the formation.

SUDDENLY an explosion snapped Riemer sharply against his safety belt. A dazzle of red and green sparks seemed to leap from the radio compartment and engulf him. He heard the top turret man cry out in pain. For a moment he lost control of the bomber. A biting, burning sensation shot along his arm. Tiny orange flames were spreading along the sleeve, spreading like thick syrup. He jumped from his seat, beating frantically at the flames, a chill panic whirling in his brain. The bomber lurched, tipped on a wing and threatened to turn over. He caught the sudden condemning look in Bix's eyes, and then the co-pilot grasped the wheel, tensed his shoulders and sucked it back toward his chest.

The Liberator seemed to groan in protest, then lifted its nose and leveled off. Riemer could scarcely see through the dense smoke that hung heavy and thick across the flight deck. The engineer was out of his turret, oxygen hose dangling like a snout from his face. He was beating frantically at the flames that were licking around the glass fuel gauges, disregarding the smouldering sparks that had eaten through his fur-lined flying boots.

A dozen flares, looking like king-sized shotgun shells were scattered across the flight deck. Riemer stood frozen, realizing instantly what had happened. A chunk of flak had sliced through the flare box, detonating one of them. That explained the red and green sparks. Riemer reached down mechanically and picked them up. He threw them behind the seat in the pilot's compartment and looked dazedly around.

The engineer had smothered the flames, but the felt carpet was still smouldering. He glanced sharply at Riemer. The pilot felt the skin tighten across his forehead, suddenly realizing that the horror he felt was written in his eyes. He stumbled back to his seat. This was where the captain of a ship belonged, not standing around with his face a mask of terror. His hands trembled as he connected earphones and mike cords. He pressed the button, trying to keep his voice from shaking.

"Bombardier from pilot. We've had a little trouble. Come up here and help the engineer. Crack bomb bays on the way up. Maybe we can get rid of some of that damned smoke. Crew from pilot. Everything's okay now. A flare went off in the radio compartment. Keep the fighters clear, and we'll try and catch the formation."

He glanced at Bix. The co-pilot was hunched over the wheel, his jaw a stubborn angle. The leg of his flight suit was smouldering. Riemer grasped the controls.

"Better get rid of those sparks, Bix," he said.

"Don't worry about it," Bix snapped. "It's our job to get this ship upstairs, and fast."

For a moment Joe Riemer hated his co-pilot. Deep, biting anger stirred him to snap, "I am aware of my job! Give me a rich mixture on number four."

Keeping a steady hand on the wheel, he slid back the side window, allowing the hard-driven, snapping cold wind to

come in and force the smoke through the cracked bomb bays. He could feel the twin tails of the B-24 shudder convulsively as the tail guns chattered. The formation was winging high and far in advance, outlined sharply against the milky blue of the sky. A burst of tracers snapped past the cockpit, and he saw the lunging, yellow trail of a rocket as it missed the ship by scant yards. But they were well over the sea now, and he knew the enemy fighters couldn't hang on much longer. The F.W. wasn't a long distance ship, and Rommel had had enough trouble with his supply lines to conserve his fuel.

HIS senses momentarily sharpened by the evasive action through the fighter belt, Riemer again felt the doubts searing his mind as Tel Aviv came in sight. The formation banked over the city and swung a pattern around the field at nearby Lydda. Riemer lined up the runway and brought the bomber in for a landing. He made an inspection of the ship, filled in the form 1-A, and rounded the ship to await the verdict of his crew.

Nine gaunt-eyed men with the smudge of oxygen masks still on their faces. They lit cigarettes but did not speak. News, Riemer thought bitterly, travels fast.

He realized that during the hell of the fire he had momentarily lost command of his ship. That the crew kept silent on this bit deep into his conscience. And this was the second time he had failed in the crucial test.

Interrogation was an ordeal. Riemer kept silent, allowing the men to tell their own version of the mission. The engineer told his story. Bix told how the sudden explosion had made them lose control of the ship. Nothing was said about Riemer leaving the controls, but he could read their unspoken thoughts. He had failed them, had given the impression that he was getting ready to bail out. A sob tore at his throat. He lighted a cigarette with trembling fingers and walked slowly toward the dispensary to have his burned arm bandaged.

A yellow bomber's moon was riding the sky. Music filtered from the many cafes and bistros that lined the mile-long avenue facing the Mediterranean. A breast-high cement wall separated the avenue from the strip of dull, white beach. The modernistic white buildings of Tel Aviv showed clearly against the star-studded sky.

Riemer leaned wearily against the wall. A cigarette burned between his fingers. He looked into himself with a cold detachment, not liking what he saw. He had not liked it when he had faced himself in the mirror that afternoon. He had not liked the slight nervousness with which he had met his own gaze.

A solitary figure moved toward him. It was Mawson. The correspondent pulled a pipe from his coat pocket and glanced at Riemer.

"Lovely country," he offered. "Reminds me of Florida. It's hard to imagine that men are killing each other only a few hundred miles away."

"It would be hard for you to imagine anything," Riemer said, "except a glaring headline. I suppose you heard today's version?"

"I heard nothing," Mawson said flatly.

Riemer instantly felt rotten for having doubted his crew. He should have known they wouldn't talk. He said, "Have you done anything about that permit? You could write a great war, mister, if you had some first hand information."

"As a matter of fact I have," Mawson said coolly, "and I've asked to fly with your crew."

"You're a trusting man, aren't you, Mawson?" Riemer said softly. "We'll see what we can do about giving you a real show. We're hitting Greece. Salonika is the target, and it's a tidy hot spot. They really throw it up solid there, and I suppose you've heard about Crete. Well, mister, we don't miss that spot very far and the Luftwaffe uses the island for nesting ground. Bring your typewriter, mister."

He turned abruptly and walked away.

JOE Riemer lifted the bomber from the runway at 0700 hours the next morning. Making a straight climbing run from the field, he circled left at the designated spot and recrossed the field at 2000 feet. Looking down, he saw the rest of the Group taking to the air at ninety-second intervals. Twenty-five ships took to the air; the entire strength of the Middle Eastern Air Force. Rendezvous was at

8000 thousand, Riemer flying number 3 position in the tail box.

At 10,000 they went on oxygen, and the gunners made the bomber shiver with practice bursts. The good-natured gabbing of yesterday was missing, filling Riemer with a hollow, aching hunger. It meant something to the skipper of a crew to be looked up to, not because of rank, but because he was the kind of a guy whom they could depend upon to bring them back.

Mawson was sitting at the radio table, his earphones plugged into the liaison receiver, fiddling with the dials. His eyes below his narrow, pale forehead were steady when he glanced up and caught Riemer's look. The guy had guts. Riemer hated to admit it, but he knew that the correspondent had been around enough to know what could happen on a mission.

The navigator called out the island of Cyprus off their right wing. Riemer remembered the course. They would cut between the Dodecanese Islands, keeping Crete at as great a distance as possible, then up the Aegean Sea to the target.

THEN he saw them. Slicing with incredible speed toward the formation were dozens of fighters. The gunners began to call them out in short, snapping voices. Riemer tightened his position. A solid wall of steel was the only answer to such an attack. Stragglers were doomed. And the yellow noses of enemy 190s stabbed at them, their Mausers flaming.

The .50 calibers were chattering again. Sometimes it seemed to Riemer that he lived with their snapping bark in his ears.

"Hey!" shouted a gunner. "Messy 110s coming in also!"

Riemer caught sight of the twin-tailed fighter-bombers coming in at ten o'clock. Those babies could get you coming or going. Who said Rommel had the Luftwaffe busy in Africa?

They were turning up the Aegean Sea, and still the fighters kept up their relentless attack. Top turret man screamed over interphone, and looking back toward the flight deck, Riemer saw the gunner's legs dangling from the turret, the blood running along the trousers to soak into the fur top of the flying boots. Mawson was up and easing the boy from the turret, placing him gently on the flight deck, and reaching for the emergency kit. Riemer barked an order to the navigator to take over the Martin upper. They would need fire power.

Number 4 engine was smoking on the ship flying their left wing. The smoke became flames, the ship lost flying speed, and then it was dropping back and going down in a terrific dive. Suddenly an explosion sheared off its right wing, and then it was no longer an airplane, but a crippled giant who would never again fly the skies against an enemy. Riemer saw no chutes coming out of the fast-dropping ship. Ten men, still alive probably, but unable to claw their way to an escape hatch and safety. Ten men who would die now, now, now, and as Riemer watched he saw the bomber crash against the sea and disappear.

There was a gushing roaring flame as a bomber in the lead box took a direct hit in the bomb bay gas tanks. Riemer closed his eyes to the flames, applied left rudder and swept clear of the flying chunks of airplane. Two down, and they hadn't reached the target. How many of the Liberators would land at home base tonight? The thought stirred, bringing anger and determination. Hell couldn't stop them from hitting the target, not if they had to crash it.

Up ahead he saw the bomb bay doors of the lead box rolling back, and then he heard the dull rumble as their own bomb bays cracked, and the giant tunnel-wind that came as prop wash blasted through the wide open belly of the ship.

"I'll take her now," the bombardier announced crisply.

The fighters had left them, but Riemer knew it was only during the bomb run. They had respect for the hell of steel the ground gunners would throw up. And up it came!

They were helpless up there. There could be no evasive action until the bombs had left the giants. They were ducks, flying into a barrage from hunters' guns. And one glowing fragment could finish them. A sudden, jarring lunge and Riemer momentarily grasped the controls. His eyes swept the instrument panel. Oil pressure was dropping on number 2 engine—dropping fast. R.p.m. was low. He heard the

yell from a waist gunner, telling him that number 2 was smoking. It meant a feather job, and he reached up and worked the feathering knob.

He fed a rich mixture to the remaining three engines, and then came the sudden lifting, zooming sensation as the bombs left their racks and started the screaming plunge to the target below. The breakaway was fast, clean. But before they cleared the flak, the tail gunner came over the phone, announcing calmly that he'd been hit and was bleeding badly. A waist gunner barked encouragement, "Hold on, guy, I'll be with you in a second."

Veterans, these boys, Riemer told himself grimly. And the rest of them; every flying man and ground man in the middle east doing the job of ten.

The flak was behind them now and the navigator closed the bomb bay doors. Riemer turned his head, saw him climbing back to the flight deck, his face twisting. Something was wrong! The navigator hooked up to interphone and came over, "Hydraulic shot out!"

Riemer cursed inwardly. That would mean cranking down the landing gear, and if they wouldn't lock, or wouldn't crank down, it meant a crash landing. But before that, there were still the fighters.

They were coming in again, racing after the now-empty bombers. They know we're a small outfit, Riemer thought grimly. They'd like to wipe us clear out of this neck of the woods. We're trouble, too much trouble for them. And we're only beginning. One year, two years from now we'll be blasting Berlin, and not with twenty-five planes but a thousand.

HE FELT his blood pound as the heat of battle coursed through his veins. This was it. This was the pay-off. Machine guns blasted against the fighters, clearing a path for the bombers. But it wasn't good enough. There were too many of the enemy planes. A 20 mm. cannon shell smashed into number 4 engine, tearing the guts from the engine. Riemer feathered it, and they were falling back and dropping altitude and he poured full throttle and rich mixture to the remaining engines.

How long could the fighters hang on before running out of gas? And how long would the gunners' ammunition hold out? But you couldn't answer those questions. You could only live through the hellish moments and pray.

A stutter of bullets swept across the nose of the ship. The gunner up there was throwing it back. Riemer saw the fighter zoom for a pull-up in front of the bomber, saw the tracers from the nose gun splatter into the cockpit of the fighter. A neat bit of shooting, and the kind they needed in this theatre.

The fighters left the formation as suddenly as they had attacked it. Riemer nursed the crippled bomber along, juggling the controls, but somehow the ship stayed cocked at a terrible angle, completely out of trim. The formation was out of sight. From here on in it was up to the navigator —and Lady Luck.

It was two hours later that they sighted the coast line of Palestine, and the gleaming towers of Tel Aviv. Riemer avoided the city, circling the now trembling bomber around until they spotted the Lydda field. He felt that every crew member was guessing as to his next move. If the landing gear cranked down, they had a chance. He said, "Okay, bombardier. Let's see if we can get the gear down."

They circled the field twice before the answer came back. "Left gear down and locked. Right gear won't budge."

Riemer switched his jack box to command and called the tower. "Coming in on left landing gear," he snapped harshly. "Get ready down there." Switching back to interphone, he told his crew, "Anyone who wants to has permission to bail out. I am landing this ship. Confirm."

He felt a glow of pride when every man decided to ride the ship down. It was a chance, they were giving him a chance. He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up and saw Mawson standing there and grinning at him. His fingers tightened on Riemer's shoulder for an instant, and suddenly some certain unmistakable knowing told the pilot that the landing was a test to force the horror of his own cowardice from his mind. The fear was still deep within him, but with it came a swift elation, an upward pressing of excitement such as he had never before experienced.

Dropping the bomber in a shallow glide, he heard Bix calling off landing speed. The runway flattened beneath them. Num-

ber 3 engine spluttered. Riemer felt a sinking sensation. The lone left gear hissed against the concrete, and fighting to keep the right wing air-borne, he saw Bix working frantically to keep the faltering third engine alive, heard its great dying tremble and the terrific metallic crash as the right wing ground into the runway and twisted the controls from his hands and it was purely instinct that made him shout "Switches off" and then there was nothing but a grinding, tearing, dust-choking sensation as the great ship spun from the runway and plunged with its momentum to crash into the side of a parked Liberator.

It was as though a heavy timber had struck him across his guts. He seemed to be tumbling headlong into a molten pit.

Flames!

He struggled with the safety belt, and very clearly now he could hear the snapping paper-like crackle of the flames. Across the smoke of the cockpit he could see Bix slumped unconscious over his controls. A hollow panic gripped him. He seemed incapable of movement, and then, suddenly, there was only the wild desire to escape the flames.

He stepped blindly onto the slanting flight deck, and now with the crackle of flames came the dull, hissing *ping, ping, ping,* as unfired cartridges exploded. Through a break in the smoke he saw running men fling themselves to the ground. He groped frantically to open the top escape hatch, stumbled, and looking down saw the body of the wounded engineer.

Something wrenched at his heart, then. With all the power of his shoulders he wrenched the hatch open. Lifting the inert form of the gunner up, he pushed him through the hatch, heard him sliding down the side of the ship and fall to the ground below. Shouts told him there were men there to take over. But he was not thinking now.

Flames were feeding now on the felt carpet of the flight deck. He stepped across, unfastened Bix's safety belt and hauled the unconscious co-pilot from the seat. The heat from the flames were a torture, but he worked Bix through the hatch and turned for the last time. The smoke was so thick that he could not see six inches in front of him. He realized suddenly that the gas tanks would blow at any second.

He found Mawson pinned behind the radio seat. The correspondent was conscious. A stifled groan burst from his lips as Riemer dragged him toward the hatch. He heard shouts from the men outside as they caught the correspondent. A great weariness engulfed him. Gripping the sides of the open hatch he tried desperately to lift his body up. He made it with one elbow, feeling the burning pain along his legs, and then suddenly hands were helping him and he was lifted clear and then he knew nothing.

IT WAS white, all white. Death was white. Someone walked toward him, dressed in white. He blinked his eyes rapidly and tried to smile at the nurse.

"Hello, Riemer."

He turned his head toward the next bed and saw Mawson, the correspondent.

"How'd it go?" he asked.

"The engineer was already dead," Mawson said. "Some of the rest of us were hurt, but okay, thanks to you."

Riemer closed his eyes with a sigh, but Mawson was speaking again.

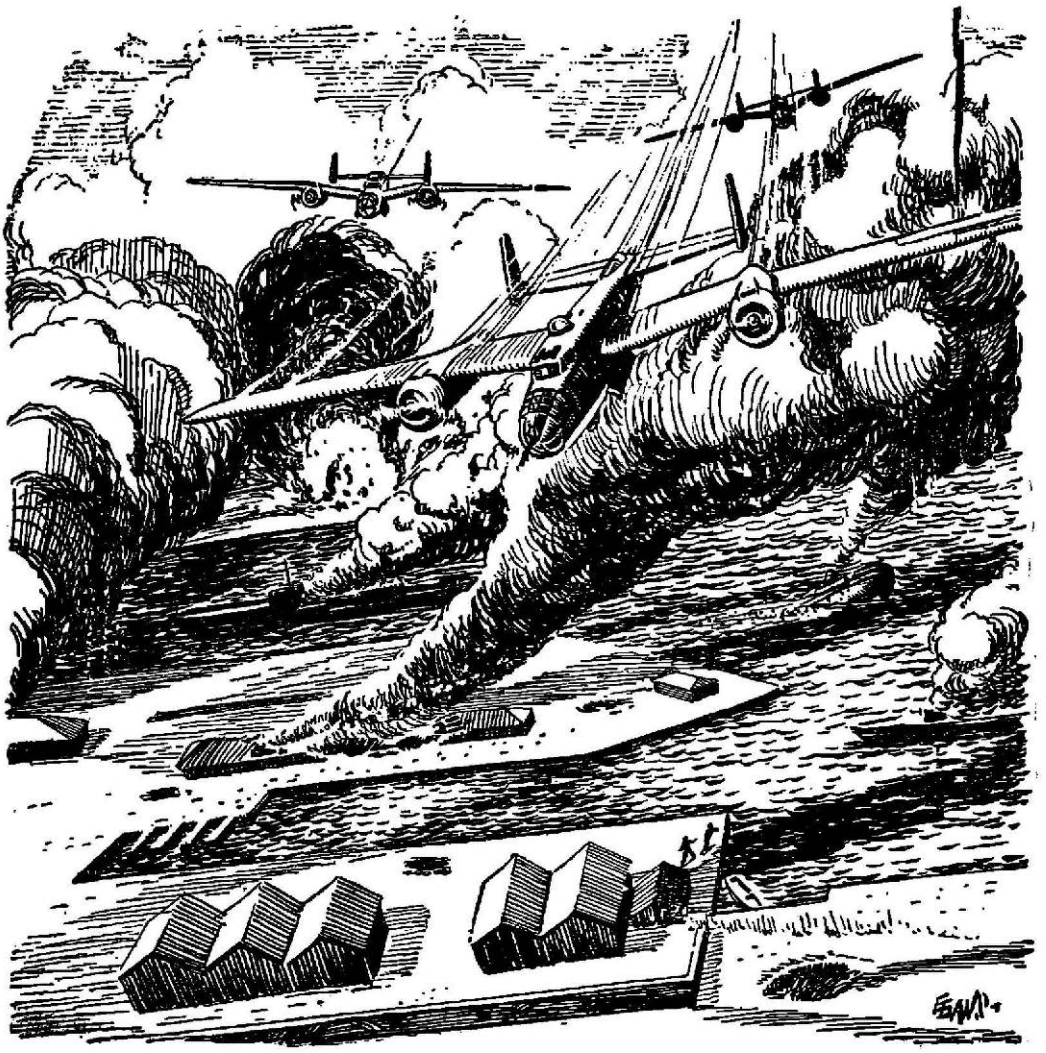
"Tell me about the scars, friend," he said softly.

A tremble ran along Riemer's body. He turned his head.

"I saw them after they took you from the ship," Mawson continued. "Your legs, they were horribly burned, but the scars were old."

Riemer brought a bandaged hand up across his forehead. "It happened a long time ago," he forced himself to say. "I came home and the house was on fire. Mother and dad were in there. I got them out, but it was too late; almost too late for me. The doctors wanted to amputate, but I refused. It took me three years to regain the use of my legs. That's why—"

"I understand," Mawson said softly. "You know, fellow. I am writing a book. All us correspondents write books. Mine's gonna be about guys like you—guys with guts."



It felt as though we were a cork in boiling water.

INTO THE SOUP

By SCOTT SUMNER

Slowly, Bomber Pilot Mike Duboise saw why the 99th climbed only into the foulest weather to hit Mekoy . . . and slowly rage and revolt boiled up within him.

NOW, I'M just a co-pilot, not a strategist, but you didn't have to read Clausewitz to know that the war in China was really screwy. Here we were — the 99th Medium Bombardment Squadron — stationed practically in Tibet. Yet we'd been raiding nothing but Mekoy Harbor—*on the coast.*

And something else had been going on; something big and queer and frightening. We'd all sensed it ever since the arrival of our new C.O., Lieutenant Colonel Joss Hurd, hero of the Marne, barnstormer, movie stunt flyer, and Bendix trophy contender. Mike Duboise, my pilot, was the first to say what we'd all been thinking.

"Bill," he said that night, "The whole damned 99th Squadron is doomed to extinction."

China rain slanted down. The ramp lights made flaming sword reflections in the props, shimmering in warm-up. Mike's jaw was as tight as a wine press. His deep-set, pewter eyes caught little flecks of that same light; snared them and sent them back into the rain.

"Extinction," he said, "just like the blasted dodo and the auk."

There was poetry in Mike, although not quite enough to make a poet out of him. But he flew B-25's that way. With grace, I mean, and rhythm and feeling—although don't get the idea Mike was a sissy. I'd seen him in action in Calcutta bar rooms, and it had always taken twice as many M.P.s twice as long to bring him in.

I shrugged at his pessimistic remarks. *"C'est la guerre."*

"C'est la in a pig's eye," he answered. "I'm calling a showdown when our dear commanding officer, Hot-shot Hurd gets here."

"Now, wait, Mike," I said, putting a hand on his leather jacketed arm. It was the same gesture I always made in bar rooms before Mike really precipitated things. I looked anxiously into the rain, too—Colonel Hurd would come putting by in his jeep presently, and personally pass out the target flimsies to each airplane commander.

"Wait," I said. "You can get into an awful lot of trouble."

"More than we're in already?" He whirled his big head. "Look at that weather! Every time the stuff socks in, Hurd sends us on another mission! We haven't lost a plane to enemy action in thirty days—but there have been *twelve* weather crack-ups! What does he think we fly—submarines?"

"Well, I guess the Colonel gets his orders like anybody else," I said. I only half-believed it, myself.

"I'll say he does," Mike nodded. *"And I know what those orders have been."*

"How's that again?" I asked.

But Mike would only scowl mysteriously and say, "You'll see."

I looked back at him helplessly. I remembered days when Mike smiled more, showing his white, even teeth. I remembered days when we all smiled more. But Shengliu had taken it out of us. Arriving at this remote base, the 99th had at first done nothing but sit on that part of its anatomy which is designed to accommodate parachutes. We were sure that somebody at headquarters had accidentally knocked a colored pin out of a map and that the A-Staff had forgotten we were here. We didn't even have a commanding officer, and Mike, with the rank of Captain, had acted as same.

And then orders—signed by General Balkner, himself—had assigned us the fabled Joss Hurd, Lieutenant Colonel Josselyn P. Hurd, Air Corps, ORC—and everybody had rubbed his hands and murmured: "At last. Action."

Oh, brother—were they ever so right! An occluded front socked in all over Central China two days after Hurd arrived—and we flew. We flew to the only target we'd known then, or since, Mekoy Harbor. You didn't hear of Mekoy Harbor back home because it was one big thorn in Asia's side, and the correspondents weren't allowed to mention it. But C.O.s threatened bad little pilots with Mekoy, just as mothers threaten children with the Bogie Man. The flak there was as thick as over-boiled rice, and the Zeroes as numerous as Szechuan mosquitoes.

Even at that, the 99th wouldn't have squawked. They'd asked for action, and here it was. But every mission, so far—as though flak and Zeroes weren't enough to deal with—had been sent out in weather that literally grounded the ducks!

THE SOUND of an approaching jeep jolted me out of my thoughts. I tightened my hands at my sides as a compact, stocky man in a trench coat stepped out of it, His skin, tight and wrinkled at the stress points, looked like protective plastic over the bones and muscles of his face. He loosened a target flimsy from his clip board, and started to say: "Here you are, Duboise—"

"Just a minute, Colonel, *sir,*" said Mike coldly.

Joss Hurd brought his eyes up smartly. His mouth got so thin that it seemed like just another wrinkle in his air-beaten face. "Yes?"

"Do you honestly expect us to get

through and come back tonight—in *this?"* He waved his hands at the grey rain and the clouds, curling close to the runway.

Hurd was quiet for a moment. He didn't move his little dark eyes from the line of Mike's metallic stare. Then he spoke, his voice low. "If Headquarters says the 99th hits Mekoy at a certain time, it's got to be done."

"At a certain time," repeated Mike significantly.

Hurd's salt and pepper brows moved just a little. "What's on your mind, Duboise? Say it."

Mike folded his arms across his chest. He towered over the little hard-faced C.O. but that didn't seem to bother Hurd at all. Mike said:

"This is a fast cold front—I checked with weather. Tomorrow there'll be an unlimited ceiling. No icing. No turbulence. You're familiar with those *modern* aeronautical terms, aren't you, *sir?"*

"You'll fly this mission tonight," Hurd said calmly.

"Maybe you've forgotten what weather can do to an airplane, Colonel." Mike's voice was a tight whisper. "I notice you don't log time in your P-40 unless it's C-A-V-U. Well, B-25's aren't *that* much different from P-40's." He nodded at the murky runway again.

"You have your orders, Duboise," the Colonel said wearily.

"Yes, sir. I have." Mike nodded. "I have something else, too. A nice case for the Inspector General."

Hurd's eyes narrowed. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

"I was O.D. last night, sir, remember? One of the duties of the Officer of the Day is to check on crypto security. I wasn't snooping, but I couldn't help seeing the message from General Balkner that came off the strips. *The message calling for this raid, I mean."*

"I see," answered Hurd. He lifted a tightly gloved hand, and pointed a finger that almost, but not quite, touched the big pilot's chest. "No matter what you saw, Captain Duboise—no matter what you *think*—you will fly this mission tonight as ordered."

He dropped the gloved hand, then turned slowly, and walked back to the jeep. In a moment its tail light was jogging down the ramp toward the next purring Mitchell bomber.

"Mike," I said, "What's it all about? What did you see in that message?"

He looked at his watch. "I'll tell you after we take off. And when we get back to the staging area, I'll tell the rest of the guys. Something tells me this mission isn't going to be flown exactly as Colonel Hurd thinks it is—"

IN THE AIRPLANE, we went through the usual procedure—although all the time I kept wondering about the message Mike had seen. While he checked the auto pilot and controls, I made sure the hatches were closed, and the turrets retracted. I noted the fuel. I swept my eyes over the instruments: suction, hydraulic pressure, brake pressure, fuel pressure. Then I watched Mike set the RPM, the mixture and the supercharger.

"Let's get into it fast," Mike said. "Gimme thirty on the flaps."

"Rog'," I said. I shrugged and sighed. The Duboise special kangaroo take-off. "Flaps down, cowl open, gyros uncaged."

"Oil?"

"Eighty-seven. It's okay."

Mike nodded grimly, "Hang on, little chum."

We slammed down the runway, and the curling cloud-fog came at us, dodged at the last second, then whirled away in the slipstream. The lights of Shengliu blurred past. The big, double-row Wrights shook and snarled with power, and the airplane trembled deliciously all the way to its twin rudders.

Shengliu was no different from most China air fields in one respect—it had a village at the end of the runway. And beyond that, a black and green mountain of volcanic rock bumbled up into the sky. There was only one take-off pattern—a quick jump, a fast turn to the right, and then as much altitude as you could get.

"Wheels up," said Mike.

It seemed early for that, but I knew from experience that Mike wouldn't throw me any curves. I snapped 'em up. They folded, with neat timing, at the precise instant we were airborne, and the Mitchell leaped ahead with a few extra MPH because of it. One thing about Mike, as a pilot—he made his own margins of safety.

We whooshed across the Chinese village, and if there had been another coat of paint on the old Mitchell, we'd have scraped a roof top. Then her nose went up and she plowed into the grey stuff.

The sun had long since come around once more to this part of the world when we found the staging area. To get there we used a combination of all the navigational tricks in the book plus a dash of pure instinct. There were no airway beams in China, although sometimes you could pick up weak, local signals by skip distance. Mostly, it was dead reckoning, and check every once in a while, when we could top the overcast, on the stars.

At the staging area, they turned on a non-directional beacon just long enough to get us down in a box approach. Since the Japs would have been able to spot a raid through the operation of this beacon, it was turned on at odd hours and odd times. We finally taxied the plane to a standstill near the gas drums of the staging area.

The air was hot and sticky here, even with the grey overcast that came down to about a thousand feet. This staging area—a place called Chanfoo—was in a part of China usually marked on maps with a red wash. Jap-occupied territory, in other words. But, as I said, the war in China was a screwy one, and there never was a definite line between Jap and Allied territory.

At Chanfoo, guerrilla troops had gained control of a certain part of the countryside, and managed to keep the Japs out. We flew the airfield in—literally—and used the small, sketchily equipped base as a refuelling spot for our longer flights.

THE COMMANDING OFFICER of Chanfoo greeted us as we stepped from the plane. He was every bit of a second lieutenant.

"Hi," he waved, grinning, "My name's Morrison. Friends call me Chip."

"How are you," said Mike, shaking, then introducing the two of us. "Any chow around here?"

"Sure," said Morrison, waving toward the ramp. He had very large freckles on his face and eyes the color of robin's eggs. A Chinese cap was pushed far back on his head and bright red hair spilled from under the bill of it. The rest of his uniform consisted of one-piece mechanic's fatigues which had had the green color washed out of them long ago.

We walked toward a mess hall that consisted of a thatched roof on four poles, and the other crewmen of the 99th began to converge from their various airplanes.

Morrison said, "I'd ask you guys to have a drink, but I understand you're pulling out again in about an hour,"

"Well—maybe not," said Mike, frowning darkly.

"Engine trouble?" Morrison asked.

"Lieutenant Colonel trouble," Mike told him.

The red-headed lieutenant sensed that the sort of thing you don't question was going on, so he didn't question it. All the way to the mess hall he chatted amiably about the village of Chanfoo, its fine Cantonese cooking, potent rice wine and cooperative sing-song girls. I kept my mouth shut—hard. All I needed now, on top of everything else, was for Mike Duboise to go on a pub crawl, and end up offering to take on the population of South China, single-handed, no holds barred.

In the mess hall, Mike waited until the Chinese serving boys brought the canned peaches around before he spoke to the others. Why food in China became more palatable nearer the front, I will never know—but that's the way it was. Canned peaches—we'd have almost given aid and comfort to the enemy to get them back in Shengliu.

Anyway, Mike stood up at the end of the long table, looked around him, and waited until he had everybody's attention. He cleared his throat.

"All you guys know," he said, "that since Hurd's arrival we haven't flown one mission in good weather. We haven't lost a plane to enemy action—but we've dropped twelve to weather. Maybe some of you have wondered if this isn't a little more than just coincidence."

There was a surge of low conversation, and the pilots of the 99th traded looks with their crewmen.

Mike went on. "Accidentally, I happened to see the message from Headquarters ordering today's mission. Now get this—*that message called for the raid anytime within ten days.*"

The silence was like a blast from a hot

oven. Jaws dropped. Some men spread their fingers on the table tops, others made clenched fists.

"In other words," Mike said slowly, "it was strictly Lieutenant Colonel Joss Hurd's idea that we fly in this rotten weather. I checked with the meteorologist after that. This big cold front is a fast-moving one, and will dissipate by this time tomorrow. Hurd could've held off twenty-four hours and given us C.F.R. conditions if he'd wanted to."

Somebody called out: "Why? Why would Hurd do that? What's the big idea?"

Mike shrugged broadly. "Looks to me like that barnstormer doesn't understand how tough weather can be—even when you have modern instruments to fly on. Or else—" Mike looked down at the table top, and drummed his fingers on it for a second, then he looked up again. "Or else he's nutty as a fruit cake."

THE OTHERS shifted in their seats. At the far end of the long table red-headed Lieutenant Chip Morrison busied himself with his coffee, as though he were all alone.

"Well, here's my suggestion," Mike finally said. "No pilot has to take off if he's unsatisfied with his airplane. So it seems to me that maybe everybody in the 99th could suddenly find little things in their airplanes that needed attention. In twenty-four hours most of this weather will have cleared out. In twenty-four hours we can take off on the final leg of our strike at Mekoy. How's it sound?"

After a long pause, one of the pilots called: "I'm for it, Mike." And somebody else said, "Sure—we can't let Hurd get away with this." And then they were all talking at once again.

Mike held up his hand, and took a vote on it. The vote was unanimous. They would sleep in the airplanes, and make out as well as they could on K ration, to keep from depleting Morrison's thin larder.

After most of the arrangements were made, Mike and I picked up Morrison again in the Operations shack. Morrison started by vetoing Mike's suggestion that we go into the village and sample the fine Cantonese cooking, and a few of the other attractions. He didn't know Mike's persuasive powers. It took the big pilot not more than ten minutes to maneuver the three of us into Morrison's wheezing jeep, and we bounced away from the airfield over a small-scale replica of the Himalayas, which was laughingly called a road.

The wine shop was owned by an astoundingly fat personage whom Mike immediately nicknamed "Laughing Buddha." We sat at a bamboo table in the middle of the room, trying to weather the stares of the Chinese in the place who were finding it difficult to keep their stares polite. Mike insisted on ordering food—although neither Morrison or I were hungry. And while we waited for the first course of paper-wrapped chicken slices, Mike put down four cups of vodka, chased with rice wine.

Morrison and I traded glances. I shrugged. "He's a genius," I said. "You got to make allowances for geniuses."

"Oh," nodded Morrison gravely.

Mike was trying to teach us, respectively, the tenor and baritone harmony to the Whiffenpoof song when the five ragged, quiet men with the cartridge belts entered. I saw them first, and said quietly:

"Hold it. Looks like the Northwest Mounted, or somebody."

Morrison swiveled his red head. "Don't know who they are," he said, from the side of his mouth. "But you're liable to run into anything in Chanfoo."

What had particularly attracted me was the way these five men refused to notice the crazy American pilots in the middle of the room. They avoided staring at us almost painfully and went immediately to a table in the rear. Nor did they seem to be talking among themselves. Their apparent leader was a tall, thin Chinese with a narrow, rather hooked nose—he looked a good deal like a Manchurian, or Korean. They all wore odd combinations of faded khaki and the ubiquitous blue cotton of China; they all carried canvas cartridge belts, either about their waists or as *bandalleros*. The leader sported an old, German-style bayonet at his hip.

Laughing Bhudda waddled to the table about that time with a steaming bowl of *Heung Yeung Kai Ting.*

"Hey," said Mike happily, turning to him, "Who'se those guys? *Ta-men hsieh, shen m'?*"

Laughing Bhudda brought his fat hands together in an attitude of prayer. "Oh!" he said, "is velly blave guellilla *ping!*"

"Guerillas?" asked Mike, brightening.

"Guellilla, guellilla," nodded Laughing Bhudda enthusiastically.

"H'ray for the guerillas! Buy 'em all a drink!" roared Mike. He got to his feet just a mite uncertainly, and turned to face the five quiet men in the rear of the room. "*Ni hao m'!*" he sang at them, "Bottoms up—*kan pei!*"

I'M still not sure exactly how it started —but I know that not more than five minutes later a drinking contest had started. This is a favorite game with such people as Chinese fighting men, and he who gets drunk under the table loses much face, to say nothing of his last meal in most cases.

Mike had selected the thin, hooknosed man as his special mark. They would each quaff drink after drink, placing the upturned cup on the table to show that it was empty and saying, "*Kan pei*—bottoms up!"

Everyone was so busy watching Mike, that I managed to drizzle most of my drinks on the floor. It wasn't stuffiness on my part—I just don't like Chinese vodka, Morrison apparently felt the same way; I caught him getting rid of his, too.

Even the great Mike Duboise should have known better than to enter a *kan pei* contest with a Chinese on his home grounds. These people can hold more spirits than the tank of a B-29. Hooknose was still moving easily and soberly, by the time Mike began to get a glassy look in his eye.

I had turned my head away momentarily to look around the room, and at the door, the way you will when you're uncomfortable and jumpy and have something like a delayed mission on your conscience. I was swinging it back again to see if Mike was still on his feet, when I spotted Hook-nose going for his bayonet.

"Look out, Mike!" I yelled.

"*Haiyaku! Haiyaku!*" screamed Hooknose.

And the blood in me turned to frozen frappe. That wasn't Chinese guerrilla talk at all—*that was Japanese!* I knew now why the "guerillas" had seemed odd to me—why they had looked like Manchurians, or Koreans.

Chip Morrison didn't have red hair just for decoration. At the first sound of my warning, he was already whirling his shoulders around, and his fist was on its way to Hook-nose's face. I was on the other side of the table. I slammed myself down on its surface, and slid on my belly, hitting Hooknose in a flying tackle. Somehow I managed to find the wrist of his bayonet hand and twist it—I heard the thing clatter. By that time others were piling on top of me. The table gave way with a crash.

Out of the kaliedoscope of flying arms and legs and leaping figures, one detail was clear. Mike Duboise—incredibly—was still on his feet and lashing out with long, powerful blows at whoever was within reach. His language was stronger than the vodka.

After a number of people had punched me, and I had punched them back, I became aware of Chip Morrison's voice.

"Come on—this way! Follow me!" He was on his way to the door, shaking one of the smaller Japs from him. Mike and I stumbled in his wake.

Somehow, then, we were out in the street—a crowd of natives was milling about, shouting and jabbering to each other and gesturing at us. Our jeep was there, where we had parked it. The five "guerillas" evidently deemed it wise not to follow us, probably for the same reason that they had toted nothing more formidable than an old bayonet into the village of Chanfoo. Morrison put the rotor back into the jeep, and in another moment we were jostling back toward the air field.

Mike was cold sober now, and with his fingertips he daubed cuts and bruises on his face. "Japs," he said bitterly, "how do you like that?"

"I don't like it," Morrison said. "If they can put two and two together, they know a couple of pilots aren't down here for a vacation. You guys are liable to have a little more opposition than you bargained for tomorrow."

AS THE Weather Detachment had predicted, most of the stuff rolled away the next morning, and what remained stayed high in the sky, letting the sun come through the thin patches quite easily. The 99th Squadron made its first fair weather take-off in weeks. The operation came off perfectly, and in less than half an hour we

had formed a V of V's and Mike had set the course to Mekoy Harbor.

South China, with its unbelievable toy mountains and its patchwork pattern of rice paddies was beneath us. We intercepted the big river that flowed into Mekoy at exactly the point we had planned, and then swung the whole formation in a wide turn to follow it in contact. Mike squinted at the terrain, smiled and said:

"I'd forgotten what it was like to fly and be able to pick up check points on the ground."

Ahead, the shark's teeth of the small Lung Hsiao range studded the horizon. Mike frowned a little at his map, then carefully folded it and waggled his wings. He pushed the controls forward slightly, and began to lose altitude. The flight behind us followed suit. Minutes later we were hedge-hopping, coming in low, hoping that the Imperial Japanese forces at Mekoy Harbor would be duly surprised to see us.

They weren't.

We skimmed over the Lung Hsiao peaks, coming through a sort of notch in them. Mekoy Harbor was on the other side, Mekoy Harbor and the South Shina Sea. The moment that the plexiglas snout of our own lead Mitchell poked out of the mountain pass, the air was suddenly and miraculously filled with black and white puffs. And below, all along the harbor's edge, were the bright dots and flashes of anti-aircraft.

I saw Mike's jaw drop with surprise. Then I saw him clamp it shut again, lean forward, and press just a little more throttle into the hungry engines. "Nothing to do but go through it," he said.

We selected a large ship almost in the middle of the harbor for our own personal target. It was still about ten miles away; but Mike hung the torpedo sight on it, and then put the Mitchell in a long, shallow, steady dive. Evasive flying at this low altitude would have been useless.

I sat there and held my teeth together and watched the puffs of flak float by. One of them appeared just off the right wing; I heard noises like scrap iron on a tin roof, and felt the airplane shudder. Several irregular holes appeared in the skin of the wing near the tip.

Mike wrestled with the controls.

"Okay?" I asked.

He nodded quickly. "Little mushy on the right aileron. But okay."

All I could think of, as we slated down into the harbor was one of these crazy dream sequences they sometimes get into the movies. The instant you looked outside of the Mitchell's cockpit, everything was unreal. *Unreal*—that was the word. Below, Mekoy Harbor was a pattern of zig zag patches with the irregular, shining curve of the sea eating into it. The gun flashes were like scratches on a negative. The ships in the water were like beetles. And the flak puffs were like drops of ink in a pan of water—they would appear ahead, seem to float toward us, then as we came nearer, increase speed and rocket past.

THE OUTLINES of our floating target sharpened as it lost distance. Details appeared. I squinted at it with sudden interest, then turned to Mike and saw that he was doing the same. "Portholes," he said, "see 'em? They don't have portholes on freighters."

"But they do on troop transports!" I nodded excitedly.

Far to one side sampans were scuttling to make the shore. "Must've just pulled in," said Mike. He put his hand on the torpedo release. "Look't her decks! he's carrying at least a regiment, or a division —or whatever they have outside of the air corps."

The flak was so thick now that it was beginning to jolt us back and forth with its concussion. Mike was working both stick and rudders like crazy to keep the torpedo sight on the target. And that target was swelling, coming at us with an illusion of increased speed. I snagged my under lip with my teeth and made wishes that had to do with getting it quick—*poof*, all at once—if we had to get it. It seemed to me that with flak covering about one-tenth of the sky where we were, we had therefore a ten-to-one chance of making it. Ten-to-one is not good odds when the ticket is for your life.

"On the deck!" said Mike.

We leveled off with our bomb bays just missing the surface of the water. Mike pulled the throttle back a little and watched the air speed drop. He reached over and pressed down on auxiliary bomb bay door control. The red light winked, showing

that the doors were open. We were near enough now to see that the decks of the transport were awash with troops—hundreds of them. And incendiaries were slamming at us from the ship's deck guns, too.

The shore batteries had depressed now; they were trying to fire shells directly in our path, so that we might crash into one of the geysers of water thus made. Hitting a column of water like that at almost two hundred miles an hour is pretty much the same as hitting a brick wall.

"Faithfully yours!" sang Mike, as he pressed the torpedo release. He thumbed it much harder than was necessary to make it work, and he thrust his big jaw forward at the target as though the gesture might somehow add speed to the galloping Mark III Modification Two.

The Mitchell lightened, leaped, and Mike threw her controls up and over, pulling her away in a climbing turn that slammed us hard into our seats. As we winged over I had a glimpse of the shore line and I saw great, billowing columns of smoke and fire. The other airplanes of the 99th had found work for themselves.

There was an explosion, and it felt as though we were a cork in boiling water.

"There she goes!" Mike shouted, looking out over the side.

The transport we'd torpedoed was momentarily out of my vision, so I busied myself looking up and ahead. I guess that's how come I was the first one to see our little friends in the small, razor-winged planes with the stubby, round cowlings.

"Mike," I said, pointing, "we have company."

He looked, spotted them. "Twelve, no less," he said. "An even dozen."

"Any ideas?" I asked.

"Yeah," nodded Mike, dryly. "Yeah—our strategy is very simple. We plain get the hell out of here as fast as we can."

WE FINISHED our wide climbing turn, and the specks of the Zeroes in the southwest quarter swung out of sight. Mike alerted the crew by interphone, then adjusted his mixture, throttle and prop pitch to get every possible mile of straight and level speed out of the bomber.

On either side of us, the other airplanes of the 99th were pulling out of their turns, and heading for the Lung Hsiao range, where we had planned to re-group. One, I noticed, was staggering along with thin, grey smoke trailing from its port engine.

I stole a glance at Mike and saw that his heavy, dark eyebrows all but concealed his eyes, and that there were washboard ruffles in his forehead. I could easily guess what was going through his mind. Mekoy Harbor had this day offered everything in the book—it was about even money that they had expected us. And it was even money again that the tip-off had come from Mike's little evening in the Laughing Bhudda's wine shop the night before.

"Mike," I said, "relax. It isn't over yet. All's well that ends well. We may pull out of this okay."

"Shut up," said Mike viciously. Then, almost immediately, he turned, looked eager, and said, "I'm sorry, Bill."

The others began to pull into a kind of formation, huddling for protection even before we reached the re-grouping point. Mike waggled his wings several times as they clustered about on both sides.

The interphone crackled; it was our tail gunner: "They're coming in high—first two have just peeled off!"

I saw the top turret on our wingman's ship move, adjusting for range. I sat there with my fingers clenched to the seat and wished mightily that I could be in a turret, too, just to keep those fingers busy. There are times when being a co-pilot is strictly no fun.

Dimly, then, I heard our dorsal guns hammering—a kind of a dull, woodpecker sound through the snarl of the big twin Wrights. Above, the white belly of the attacking Zero floated away in a Heaven-bent climb, the illusion of his speed cut down by our own forward progress. Our top guns still chattered, so I knew the turret must have followed him around for a quick tail shot. Tracers from the other B-25's in the formation made a cat's cradle of white strings in the China sky.

The next sound that I heard came from the vicinity of the bomb bays. It had the same rhythm as machine gun fire, but a different tone, and kind of hollow *wham wham wham wham.* I knew that sound. I'd talked to enough pilots who had taken 7.7 millimeter hits to know it. I turned my head instinctively, and in that way glimp-

sed the nacelle of the left engine. I saw little holes appear in it.

"Feather number one!" Mike called quickly.

I touched the switch. The prop began to coast reluctantly to its dormant position. I could feel our airplane lose speed; it was like suddenly leaving thin air and plowing into a bowl of mush. Mike dipped the nose for additional airspeed, and to keep from backing into the airplanes behind us.

In the next instant we checked number one engine in record time, reading three gauges at once and adding our visual estimate to that.

"Maybe it's okay—" Mike breathed hopefully. He reached for the throttle once more, and nodded. "Let's try."

We brought number one engine in again, nursed her with more care than Florence Nightingale ever gave the sickest man in the world. She choked a little, growled, hacked, sputtered—then caught. Mike compensated with the controls as the left wing took an additional pull.

"It may hold out," he muttered.

WE HAD lost power, no doubt of it. But there was no sign yet of tell-tale vibration to herald the sudden departure of our left engine nacelle from its wing. I took in a deep breath, now that I had time for such unessential activities as breathing, and looked around.

We had dropped several miles behind the formation, and several hundred feet below it. We were almost skimming the saddleback of the pass in the mountain range. I couldn't be sure, yet, but it seemed as though the altimeter was dropping very slowly. I remember thinking how ridiculous it would be if, after surviving the thickest concentration of flak in China, plus an attack by an even dozen of Zeroes, we should end up in an obscure mountain range because we couldn't gain enough altitude. I guess it all made me sort of light-headed, or surrealistic, or something.

"Life is funny, nuts to life!" I said. Then I was laughing uproariously about nothing at all.

Mike slapped me full in the face. "Bill! Snap out of it!"

I snapped. My face reddened, and I said, "Sorry, Mike."

He grinned and pressed his fingers into my arm, and I knew everything was okay —for a few more seconds, anyway.

The interphone again: "Here they come —six of 'em!"

Mike and I looked at each other blankly. We might have known it. Fully half the complement of attacking Zeroes had detached itself from the formation to make a sure thing out of the straggler.

"Oh, brother," I said.

"Nice knowing you," Mike answered.

Mike then took the control column and all but twisted it from its moorings. He looked as though he were beating pudding with a big tablespoon instead of flying. I guess, using a broad term, you could call it 'evasive maneuvering'. But our B-25 went through gyrations that Lieutenant Colonel Hurd never thought of in his years of stunt flying, I was willing to swear.

What made it double-distilled hell was not being able to see our six attackers— yet knowing that they were screaming down on us from behind and on high. We were so near the good Chinese eath now that I swore our prop tips were pruning trees and harvesting rice. On either side of us jagged peaks of the Lung Hsiaos stabbed up at the clouds.

I brought my head up. My eyes widened and froze that way. I pointed—directly ahead.

"Mike! Another one!"

The silhouette of a single engine fighter was closing toward us. Mike looked. He opened his jaw, then slammed it shut again. When he opened it a second time, he said:

"It's not a Zero!"

I looked harder. No—it wasn't a Zero. It was a little difficult to spot in head-on silhouette, but that heavy air scoop just under the engine was the first clue.

Our tail guns and our top turret banged away in that instant. Zeroes, their wings catching the sun intermittently like trolling spoons, whipped over us and away. Somewhere behind, the fuselage thumped with hits. And then, the P-40 ahead pulled up just in time to avoid collision with us, hung on its prop for a second, and in the most impossible deflection shot sent a short, almost casual burst into the first Zero pulling away.

It was so quick that it seemed like nothing at all. A short blob of tracer fire spit itself from the P-40's wings, and the Zero

went into a snap-roll, then spun away toward the earth. It must have been a direct hit on the pilot.

"It's the ghost of Rickenbacker, himself!" I said.

"Rickenbacker, hell," Mike shouted, "That's Hurd's P-40! What in hell's *he* doing here?"

It was pretty clear what Joss Hurd was doing here. He was reducing the strength of the Imperial Japanese Air Force with cold precision and some of the damndest flying I had even seen in my life.

After nicking the first Zero with a deflection shot that nobody else would have even considered worth trying, he dropped off on one wing, ruddered up again, and caught a second Zero with a long raking burst the entire length of its belly. That one just became a bunch of flame in midair. Then—so quickly that it seemed like the same burst—he swung the line of tracers out beyond the second Zero and caught a third one.

"Three!" I breathed. "Three of 'em—in ten seconds. Maybe less!"

The Japanese Imperial Air Force had had enough. The others pulled off at least ten miles to the right, and began to circle. They reminded me of jackals beaten off by a wildcat.

And with that, Hurd's P-40 skidded about and pulled neatly alongside of us, coasting at reduced throttle. I could see the little ex-barnstomer's head in the cockpit. He had his fingers to his throat mike. I switched to VHF.

"Hello, Delaware. Delaware One. You okay?" came the Colonel's voice.

"We can make it to Boston," I answered. That was the code name for the staging area at Chanfoo.

"Roger," Hurd answered, then added a little wryly, "but I'll be here to keep you out of trouble."

WE HAD TO circle Chanfoo for a few minutes before we could get in, because a big, dun colored C-47 was just landing. We thought it might be the regular weekly supply plane, but when we got down we found out differently. Waiting on the ramp for us was a full squad of well-pressed, cold-eyed gents, and among them I saw shining silver stars.

I had seen pictures of General Balkner, and his white mustachios and broad shoulders were unmistakable. Lieutenant Colonel Josselyn Hurd was standing at the General's side—and the whole kit and boodle of them were staring at Mike and me as we approached.

The General's first words nearly bowled us over—so much so that we completely forgot to salute.

"Congratulations, Captain!" he said in a booming bass voice. "The guerilla observers in the Lung Hsiao mountains just radioed the results of your mission! Mekoy Harbor is practically wiped out—you caught an ammunition dump there. To say nothing of troop reinforcements that were scheduled for a big drive."

"Uh—we did, sir?" Mike was swallowing imaginary watermelons.

General Balkner then stepped forward and put his hand on Mike's shoulder in a very un-General-like manner. His grin made his white mustachioes wave.

"The remarkable thing is that you did it without losing one plane. The 99th must be the luckiest squadron in the Air Force. You see, Headquarters long ago decided that the 99th would have to wipe out Mekoy—even if it meant wiping out the 99th, too. I know that sounds rough, Captain, but we Generals have to do that sometimes in war, whether we like it or not."

He turned to Joss Hurd then, crusty, weather-beaten Joss Hurd, whose stress-wrinkled face was splashed all over with a smile.

"Colonel Hurd," he said, "it's nothing short of a miracle that you've kept your squadron together after being literally ordered to expend it. What's your secret, Colonel? How'd you do it?"

"Mostly luck," Hurd's quiet, dry voice said. "But we kind of reduced the odds by flying *only when the weather was bad.* That way we lost less planes to weather than we would have to enemy opposition."

"But today's raid," said the General, puzzled. "There wasn't a cloud in the sky."

"Well," Hurd grinned, "that's where the luck comes in. Mike Duboise's luck—"

"And Colonel Hurd's brains," grinned Mike. "What a combination! General—with that combination you couldn't wipe out the 99th if you tried!"

He concentrated on getting his bursts onto the building.

Operation Oblivion

By MALCOLM MARTIN

Flying wing to wing with him, they glared their hatred, sneered their contempt. He made a fine art of avoiding combat. For what, they snarled, was this fancy fly-boy saving himself?

HIGH ABOVE THE SOFT PACIFIC swells four sleek, humpbacked Hellcats circled easily. Far beneath, and miles behind, the Fifth Fleet drove relentlessly northward. This was the modern picket line. Bull Halsey called them his eyes until he had to use them for fists, and they served both purposes well.

Inside the foremost Hellcat cockpit Lieutenant Chauncey Drelincourt lolled aimlessly. A cigarette dangled from his lips, and to relieve his boredom he calculated the vector of an unimpeded fifty caliber bullet when it reached sea-level after being fired dead ahead in a horizontal plane. "Let's see," he thought. "Velocity plus two hundred and forty knots provided by my plane as against gravity drag, and . . ."

"Hello, Pontiac 99 and Pontiac 131, this is Pontiac base. Vector 030, Buster . . . Over . . ."

All in one motion Court flicked the cigarette out of the open cockpit, goosed the throttle, swung his crate into a steep right bank, and reached for his mike.

"Hell,o Pontiac Base, this is Pontiac 131, steady on 030 . . . over . . ."

A second later he heard the skipper's drawling voice, and knew that they were going for the kill together.

"Hello, Pontiac Base, this is Pontiac Base . . . Bogeys ahead fifty . . . Angels ten . . . out . . ."

Even as Court began to ease his Hellcat down towards ten thousand feet, he felt rather than saw that his division had tightened into close-order formation and, as he watched, Lt. Redding, his section leader, fired a testing burst from his six fifty calibers. But Court made no move to test his guns. Cold tentacles of fear clutched at his heart. Not fear of the Nips, but fear of what his squadron mates would say when once again he bungled a perfect set-up. Anger was his next emotion. Anger at the fate that placed him here, the far-flung lance of American might, armed with all the modern weapons that the factory workers back home could provide, and yet as helpless as a paralytic. For Court knew that he dare not risk any action with the Nip pilots sneaking towards the fleet only a few minutes ahead.

Redding, his section leader, would look his scornful look again and walk away without a word when they were back aboard the Cabot. Little Doc Scott, his wing-man, would blush angrily, but remain faithful to his leader even as the unwritten law of the fleet demanded.

Why shouldn't they be angry? Had not Court, although presented with every possible opportunity in three weeks' cruising off Formosa, missed the easiest set-ups, and so tangled up his division that they might just as well have stayed aboard their carrier? Worse still, on the strafing runs, had he not pulled out far above the flak after firing his guns at a uselessly high altitude? "Dip bombing," Guy Redding had called it with a sneer.

COURT gritted his teeth in sheer frustrated rage as he watched the skipper's division angling in from his left. Once again he would have to sit by and watch, as some other division made the kill. *He* must endure the taunts, both veiled and open, when he returned to his ship. But orders were orders, especially when delivered by a man like General Groves, who seemed to have every scientist in America taking orders from him, as well as a large section of Military Intelligence.

With a curse he flung these thoughts behind him, and concentrated on the business in hand. Suddenly his earphones crackled again.

"Pontiac 99 and 131 this is Pontiac Base. Bogey ahead seven. Angels eight . . . over . . ."

"Pontiac Base, this is Pontiac 99. Roger . . ."

"Pontiac Base, this is Pontiac 131. Roger . . ."

Court's blue eyes flashed as he replaced the mike in the holder and began to scan the sky ahead. The skipper's division was ahead of him now, and slightly above. 'Way off on the horizon he saw a speck, and before he remembered, he almost swung his plane towards it. He must wait until they saw it first. It must be the skipper who spotted the Bogeys. That would give him the honor of the kill.

Again the earphones crackled. "Pontiac 131, this is Pontiac 133. Bogeys at eleven o'clock, down."

That was Redding, Court thought furiously. Now he was in trouble. Even as he banked left to eleven o'clock he estimated his chances. If he admitted that he saw them he would be expected to lead the attack. A lucky bullet might get him and end General Groves' carefully thought-out plan. On the other hand, if he pretended not to see them and turned the lead over to Redding, he would be drawn right into the middle of a dogfight. Coldly he fought down panic as he brought the full power of his scientific mind to bear on this problem. In a flash the only logical solution occurred to him.

Quickly he raised his gloved hand and patted his head. Instantly he saw Redding swing out and start to take the lead. Just as he came abreast, Court held his nose with his right hand, and cocking the thumb of his left hand, pointed his index finger, indicating that his guns were snafu.

He had a momentary glimpse of his section leader's contemptuous smile as Redding flew past. Court's lips tightened. Waving his hand to Doc Scott, he instructed him to follow Redding.

At last he was free to see what was going on. His eyes searched the horizon and spotted the Nips. Three . . . six . . . nine . . . an even dozen. They looked like

Judies, he thought, but at that distance you couldn't tell. He heard the skipper's voice call out "Tally-ho," and as he watched, the two divisions plunged toward the unsuspecting Nips five miles away and two thousand feet below. At this time of year the Japs' southeasterly course took them directly into the sun. None of the Emperor's chosen sons saw the Hellcats plummeting down upon them.

Enviously he watched the skipper swing his division to one side until the two divisions flanked their quarry and then, with perfect synchronization, all Hellcats plunged for the attack. At six hundred knots per hour, the last few miles disintegrated between the diving Grummans and the long "V" formation adopted by the Judies.

THE skipper gunned his Hellcat straight for the Jap formation leader. The fifties chattered their song of death, and the red tracers reached for the Judy. Then hell broke loose. The leader dove sharply, and banked toward the skipper's division, presenting him with a nose shot instead of a tail target. The rest of the Heavenly Host zoomed off in all directions. Some banked steeply towards the skipper's division, and presented their tails to Redding's guns, and some saw Redding first, and turned towards him. One or two dove towards the water leaving themselves wide open to both divisions.

Crimson tracers cut the sky apart in all directions as the fifty calibers stuttered away. The skipper was closer behind his Judy now. His lead was eating upwards from tail to cockpit as the Nip turned frantically from side to side, losing all science as destruction neared. Suddenly the entire Judy disintegrated, and the skipper's plane flew through a hail of scrap that had once been a prized portion of the Mikado's aerial fleet.

Over to the left Redding and his wingman were pouring it into a couple of Judies that clung as tight as lovers at midnight. The leading Jap wavered and his left wing ripped off. Instantly the plane cartwheeled into its running mate. A tiny plume of smoke broke from the interlocked planes, and a moment later both plunged into the sky-blue water. Almost immediately a huge explosion marked the detonation of a bomb originally destined for an American carrier.

Beneath him Court counted four more plumes of smoke, like trial strokes on an artist's palette. Four thousand feet long, they ran the gamut of color from light grey through crimson, to a dark black where the trail ended just above the water.

Far out on the horizon he saw two Judies high-tailing for home. But each one had a Grumman sitting on its tail a scant few hundred yards behind. Court could guess what was going on in those cockpits.

Each American hunched forward in his seat, the throttle up to the stop. Water-injection on for those precious extra knots. The prop pitch tightened to the last revolution. The fingers tense on the triggers. Gunsights on, and keen eyes searching through the red ring until the Nip plane should fill enough of it to show that extreme range had been reached. The final calculation. The white-knuckled fingers pressing the red button on the control stick. The hungry fingers of lead arcing just short of the Judy's tail. The Judy swerving wildly as the tracers flared out. The Grumman cutting inside the turn. Another burst of fire, and the Jap pilot stiffening with a lead backbone.

It was over now. Not an enemy plane remained in the sky. Not an American plane had been lost. Court heard the skipper's voice sing out with a note of triumph. "Pontiac Base, this is Pontiac 99. Splashed 12 Judies. Over."

"Pontiac 99 this is Pontiac Base. Nice work. Return to Mother . . . Out . . ."

Court watched Redding gather the division together, and saw him bank sharply from side to side as he searched for his leader. "Safe to rejoin him now," he thought wryly, and dove forward. With one hand on the throttle he flashed past the group and slid effortlessly into the lead spot.

On the way back to the *Cabot* Court occupied himself with a little electrical engineering. With his aviator's knife he pried loose the solenoid button controlling his guns and twisted the wires until they crossed the connection for the emergency fuel pump. Then he replaced the solenoid, charged his guns, and tightened his fingers on the trigger button. As he expected, the

guns refused to fire. Now no one could question his story of six useless guns.

Half an hour later Court swung into the groove and watched Bill Green, the L.S.O., give him a steady roger until the dramatic moment of the cut. He snapped his gaze away from Bill and fought the Grumman down to a tail-first landing, catching the second wire.

Moments later he was in the ready room stripping off his flying gear when Redding and the skipper, Lt. Commander MacGregor, came in together. Redding was talking fast, the skipper listening with a frown. Court barely heard his reply. "Alright, Redding," the skipper drawled softly. "I'll speak to him myself."

"Lieutenant Drelincourt," he continued more clearly, "I'd be obliged if you'd see me in my quarters after chow."

"Yes, sir," answered Court, aware of the other pilots listening behind him. In spite of himself he ran a nervous tongue over his lips. "What a perfect picture of guilt I must seem!" he thought.

II

CHOW THAT EVENING WAS torture. The seat on his left was vacant, and he suspected that the one on his right would have been vacant also if there had been enough spare seats in the wardroom. No one spoke to him as he listened to the other pilots rehashing their afternoon victory.

"Saw the yellow-belly start to turn, and put a burst ahead of her—flew right into it—Just came apart in the air!"

"Had the water-injection on. She was indicating 310. That dumb bunny made a turn and I had him cold."

". . . so close I had my wing right in his cockpit. He looked just like Peter Lorre."

"Peter Lorre," mused Court. "Oh, yes, the movie villain." When had he seen him first? Must have been years ago. Before the war. That was almost another life. Court had been a student at Cal Tech. An honor student, and a first-string quarterback. People had been glad enough to speak to him when he was on the campus. His whole life had been wrapped up in studying electronics, and nuclear physics. Yet three years after he graduated, the draft came along, and a year later, the war. But he hadn't waited. By the time war was declared he was already wearing gold wings on his navy tunic.

They made him a pig-boat jockey, and sent him all over the Caribbean, and after that across the South Pacific to Noumea with the Black Cat Squadron. He'd had the usual bouts of malaria, but he wasn't any sicker than the rest of his gang when the orders came through that changed his life. Just a cryptic telegram signed by COMSOPAC directing him to NAS-Washington, and to await further orders. Protests had been of no avail, and a week later he was sleeping in the Mayflower Hotel, Washington, D. C.

Togged out in his faded khaki uniform, he reported to Admiral Coyle's office bright and early next morning. By this time he realized that something was in the wind, and he was eager to see what sort of orders he had drawn in the great war lottery.

A pretty blond Wave in the Admiral's outer office gave him her very best smile as she surveyed the hard five-foot ten frame which had terrorized a host of gridiron foes. She noted the stripe and a half on his shoulder boards, and decided she'd date him some week-day.

"Lieutenant (J.G.) Drelincourt here. I was instructed to report to Admiral Coyle as soon as I arrived.

"Oh yes, sir," murmured the Wave. "The Admiral is expecting you."

Court watched her wiggle her way towards the Admiral's door. One minute later he was through the door and saluting stiffly.

"Come in, my boy," said the Admiral gruffly. "I'm glad to see you back safely. Understand you fellows haven't quite polished off the Jap Navy yet."

"No sir," said Court with a grin, "But that's mainly because the Army's on our side!"

"Harrumph!" said the Admiral, choking slightly, "This gentleman here is General Groves."

Court whirled, reddening, and saw a figure to the left of the door regarding him quizzically.

"I beg your pardon, Sir," Court stammered. "I was only joking."

"That's all right, son," growled the General, "Before we're through with you

you'll realize that there's quite a lot of cooperation between the Army and their Junior Service."

"Sit down," he continued, waving Court to a chair opposite him. "I want to check a few facts with you. According to these records you graduated from Cal Tech in 1938. While there you majored in nuclear science and electronics, and later took a job with General Electric. On the campus you were a popular figure, and made many friends. Among them I am informed was a young lady by the name of Meo Okamura. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir," said Chauncey, while his mind feverishly searched for the import of the questions. "She was a Japanese exchange student. I knew her quite well. We shared several courses. Her father was some sort of big-wig in Japan, wasn't he?"

"More to the point, he was and is their most brilliant nuclear physicist. That should give you a clue as to what my job is," replied the General, gazing at him intently. "What," he continued, without pausing, "was your impression of Miss Okamura? Did you feel that she liked America? Did she ever give you any reason for believing she favored the democratic system, or was opposed to the type of government in Japan at that time?"

COURT'S mind reeled under the barrage of questions, but he did his best to answer. "She seemed to like America, and everyone who knew her then thought very highly of her. Several times I remember her saying that Japan had much to learn from America, but that they had to work out their destiny in their own way. She even joined the Young Democratic League on the campus. Seems to me she made a few speeches."

"She did," answered General Groves, "and twice she mentioned that the true democratic system would be transferred to Japan as soon as her people were ready for it. For that reason we believe that she may be friendly towards us."

"However," he continued, "That is not of vital importance. The fact remains that her father is Japan's most brilliant scientist, and we want to find out what he is up to."

"But why have you told me this?" Court queried incredulously. "I haven't the slightest idea where Meo is now, let alone knowing what her father is doing."

"Of course you haven't," said the General, rising from his chair, "But we hope you're going to find out. Take a look at this wall map. You can see that it depicts the coast of Honshu. This red circle marks the Paramushiro Airfield. A quarter of a mile south of there and just east of an American prison camp is the home of Okamura San and his charming daughter Meo. We want you to volunteer to go to Japan and kidnap Okamura."

In that little room the silence was deafening. The Admiral sat at his desk doodling little mermaids on a white blotter. The General gazed fixedly on the wall map. Court sat rigidly erect, his mind in a turmoil. What an assignment! Just to go to Japan and pick up a Nip scientist! Probably one of the best-guarded men in the Mikado's Empire. Hell! he couldn't even speak a word of Japanese!

He knew the reputation the Japs had for torturing airmen shot down over their territory. That would be child's play compared to what they would do to an authentic spy. His blood ran cold as he foresaw the difficulties of his mission. Nonetheless, he knew he had but one choice.

"Naturally I'll volunteer, sir," he said quietly. "When do we get under way?"

"Harrumph!" snorted the Admiral. "Knew he would, General. I'll leave you alone with him now."

So saying, he struggled out of his chair and left the room without a backward glance. A moment later he could be heard relieving his feelings by grossly insulting the pretty blond Wave. She had a very good understanding of her part in the war effort, and was soothing him gently.

Court smiled as he remembered the dates he had had with that little Wave. The evenings they had spent together while General Grove's aide was briefing him for his great mission. Smiled again, and found himself gazing into the face of a messroom attendant who was clearing away the last dishes from the empty table in the Cabot wardroom.

Right now he was due for a very unpleasant interview. The skipper wanted to see him, and ten to one he was going to give him a dressing down for cowardice, or at least incompetence.

A MOMENT later he pulled aside the flash proof curtains in front of the skipper's cabin and walked in. Lieutenant Commander MacGregor was seated at his desk, and he wasted no time in preliminaries.

"Drelincourt," he drawled, "You've been with this squadron for about three weeks. During that time you have been in contact with the enemy on numerous occasions. Yet your division has the worst record in the outfit, and I have heard some very disquieting rumors about your conduct under fire."

"This squadron," he continued, silencing Court's involuntary protest with a firm gesture, "represents a considerable fraction of our first line fighting strength. Every man has been through rigorous training, and the weaklings have been eliminated as far as possible. Tomorrow morning the fleet moves against the main islands of Japan for the first time. Failure now would set us back for months, and possibly years. We can take no chances with a weak link, and you are the weak link in this squadron. As of now you will consider yourself grounded."

"But—but you can't do that, Commander," Court cried wildly. "I *have* to fly tomorrow."

"And why do you have to fly tomorrow? asked the skipper icily.

"Because—because I must get to Japan tomorrow," Court replied feverishly, on the verge of blurting out his secret. "Please give me another chance."

"I'm sorry, Drelincourt," MacGregor began, when an interruption came. A young sailor tapped cautiously, and entered the room. He addressed Lieutenant Commander MacGregor.

"I beg your pardon, sir. I have a top priority coded message for you."

"Thank you," said the skipper, taking the typewritten sheet. "Sit down, Drelincourt, I'll attend to you in a minute."

Sweat beaded Court's forehead as he watched the skipper decode the message. He would have given anything to reveal his secret, but his instructions had been explicit on that point. He remembered the General's words during that first interview in Admiral Coyle's office.

"You see, Drelincourt," General Groves had explained, "This thing is too important to take chances with. The less people that know about it the better. You're a scientist yourself, and you can understand me when I say that if our own experiments are successful we may save countless thousands of American lives. Naturally we don't to go off half-cocked. We want to be sure that our bomb will work perfectly. The hell of it is that we don't know how long we can afford to wait. If the Japs have a similar weapon, it would be suicide to wait until they spring it on us. But, if we can get hold of Okamura, we can find out how far they have advanced."

"On the other hand," he continued, "we don't want them to guess how interested we are in atomic energy. When we launch our attack, we want the full psychological value of surprise. For that reason we have to have an aviator. If you are captured near Okamura, you can pose as a shot-down pilot without alarming Japanese Intelligence, whereas a spy caught in that area would be likely to give away the whole show."

"But how am I to get to his house without being observed, and how am I to get him away from Japan?" Court had asked perplexedly.

"That will all be explained to you in due course," the General had replied. "You will be thoroughly briefed. Every resource we have will be placed at your disposal. My aides will explain all that to you. I myself will not see you again, but before I wish you good luck on your mission, I have one more thing to say. This mission of yours is tied up directly with America's most closely-guarded secret. The entire operation is so important that it is never referred to except as the Manhattan Project. Under no circumstances must you tell the little you know of these plans to anybody. Not so long ago a full Colonel was court-martialled and dishonorably discharged for mentioning at a cocktail party that he was working on the Manhattan Project. You know enough not to tell the Japs. Be even more sure you don't tell anybody on our side. This is labelled top secret, and the orders came direct from President Roosevelt."

"Of course, sir," Court had said, slightly dazed by the long speech, "I won't spill the beans."

"I know you won't, lad," approved the General. "You may go now. In the morning you will report to my headquarters, and one of my aides will brief you. You have a long hard task in front of you. I doubt if you will be ready inside of three months. Good-bye, and good luck."

"Thank you, General Groves," Court had replied. "I guess I'll need it"

THAT had ended the interview, but Court's work had only just begun. In the morning General Groves' aide told him that he would be switched from PBY's to F6F's. He would receive carrier training, and be sent out to joint the fleet. His training would be compressed into the shortest possible time. In addition to his normal courses he would receive constant briefing on his coming mission. Details of the topography surrounding Okamura's house. Psychological instruction so that he could better persuade Meo to come willingly, and thus perhaps help with the difficult task of extracting information from her father. Constant reminders that he must on no account unnecessarily risk his life before the mission began.

The months had passed in a flash. Initial training at Melbourne, Florida. Carrier qualification at the Great Lakes. A quick trip to Honolulu for additional landings on the ungainly old Saratoga. Special handling all the way. Never a wasted minute. When he wasn't flying, there was study.

Then one day they had popped him into a big Navy transport, and flown him out to Guam. A few days later he was ordered aboard the *Cabot*, and reported to Lieutenant Commander MacGregor as a replacement pilot. That very evening he had received a message reminding him that he was not to engage in combat, and was to take no chances with flak, but that he must fly all routine missions, so that if captured he could spin a good story to Jap Intelligence. As if he needed a message to remind him of the unpleasant task before him—

"This message seems to apply to you, Drelincourt," said the skipper, looking up from his desk. "Perhaps you had better read it."

Court took the message with trembling hands. His eye leaped to the signature. It was signed by Admiral Coyle for General Groves. Then the pencilled-in words above the code seared themselves into his brain.

C.O. VF-22. YOU ARE HEREBY INSTRUCTED TO TAKE ORDERS FROM LT. DRELINCOURT UPON THE OCCASION OF YOUR SCHEDULED ATTACK TOMORROW MORNING AGAINST THE MAINLAND OF JAPAN. HIS ORDERS TAKE PRECEDENCE OVER ALL OTHERS. YOUR SUPERIORS HAVE BEEN INFORMED.

SIGNED ADMIRAL COYLE FOR GEN. GROVES.

"You seem to have quite a lot of pull," drawled MacGregor bitingly. "Just what are my orders for tomorrow? Bombing Tokyo from 15,000 feet? That would be about your speed!"

"No," said Court, with enough steel in his tone to make the skipper look up uneasily. "All I want you to do is include me in the afternoon strike. I want three other divisions besides my own to accompany me. Our target will be the Paramushiro Airfield. We will strafe at low altitude. In the event that I am shot down, no further action is to be taken, nor is any mention of that fact to be made over the radio. Is that clear?"

"Sure, it's clear," bit out MacGregor, "but if you think it's too dangerous I could probably scrape up a few more divisions to escort you tomorrow."

"That won't be necessary, Commander," replied Court, blushing. "With your permission I'll return to my quarters."

"Run along, sonny boy," answered MacGregor sarcastically, "unless you think it would be safer in the hold. One of the kamikaze boys might pay us a visit tonight."

Court bit his lips and spun on his heel, his fists clenched. Without a word he stalked out of the cabin. His face was as hot as a furnace, but his mind was as cool as an ice-pack. There was much to be done this evening. It might well be his last evening alive.

Back in his cabin he drew the flashproof curtains together, and unlocking his sea-chest extracted the waterproof of the Paramushiro district, and looked at them once more. He knew them by heart, of course, but it never did any harm to check. Quietly he folded them up and put them

in his back-pack. Inside his flying suit he placed the two deadly poison pills that had been given to him months before. Next he took out his aviator's .38 caliber pistol, and inserted a fresh clip and checked the action a couple of times. Then he lay down on his bunk and began slowly to run over the time schedule for the following day. Eight hours from the time he landed he had to be back at the point where a rubber boat from the submarine would pick him up. Not much time to pull a kidnapping job in the heart of the enemy's country, he reflected sleepily . . .

III

CLANG-CLANG-CLANG—the brazen alarm sounded the call to General Quarters. Court jerked himself out of his bunk and swung his legs to the deck. A glance at his watch told him it was five o'clock, an hour before dawn. The Nips were up early, he thought. A high pitched squawk, and the public address system came to life.

"Bogeys at fourteen miles, closing. For your information night fighters have been launched, and are in contact with the enemy. At the present moment we are one hundred and ten miles due East of Tokyo, and still closing."

As Court left his cabin and headed for the ready room he heard waterproof bulkheads slam shut. Only dim blue lights lit the wardroom as he passed through it. Ghostly figures scurried in all directions. Lt. Miller, the ship's sawbones, was directing a couple of pharmacists' mates to set up a temporary first-aid station in the officers' mess.

In the ready room Court found the pilots scheduled for the dawn strike already in their gear. They unconcernedly copied data off the big blackboard in front of them. The squadron Intelligence officer gave low-voiced answers to last-minute questions.

The squawk-box in the ready room erupted as the ship's observer gave the crew below a running commentary on the fight above.

"There is gunfire on the horizon now. That'll be the picket line firing. I can see a red glow in the sky—looks like the destroyers got one. Here comes the 'lamp lighter'. He's dropping flares. Everything in the fleet is firing at him. He's on a course that will take him across our path. We're making a turn now. Wow! They nailed him. There he goes! Just a big ball of red flame on the water about two miles ahead of us. Just a moment. Here's a report from airplot. Bogeys are opening again. Looks like they've had enough."

A few minutes later the calm voice of the air-officer came into the room. "Pilots, man your planes. Good luck, and good hunting."

Instantly the pilots scrambled to their feet and crowded out of the light-baffle door, and onto the deck.

Five minutes later Court heard the deep throb of the Grummans, and the TBF's as they came to life. Only seconds after, the ship-shaking thump of the catapult told him that the planes were being launched. Court wished that he was with them. Would it never be time for the afternoon strike?

Slowly the hours crawled by. The fleet was under constant attack. The C.A.P. picked off most of the Divine Wind boys miles away from the *Cabot*, but enough of them got through to keep the ships' gunners busy. The thud of the heavy guns and the popping of the multi-barrelled pom-poms drummed unceasingly in his ears. Once a Kamikaze hit the water just astern of them, and the explosion tossed pieces of plane on the *Cabot's deck*.

Then finally it was two o'clock. Court put on his gear and copied the data from the ready-room board. Recognition signals. ZBX channels. VHF frequencies. Course to target. Course of fleet. Estimated homing course. Identification numbers of various friendly ships. All that had to be entered on his plotting board.

"Why, Chauncey," said Redding's voice in his ear, "are you still flying? This is liable to be dangerous work today."

"Yeah, still flying, Redding," Court gritted out between clenched teeth. "And, just for the record, it's Lieutenant Drelincourt to you."

"Sure, Lieutenant Drelincourt," sneered Redding, "But don't forget to check your guns, Lieutenant Drelincourt."

For a moment a red haze blurred Court's vision. By God, he could stand this no longer. He was halfway out of

his chair, right fist cocked, his whole body aching to smash that taunting face, before sanity returned to him. He saw Redding stumble backwards in alarm, and sneer again as Court sat down. Quickly he glanced around the ready-room. Fortunately the other pilots had been too busy to notice the by-play. Just at that moment the squawk-box blared out the dramatic, "Pilots, man your planes!"

In an instant Court was on his feet, and heading for the deck. Outside the force of the wind down the flat carrier deck almost knocked him off his feet. His eye picked out his plane, and he vaulted into the cockpit. The plane captain was standing by. "She's 4-0, sir," he said proudly.

"Good man!" said Court.

His hands were busy plugging in his radio, adjusting his harness, stowing his chart board, and he had barely finished when the bull horn on deck blared out, "Prepare to start engines!" Then, "Stand clear of propellers," and finally, "Start engines."

Instantly the engine caught, choked for a moment, and purred into life. He let it idle as he watched the skipper's rev up. Plenty of wind this afternoon, he thought. That was why they were using a fly-off instead of the catapult.

Then it was his turn. Fly one. The chief deck handler waved his paddles at Court, and he eased the plane forward. Another signal, and the wings unfolded and locked into flying position. The paddle began to rotate, and Court poured the coal to his plane. Both feet pressed hard down on the brakes. The whole plane vibrated as the two thousand horse engine strove to drag him forward. The tail wavered up, and just when Court thought he could hold it no longer, the paddle snapped down. Instantly Court yanked his feet off the brakes. The Hellcat rolled along towards the Island, picking up speed with agonizing slowness. He eased the stick forward and felt her respond with a rush. Then he was past the island, and watching the bow of the *Cabot* swing upwards. Just before it reached the apex of its pitch he hauled back on the stick and threw his plane into the air.

A quick turn to clear prop-wash from the deck, and he was able to raise his wheels. A moment later he brought up his flaps, eased off power and prop pitch, and settled down to rendezvous with the other divisions. He caught sight of the skipper's division circling at fifteen hundred feet, aft of the *Cabot*, and took up his position in the circle. Inside of five minutes all four divisions had grouped themselves, and the skipper swung around and headed for Japan.

Court found himself flying about a hundred yards off MacGregor's wing. The other two divisions trailed astern. The sky was clear. Not a cloud in sight. Below, the sea was flecked with white where a twenty-knot wind lifted the tops off the Pacific swells.

Through his earphones he heard a constant stream of orders and reports. None were preceded by the carrier call sign, "Pontiac," so he was able to relax. He eased his shoulder-holster a bit where it chafed his throttle arm, and settled down to watch the horizon.

HALF an hour went by before he saw the bank of clouds that marked the coast of Japan. Instinctively he tightened the formation, and through his rear vision mirror he saw the tail divisions close up astern. Slowly the coastline grew clearer. That spit of land jutting into the ocean was a perfect landmark. Just back of that spit lay the Paramushiro Airfield. Not to mention the American prison camp so close to Okamura's cabin. Suddenly his earphones crackled again, and he recognized the skipper's drawl.

"Pontiac planes, this Pontiac 99. We will strafe our target from West to East. Recover over the sea. Tail divisions will act as top cover . . . Out . . ."

Court's hand tightened on the throttle. His breath came faster this time. He could really let go. If the Japs nailed him on one of his runs it would make his landing look all the more natural. Redding was due for a surprise.

They were west of the target now, well inland, and Court followed as the skipper swung round and positioned himself for the attack. MacGregor eased his nose down and began the long dive. Court glanced at his altimeter. 8,000 feet. He'd have plenty of speed by the time he started strafing.

His fingers tightened on the stick and,

with a glance behind him at his division, he thrust it forward. The landscape tilted, and he picked out MacGregor's group half-way down and off to his right. The gunsight glowed redly and he squinted through it at the field rushing up to him. The altimeter needle swung round and round. The airspeed indicator flickered near the red-marked danger spot.

He was flying automatically now, every nerve intent on picking out a target. His eyes narrowed as he saw a group of revetments at the far end of the field. Inside one of them he saw a Jap plane. The red balls on its wing stood out sharply. He banked a little to center his guns on the target, and the turn sent the blood rushing to his stomach. The ground was close now, and he could see the little white worms of machine gun flak twisting through the air all around him.

With a prayer he tightened his fingers on the trigger button, and watched as the red tracers bit into the dust astern of the Jap plane, and ate their way forward. The twin-engined job quivered, and a lick of smoke shot out from the wing roots. Another burst and flames belched into the air. "Scratched, one Val," he thought with satisfaction. He yanked the stick back into his belly, and before he blacked out he saw the ground rushing up to meet him. The ship shuddered and groaned, but at the last second zoomed upwards. He must have been within ten feet of Jap soil, he thought, incredulously, remembering that the usual strafing limit was a thousand feet.

The film over his eyes cleared, and Court found himself staring straight up into the sky. He shoved the stick forward and brought the world into the proper perspective. His altimeter showed six thousand feet, but his speed was low—down to a mere hundred knots. He dropped the nose to pick up some knots, and picked out the shoreline as he passed over it. Below and behind he could see the rest of his division striving to catch up. Ahead, the skipper's division had completed their rendezvous, and were circling.

Court chose that moment for reconnaissance. The airfield was easy enough to find, and so was the prison camp only a couple of miles away. He couldn't see anything moving there, but he would have bet his month's pay that the American prisoners were having their best day since captivity.

Closer to the spit of land, Court located the arching Tori of the ruined Temple of Ashido. According to his briefing, this was sacred territory, and if he could manage to land there unobserved, no patrols would disturb him. The little valley in which the temple lay would hide his landing from watchful eyes outside the forbidden hollow. But the trees were thick, and it wasn't going to be a cinch to jockey his plane into the overgrown temple grounds.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw that his division had reformed. The skipper was ahead, leading the way back for the next strafing run. Somewhere above them Court knew the two top cover divisions were searching the sky for the inevitable Jap fighters. They were two miles south of Paramushiro, heading west, when it happened.

"Pontiac planes, heads up. Many bogeys, high, at six o'clock, diving . . ." Court bent his plane into a sharp bank and searched for the Nips. Yes, there they were, heading down for the Hellcats at a steep angle. They looked like the new hot Tony's that the ship's Intelligence Officer had spoken of. "At any rate, they've got us neatly boxed," he thought, "Just the way the skipper had those Judies yesterday."

A turn either way would be fatal now. His tail would be wide open. There was time for only one maneuvre.

COURT shoved the nose of his Hellcat forward, and held it there until he picked up two hundred and fifty knots. Then he let the nose slide back to the horizon before he hauled back on the stick and began his loop. As he reached the top of the loop his eyes picked out the Jap planes. They were much closer now. Another ten seconds would put them in firing range. Their steep approach angle gave them a frightful speed.

Suddenly Court kicked hard right rudder and jammed the stick against the side of the cockpit. The Grumman rolled out of the loop into a perfect Immelman. He let the nose dip, and glanced up at the Nips. The sudden maneuvre had brought him almost directly underneath them and,

in order to fire at him, they had to steepen their dive. The noses of the Tonies grew rapidly larger, but they had passed the vertical by the time the red roses blossomed on their wings. Court didn't even bother to jink his ship. He knew that shooting accuracy was impossible from that position.

The Tonies shot by at the awful speed his action had forced on them. Court did a split "S" and followed the tail end Charlie. He had plenty of speed but he didn't attempt to follow directly after the Jap he had singled out. He knew that the Nip would have his hands full pulling out of his dive, so he pointed his nose for a section of sky far forward. He watched as the Nip wrestled his light plane out of the dive, and dragged the nose sharply upwards.

Court knew the Nip was in a complete blackout. He squinted through his gunsight and centered it on the sky-bound Tony. No sense wasting a deflection shot, he thought. He pulled in behind the Tony and watched him level off. As the Nip lost speed Court tightened his fingers on the trigger button. The tracers ate into the cockpit, but for a moment they seemed to have no effect. Then the plane jerked slightly and literally came apart in the air.

Before he could relax, the Jap planes were on top of them again. The sky became a mass of whirling, gyrating planes. Twice he managed to get a short deflection shot in at a crossing Jap plane, but neither time could he see the effect of his bursts. Doc Scott, his wing-man, had somehow managed to stay with him. That gave Court plenty of confidence. He liked the feeling that his tail was well covered.

He threw a glance at his rear view mirror, and saw a Tony only a couple of hundred feet away, guns blazing. Before he could veer off the Tony dropped a wing and burst into flames. A Hellcat shot past and attached itself to Court's wing. Scotty was on the job. Ahead of him a pair of Tonies were laying it into a lone Hellcat. Court swerved and headed for them. He chose the left-hand Nip, and opened up at a thousand feet. One short burst and he was level with the plane. It appeared undamaged, but the Jap pilot was slumped over the stick, and as he watched, the nose dipped, and the Tony headed for the ground. Almost at once the remaining Tony burst into flames as Scotty's guns found their mark.

"Pontiac 131, this is Pontiac 133," came Redding's voice. "That was my tail you cleared. Thanks, buddy."

Court felt his chest swell with an odd satisfaction. But he had no time for reflections. The dogfight had shifted inland, and gradually lost altitude. As Court watched, a large group of Zeroes swept out of the interior and headed for the melee. He heard the skipper call for reinforcements and then he was back in the struggle again.

A lone Zero swept straight for him. Court gritted his teeth and kept his nose pointed directly at him. Somebody had to break first, and he had the heaviest firepower. Evidently the Nip realized this, and at the last moment he pulled the stick up. Court raised his nose slightly and saw his tracers eat into the Zero's belly as it passed overhead. It turned turtle immediately, and dove for the ground, trailing a huge plume of black smoke.

SUDDENLY Court's Hellcat lurched. A row of holes etched a design in his starboard wing. He bent his crate into a steep bank, and threw a glance at his rear-view mirror. A sleek Zero, all nose and red-rimmed guns, was matching his turn inch for inch. There was no sign of Scotty. Again his crate shuddered as Jap lead found it, and Court desperately cartwheeled into an opposite bank. With insolent ease the lighter Jap plane matched his turn, and, strive as Court might, the nose of the Jap began to center on the Hellcat again.

As the red rosettes glowed on the Jap wings, Court cartwheeled again, and earned another breathing spell. "This won't do," he thought. "That yellow-belly can turn inside of me every time." He glanced at his altimeter and saw that he had seven thousand feet to play with. He felt the Grumman jerk again as the Nip bullets gunned into her. With a curse he rammed the stick as far forward as it would go. His body flung outward, held down only by his harness. The nose angle steepened, and his crate picked up speed. But he knew that the Jap was right on his tail.

He had to count on his armor plate on the way down, but, if the good books were right, this was the only way to shake a Jap plane. The ground was growing now at an appalling speed. The air speed indicator flickered around and around the dial, as his speed built up. Jap lead was eating into his plane. Smashing into the cockpit over his head. Bouncing off the armor plate behind him. The ground was very close now. This was the moment.

His left foot pressed hard down on the rudder pedal, and he forced the stick over with perfect synchronization. The Grumman groaned in every fiber as it sought to obey the controls. The terrific speed made every cockpit action slow motion. Grey mist rose in front of his eyes as he began to ease the stick back. The grey mist turned black, and with his last conscious effort he hauled the stick back into the pit of his stomach.

Court came to with the nose of his Hellcat pointed straight up. He shoved the stick forward and felt his body rise off his parachute-pack with the force of his momentum. He looked off to his right and saw the Zero still angling upward. The Jap had managed to pull out of his dive, but at that terrific speed his lighter plane had been unable to match Court's turn.

The Grumman snarled as Court gave it full throttle and headed for his prey. The Jap must have spotted him just before he got there. He started a bank, but never completed it. The six fifty-calibers chanted their death song, and a wing ripped loose. The Nip plane went into a spiral that was still tightening when he hit the deck.

Court took a deep breath and put his Hellcat in a steep turn as he searched the sky. The chase had taken him far inland. Not a plane was to be seen. An odd silence baffled him for a moment, until he realized that his radio had gone dead. A glance at his watch showed him that it was four o'clock. Zero hour for his mission was at hand.

SO MUCH had happened in the last half hour that he had almost forgotten his main job. Now he realized anew that he might be very, very dead by dawn. Somehow he couldn't quite believe it. Death was for the other fellows, maybe, but not for him. Mentally he pushed those thoughts out of his mind and concentrated on the business at hand.

The first move was to get back to the coast, so he headed due east, hugging the ground. Then he tightened his harness, and took a reef in his shoulder holster. This was going to be a rough landing, and any loose gear in the cockpit was liable to wind up on him, or in him.

By the time Court reached the coast the Jap planes had return to their inland bases, and the Grummans had gone back to the fleet. He had the sky to himself, and that was good. Quickly he picked out the little peninsula and the tangled growth around the ruined Temple of Ashido. Now was the time. In a moment the Japs would take their heads out of their foxholes and wonder what a lone American plane was doing wandering around by itself.

He eased his nose up and watched the speed fall off. When he had about a hundred knots he lowered his flaps and felt them bite. Fire must be avoided at all costs, since it would inevitably bring a search party, so he turned off his gas, but left the emergency fuel pump on. That would last him for the few minutes he needed to complete his landing.

He pushed his nose forward and eased off throttle. He watched carefully and spotted a break in the dense shrubbery around the temple. That was the place for him. The clearing seemed to be more or less into the wind. At least that would cut down his landing speed a little.

The plane was hanging by the prop, nose high, tail dragging, as he crawled in just above stalling speed. The tops of the tree were reaching for the Hellcat as the clearing came into sight. His body tensed and his hand tightened on the throttle. Then he yanked back the throttle and thrust the suddenly heavy nose forward. The ground darted up, and he felt tree branches tearing at the plane's body.

A big trunk loomed ahead of him, and he socked the rudder. The nose eased by, but he felt his left wing rip loose. The cockpit lurched wildly, and his right wing struck the ground. Court's harness tightened with a jerk that seemed to cut his body in two. He had a dim impression of the prop churning into the ground as the nose struck. The world went black. He felt the Hellcat nose over sickeningly.

IV.

WHEN COURT OPENED HIS eyes his first impression was that his shoulder straps were pulling him down hard against the seat. He fumbled with them a moment before he realized he was suspended head down three feet above Japanese soil. As his head cleared he freed himself and rolled out, still shaken and dazed. What was left of the Hellcat lay belly up in thick brush, almost completely hidden.

He offered up the fervent wish that his tactics had been successful in screening the landing. As he looked about he could see that this area had been carefully selected. The narrow wooded valley which contained the ancient Ashido temple gave a unique opportunity to fly in without detection, and the temple grounds were supposedly sacred at this time of year. No one violated the taboos against trespassing here, until, with the coming of the new moon, the sect celebrated the old Bushido rites in their dark courtyard.

Here he was, alone. For a moment he felt very much alone indeed, and to reassure himself he unslung his back-pack and slipped out the wrinkled waterproof maps he had almost memorized. That "X" was him, and a few hundred yards to the northeast stood the decaying temple. He was to follow the ridge two miles to the fire tower. Here his course swung south to 160 degrees, which meant two miles of heavy going down and across the Toboku supply road, and up the hill on the other side to the cabin of Okamura San.

The first part of his trip was easy, along the wooded ridge. As he walked over the pine needles he got occasional glimpses of the heavy trucks and wagons rumbling over the road below. Soldiers on foot, bicycles, civilians, all obstructed the narrow way, and the faint shouts of the drivers drifted up to him through the trees.

When he reached the fire tower he cut off to the south into the heavy foliage. He had to pick his way through a thicket, and soon the ground underfoot became soggy and wet. Visibility through the tangle was at best only a few feet, but he could tell by the noise that he was approaching the road. Voices were distinct now, and as he took one muddy step a truck's air horn blasted almost in his ear.

Stooping, he saw the feet of soldiers going by almost within reach. There was no chance of crossing in daylight.

He consulted his watch—5:30. In another two hours it would be getting dark. He settled down to sweat it out. The minutes dragged by. Gradually the light weakened and dusk closed in, though the traffic hardly slackened. Court was tense now, as the darkness deepened, but he was still undecided whether to try and slip through as part of the crowd or to make a dash for it.

From his hiding place he couldn't see the other side of the road, but Intelligence had it marked down as heavy cover territory, and he could only pray they were as right as they had been so far.

It was dark now, as dark as it would ever get, he thought. He was on his feet and on the road. The glaring headlights of a staff car, siren moaning, made the line of soldiers turn their heads and crowd off into the shallow ditch that lined the road. Court, feeling as big as a house, stooped and crowded right with them. A rifle butt jammed the small of his back, and a soldier down the line spat a curse into the dark as the car whined past.

Court stepped off into the underbrush. The soldiers moved on. He had crossed. It had been ridiculously easy. "Imagine getting away with that!" he thought as he moved away up the slope.

OKAMURA'S cabin lay more than a mile ahead through thick brush in the dark, but Court just followed rising ground as the map-indicated contours close together south from the road-crossing. With his flashlight he checked course occasionally, but the use of the light seemed to invite trouble, even here. Soon he saw a light off to the right and made for it. As he approached, Court saw the low silhouette of a palm-thatch house and a few outbuildings. Checking the layout, he knew that this was it. It had been perfectly described in his elaborate briefing.

He could recognize the lines of the house with the small laboratory in one wing, and the two storehouses and shed beyond. Swinging wide to the right, he moved quietly until he had lined up the one

lighted square of the window with a corner of the shed. At this corner the two guards met in their rounds, and Court wanted to know where they were.

His watch told him it was almost nine o'clock, and since his information had been that the guards were relieved at eight and twelve, he had three hours before the next shift. As he was figuring on the time, one of the guards moved into the faint light fanning from the window. Court saw his gun barrel and bayonet gleam before he made out the squat figure.

The sentry moved over until he stood framed by the window in black silhouette. Court idly drew a bead on the perfect target he presented, speculating on the possibility of a really silent gun—the problem was the release of sufficient energy without the rapid expansion of percussion, electronic, for instance—when the other soldier appeared from behind the shed and joined the first. As they stood talking, Court moved into his attack.

Crouched, he circled through the trees until he came up behind the shed in front of which he could still hear the sentries talking, or rather arguing, he gathered, from the shrill hissing noise of their speech. He peered through a crack in the loosely thatched wall of the shed. He saw one of the Japs stick his fixed bayonet in the ground and lean against the butt of his rifle. He had a bottle of *sake* in one hand. The taller of the two was doing the talking, with wild gestures.

"I think I'll have to break up this party," said Court to himself, and felt around in the dark for a stone. He found one and lobbed it over the shed and down the slope where it clattered loudly over the rocks.

Instantly the two Japs were at the ready. Court heard the two faint snaps as tense fingers released their safety catches. With a hurried whisper over his shoulder, the taller one sneaked away down the hill while the other backed around the corner of the shed to cover him. Court could hear the Jap breathing fast in his excitement. He stepped close behind him and tapped him on the shoulder. The man whirled, instinctively holding his rifle up before his face in self-protection. Court snatched the gun as though the Jap had handed it to him, and as the startled mouth opened to yell, he drove the bayonet up viciously behind the glistening teeth.

A rush of blood drowned the shout in the Jap's throat. He slumped forward, leaning grotesquely against his rifle, then tumbled to the ground. Court yanked the bayonet free and snapped it off the gun barrel. He set the rifle against the shed, muzzle in the dirt, and, stepping on the butt, swung himself to the roof.

FAINT sounds told him that the other Jap was still blundering around on the slope, only fifty yards away. He was working back now, and once he called out some question. Having received no answer, he called again, querulously, and then a third time, in a higher pitch, and all on one note. Court's hands were wet on the steel blade. The Nip was getting edgy. At any moment he might fire a warning shot. Court couldn't wait. To gain time he grunted something that he hoped sounded like garbled Japanese, and slid easily off the roof.

He made no attempt to be quiet. The nervous Jap was only a few yards away, taut, peering up into the blackness. Court had to make him ease up. Grumbling and muttering unintelligibly, he rolled the dead body behind the shed. He snatched the Jap's tin hat and clapped it on his head, stuffing his own helmet and goggles in a pocket. Then he grabbed the sake bottle. Singing and mumbling softly, he watched the Jap straighten a bit and call out in an angry tone.

"Ready to take up the argument," thought Court. "Well, let's have it, brother." He tossed the bottle out into the dimly lighted area in front of the shed. He sat down just in time to hear the Jap snort from a few feet away. At sight of the lolling, singing figure in the helmet, the Jap burst into a hissing rage.

"Doesn't like the covering he's been getting," surmised Court. "Can't say I blame him." The sentry moved in close to deliver a brutal kick with a tough sandalled foot. Perhaps for an instant something seemed wrong—maybe Court's bulk looked queer even in the dark—anyway, that foot hesitated just a moment. Court unrolled onto his back, hooking his right toe behind the Jap's planted foot, and kicked with all his strength at the puttee-wrapped knee.

The cracking of knee-cap and shinbone sounded like a cigar box being struck with an axe.

The Jap fell hard on his back, and Court came over him like a cat. Wild-eyed, the Jap fought for breath. Big hands closed on his windpipe. His breath never came. After a bit, Court relaxed his grip and stood up. He listened to the silence all around him and then, taking his .38 out of its holster, he crept up to the one lighted window. There was only one figure in the room, a girl. She sat reading beside a lamp with her back to the window, but he could see enough of her wax-smooth face and the black cap of her hair to recognize her. Here was Meo, the first object of his mission. What a break to find her alone—or was she? He must be careful. How would she react on seeing him? Well, there was only one way to find out.

He moved to the door and knocked, and listened to her quick steps. She opened the door and looked at him blankly.

"Why, Meo," he grinned. "Fancy meeting you here!"

He watched her beautiful black eyes register alarm, then bewilderment, then recognition, all in a moment—then perhaps just a hint of something else, he couldn't be sure, before she resumed an expression of innocent amazement, and spoke his name.

"Chauncey!"

He winced.

"May I come in?"

"Of course. But—how did you—what *is* this? Am I dreaming?" She passed her hand across her eyes.

"Can I talk to you?" he asked.

"Certainly, talk. Tell me everything. This is incredible."

"But are you alone?" He waved the gun vaguely. "Your father . . .?"

"He's in the laboratory, working. He will be there for two hours or more. Darkroom work. We are alone."

He came forward into the room.

"Are we still friends, Meo?" He looked right into her eyes. "Or enemies?"

"You ask such a question with a big pistol in your hand? Is that the way you now make friends, you Americans?" Her tone was light, but her words irritated Court. He bit down a retort.

"I'm sorry. I had forgotten it." He laid the .38 on the table and turned to her.

"You still play Dixieland records?" He motioned at the ancient gramophone in the corner. "Remember Barney's on a Saturday night? The whole college would have squeezed in there if it had been four feet longer."

"I still play jazz, Lieutenant, but only Japanese jazz now."

HIS expression must have told her what he thought of that, for she said, "Listen. I'll play you some now, while we talk. It will be like old times." She went towards the machine.

"Wait a minute," said Court. "How about your father?"

"Oh, I often play it. It will not alarm him. He will understand." She picked out a tinny version of China Boy, which started off like a hundred yard dash. "China Boy!" he thought. "That's a hell of a note." He grinned and sat down on the small sofa.

"You are as beautiful as ever, Meo. It's good to see you again."

"Likewise," she dimpled, smiling. "Now that we are friends again, tell me what you are doing in the heart of Japan in the middle of the night. Just looking up old friends and passing compliments, Lieutenant Drelincourt?"

"Honey, I guess I'm not the first to come a long way to see you again," he stalled, shaking out a cigarette and lighting it. He tried to gather his thoughts, knowing that he must make his case now, as the dark almond eyes looked at him steadily. Stray phrases from his rush training flicked through his mind. Gain her confidence . . . enlightened self-interest . . . prestige suggestion. He had sort of forgotten how shifty and devious she was. How feminine. Or was it Oriental?

"This is something like it," he sat back in the cushions. "Not many guys get this kind of a reception when they drop in on this island."

"That's right," she smiled. "But you are a special case."

"I wish I could have told some of the old gang who I was going to see when I left home. Think of the bets I could have collected."

"Bets are hard to collect. Nobody would believe you."

"Oh, I'd have to take home some proof that I had seen you. My word is good, but not that good."

"What, for instance, would you take home?"

"You, for instance."

"Me!" Her laugh tinkled above the finale of China Boy. She went to change the record. "How would you go about that? Kidnap me right out of the country across the ocean and set me down on California's campus?"

"With your help."

She regarded him, holding the pickup off the turntable.

"And why should I help?"

"Because you're smart." He sat forward. "Look, Meo, your father is known to be one of Japan's top nuclear physicists. He is not idle as far as nuclear research is concerned. Whatever is going on, he is in on it. There is a great deal of activity now in Japan that might be connected with an atomic bomb. Certain shipments and priorities recently ordered have told us a great deal."

"Extraordinary."

He ignored her. "Here's the point. We are 'way ahead of you. If your father were to develop such a bomb it would not wipe out our tremendous advantages. Its only effect would be to prolong the war. I'm sure you know this is the truth. I think any intelligent Japanese must know it in his heart.

"Just think, Meo, of the thousands of boys that will be killed before this is over, at best. And think what extending the war into a phase of atomic conflict would cost in time and damage to Japan and America—both your homes, if you wish. Think of the waste of lives such a prolonging of the fight would involve—lives of many of our friends from college, and of many like them."

She looked at her hands in her lap. "Regrettable," she said.

"There's really no point to it," he went on, "all this senseless slaughter for nothing. You must see that real service to Japan would be to get the war over as quickly as possible. As for your father, you have nothing to fear on his behalf. Arrangements have been made for him to carry on his work in congenial surroundings. He will be welcome in America."

"That is a very startling offer, Chauncey," replied Meo, "but how would you get us out if I were to accept?"

"That has all been arranged," said Court eagerly.

She sat down on the sofa beside him. "I don't know," she purred, "I would like to come, but there is one small obstacle you have overlooked."

"And what is that?" asked Court anxiously.

Her eyes gleamed with amusement and triumph. She made no answer, but pointed over his shoulder. Court whirled around and stared into the muzzle of his own automatic. Holding it steadily stood the short figure of Okamura San, all shining teeth and glasses. He bowed.

"How Jap in American movie say? So sorry, interruption please. Most interesting story you tell, Lieutenant Yankee. You tell more, yes? Please excuse honorable daughter, she damn clever, yes?"

V

HE SAT DOWN ON A CHAIR beside the table, pointing the .38 steadily at Court's stomach. Court turned to Meo and got another surprise. She slapped him hard across the mouth. Her face was twisted into an expression of mocking contempt.

"Stupid!" She spat out the word, and went to stand behind her father's chair. She smoothed her hair and urged him: "Go on, Lieutenant, keep talking. Only tell us some of the things we want to know. Talk freely, Lieutenant, you can tell us everything." She smirked. "You are among friends, you know."

Court looked down at the levelled gun and up at the two mocking, waiting faces. These two would take no stalling. If they wanted information, they would get it. The memory of the poison pills in his shirt pocket came to him, with the words that had accompanied them. "These are quicker than bamboo slivers and hot wax. If the moment comes, don't hesitate. You know too much to be allowed to play with experts."

Court pointed to his pocket. "Do you mind if I smoke?" There was no answer. He acted as though he thought this meant assent, and reached into his inner pocket

slowly. "Well, the shoe is on the other foot," he said dejectedly. "Looks like it's my turn to recite. Why not?"

He felt the capsules containing the two pills. With his thumbnail he pushed the tops off, and the two lethal pellets rolled into his palm. Life was sweet, but death had been his companion for many months. His briefing had been explicit. There was no alternative.

"Where shall I begin?" he asked, and with a quick snatch he popped the pills into his mouth. At the same time the muzzle of the .38 cracked him above the ear, and Okamura's thumb slipped into Court's sagging mouth along the cheek, and scooped out the pills, unbroken. Again the gun barrel flicked across his face, and blood from his slit cheek and nose ran over his lips. Okamura ground the pills into the floor with his heel. He continued to smile mockingly.

"Honorable parent," Meo broke the silence silkily, "let us not trouble ourselves with this one. He has much to learn before he will have much to say. We must take no chances in his instruction. I will call in company."

She went to the door and called for the guard. After two or three tries she looked irritably over her shoulder and caught the bland look on Court's face. Okamura, watching him, spoke. "No guard. Meo underestimate you, my friend."

Meo flung a robe over her flowered Obi. "I am going down to the camp, father. Colonel Sobuka will come himself when he hears what you are holding for him. You will be the life of the party, Lieutenant; the Colonel will be anxious to meet you. Father, be careful. Take no chances. We should be back in half an hour."

The door slammed shut. Court could see her flashlight swinging away down the hill. In silence Okamura's glasses regarded Court. He began to snicker.

"Americans all upset. Too bad. Think Japs maybe looking at atom, maybe find something. That is so, yes?"

Okamura was having fun. Not only was he top dog, he was sitting on a secret too juicy to keep. The thought of the effect it would have on the Yankee was delicious. He toyed with the idea of revealing a little bit of it. What was there to lose?

"Americans worry about cyclotrons. We soon throw them away. Know all about atoms. Soon send a present to Americans. Then they know all about atom, too! Ha Ha!"

Court looked up and made a wry face.

"You think I am bluffing," Okamura continued angrily, "I do not joke. You know about prisoner camp down the road where the Red Cross packages all sent. Where Yankees never bomb. No prisoners there! Shall I tell you what is there, Lieutenant?"

He rubbed his hands. Something in Okamura's manner, in the relish he took in unloading his secret, suddenly struck Court like an icy wind. Suppose he were telling the truth?

THE top level concern behind his own mission made it credible. Why would a scientist in Okamura's position needle a helpless captive with lies? The proximity of the prisoner camp, the fact that no prisoners were seen in the compound by the raiders who avoided it, the overwhelming importance of the news if it were true—Court kept his head down until he gained control of his face. Then he looked at Okamura as though it were all a huge joke.

He settled back with his thumbs in his belt, long legs extended. He pinched his nose between thumb and forefinger and waved the Jap away. Okamura leaned forward in mounting anger. All right. He would tell this stupid American something that would open his eyes. "At prisoner camp, this busy week. At Paramushiro, submarines make ready to take on Red Cross packages the prisoners send to America. Next week first shipment. Addresses, Hawaii, Guam, Midway, San Francisco, Panama!"

Okamura counted on his fingers, his eyes gleaming with excitement behind his thick lenses. He leaned back.

"Germans still playing with heavy water. Americans hush-hush Uranium. We find easy way. Learn how to break up lead atom. Japan have plenty lead. You got plenty lead in America? We perhaps send you some!"

He laughed evilly. Court was desperate.

This was fantastic, but it rang true. Too well he realized that the basic theory of atom explosion had been bared as long ago as 1907. He knew it was imperative now for him to get this information out. No chance was too long to take. He made sure that his foot extended, under a cross brace of the light table with its single lamp.

"Our submarines will do their part—" Okamura was saying. Court pretended to yawn, and then up and out with his foot. Over went the table, and the lamp smashed. As he kicked, he rolled off the sofa to the floor, and in the instance the lamp broke, the gun roared over his head. His hand stabbed at the flash in the dark, and caught metal. He pulled at the gun, and dragged the Jap's arm over his shoulder, then ducked his head in a fast rolling fall, sending Okamura over his neck, and hard to the floor, his shoulder driving into the Jap's chest.

Court heard the gun clatter to the floor. As he turned towards the Nip, Okamura swung both arms around his neck from the back, digging his thumbs into Court's neck just under the ears on both sides. Excruciating pain flamed up into Court's head. Every nerve was tortured. His knees came up, tightened involuntarily against his chest. He clawed at the Jap's fingers, but the latter's elbows and arms prevented Court from getting a good hold. The forearms under his throat were cutting off his wind. "Too strong" thought Court, on the point of blacking out with the pain.

For a moment the use of his legs returned to him as Okamura shifted his grip. Court rolled to his hands and knees, and then staggered to his feet with the Jap clinging to his back, digging and gouging in the nerve centers at the base of his brain. Court threw himself backwards with his last ounce of control, smashing the scientist under his arched back so hard that the house rattled.

When those hundred and seventy pounds hit him, the wind went out of Okamura like air out of a kid's balloon. He lay writhing by the fireplace, gasping vacantly for air. Court's whole body was numb and tingling at the same time, but he crawled over to his flashlight and with its help retrieved the gun.

From an inside pocket Court took out a little leather case. Bedded securely in cotton wool, a tiny hypodermic nestled intact. Inside the instrument were 50 cc's of sodium parathyrate—enough to stun the sensory nerves, but not enough to rob an adult of consciousness.

Swiftly Court tugged the hypo loose and knelt beside Okamura. In a second the scrawny arm was bare and Court jabbed hard. Now let him wake up, thought Court, He won't be so hard to handle.

Ten minutes later when Okamura regained consciousness his eyes had the glazed expression of a Bowery bum. Court's voice cracked out, establishing dominance over the Jap's personality. His captive was meek, subservient and quiet. Court knew he wasn't faking.

He hustled Okamura before him, out of the house and along the path, and then into the woods in the direction of the beach. Now, if he could just get a break! His rendezvous with a rubber boat from a submarine was at two A.M. Court thought he could reach the beach by one-thirty. That left half an hour to hold on to Okamura, and to duck the search that would be turned loose in the area. Half a minute would be more like it. Meanwhile, he wanted to put distance between himself and the cabin. That would be the hottest spot.

But the beach was patrolled. Only a narrow wooded point jutted out into the bay, with barbed wire and patrols crossing its base. At the tip of this point, or a few yards beyond in the water, the rubber boat was to be waiting. Once the alarm was out, getting through would be twice as tough. Court decided to push on to the rendezvous point as quickly as possible.

WHEN they reached the beach, his heart sank. To the east he could make out the point in the water, and between it and where they stood at the wood's edge were no less than four sentries, their strolling figures like black beetles on the pale sands. There was nothing to do here but bluff it out. Court took his helmet and goggles from his pocket and put them on. Okamura was wearing a white scarf in the neck of his Colonel's uniform. Court took it and rubbed his face to start it bleeding afresh. When the scarf was spectacularly bloody, he wrapped it

loosely around the lower part of his face, pulled down his goggles, and took Okamura's arm. His gun hand he slipped out of his sleeve, and under his coat, pressed the muzzle against the Jap's side. The empty sleeve swung convincingly.

"Thank you for helping a badly wounded pilot who crashed in the brush during the evening's excitement. Let us enquire as to medical attention. We are unlikely to find it out here, fortunately." Okamura seemed to hesitate a moment, but as Court squeezed his arm and prodded him with the muffled .38, he grunted and shrugged. Almost as they stepped out on the sand they were challenged. Okamura's voice rang with authority. As they approached, the sentry straightened and saluted.

He pointed up the beach at a shack whose outline was just visible. A late moon peered occasionally through the scattered clouds. Okamura nodded, refusing the soldier's offer of assistance. Behind his scarf Court grinned and pushed the scientist forward. They walked slowly up the beach in plain view, and each sentry, seeing the two figures coming right down the patrol line, passed them with a salute.

The door of the shack was on the far side, and Court swung around as though they were going in, but went past the door and pulled Okamura down beside him in the shadows. As they passed a window Court saw a sergeant seated at a desk talking into the telephone. "That is probably it," he thought. "If that's the alarm, these jokers will sure as hell put two and two together." He felt like a rabbit one jump ahead of the fox. He gazed out towards the point, measuring the open gap and the wire that lay between, and then his eyes ranged out over the dark water of the bay. If only that sub were out there now. His watch read five minutes past one. In an hour they would be inside that wonderful sub—or else...

At that moment a heavy explosion shook the ground. Then another and another.

Out on the water two big searchlights snapped on and swung in wide arcs, focussing on the fountains of water bursting out of the calm surface. Depth charges! Court's heart was in his mouth. Something out there was after his sub. One of the lights raked a low shape sliding through the water with a crest of white foam at the bow—a Japanese destroyer!

The ship was in a fast turn when she suddenly seemed to lose headway. A split second later the noise of a different explosion sounded in his ears. The destroyer faltered and slowed. "Must have got a torpedo under the belt," he thought. He held Okamura tightly, watching the other light come towards them like a locomotive. Another destroyer was making a run over the spot where the water still boiled. Crump...crump...crump! Three more geysers erupted behind the fantail. Two soldiers burst out of the shack and stood, fascinated, a few yards from the door. In a second they would see him. In the torrent of noise Court raised his automatic and fired twice at the back of each neck, just under the helmet. Both Japs sprawled forward.

Court stood there, breathing heavily. His head was swelling and throbbing, but he had never though more clearly in his life. There would be no rubber boat tonight, and by tomorrow he would be in Japanese hands. Freedom was a matter of minutes. He must take action now. He *had* to get Okamura out. There was only one other method of leaving Japan. Crazy as it might seem, Court had to try it. He prodded the lethargic Okamura into motion and left the beach. In a few seconds the underbrush hid them from the other Japanese sentries.

VI

COURT AND OKAMURA CAME to the side of the highway. Court had no definite plans, but he knew he had to take advantage of every opportunity, and fast. A few trucks rumbled by, and then the road was empty for a moment. The headlights of a staff car appeared down the road. Court talked fast in Okamura's ear. The latter was still groggy and apathetic.

"Get out there and stop that car. Remember, if anything happens to me, you go first. One mistake, and you get it in the base of the spine. Don't make a mistake."

Then the Jap was out on the road, waving his arms, as the slowing headlights picked out the details of his uniform.

Court waited, tense, watching Okamura over the bead on his gun barrel. When the staff car stopped Okamura stayed in front of the lights. Court could see three Japs in the open car, two officers and the driver. One of the officers leaned over the side, calling to Okamura by name. Court swung the gun in a short arc and squeezed the trigger twice. The first Jap slumped quietly over the car door, the other stood up clawing at his holster. Court glanced back at Okamura, saw that he was standing still, and pulled the trigger again.

The Jap's gun went off through the floor of the car, and he toppled back over the side. Court sprang out in the road, covering both the driver and Okamura, while they gazed stupidly at him. He opened the car door, allowing the dead Jap to slide to the ground, and called Okamura to get in beside him. He motioned the driver out of the car and, as the Nip scrambled, the butt of the .38 slapped him behind the ear. He spread-eagled in the road. Court put Okamura behind the wheel and the car moved ahead, picking up speed rapidly.

A couple of miles further on, and minutes later, after they flashed past the camp, Court got a glimpse of Meo and a Japanese officer just coming on to the road from the hill. They were in the headlights of a waiting car, so the recognition was all one way. It was still dark. He swung his head to watch them as he passed, figuring they must soon learn of his escape. In fact, he wondered if it was beyond Meo, on hearing about the submarine, to see his connection with that. She might even go on to figure out this very move he now was making. If she did... Court nudged his driver for a little more speed.

In a moment the Airport road and the hangars loomed near the highway. They swung into the ruts and jolted up to the nearest gate. Court jammed himself down below the seat and touched the siren button on the steering column a couple of times. The sentry at the gate stood aside and acknowledged Okamura's nod with a snappy salute as they swung onto the field. They passed the remains of a Zero still smoking from the preceding afternoon's strike, and turned up the field towards the taxi strip. The headlights picked up three Judies lined up at the end of it. Court pointed at the second one and the car swerved to a stop at its wingtip.

He jumped out of the car, prodding Okamura before him. A lone mechanic appeared from underneath a neighboring Judy and apathetically obeyed the relayed instructions from Okamura to warm up the plane. Court glanced at the plane, wondering if he would be able to fly it without a checkout. He noticed that it was a two-seater with dual controls, but all the instruments were in the front seat, which meant that Okamura would have to ride behind.

As the prop turned over Court motioned Okamura to the rear seat. The mech was only a foot or two away, but his back was turned as he busied himself in the front cockpit.

Before Okamura had a chance to seat himself, Court chopped his gun hard down on the sleek black head. Simultaneously he heard the shout behind him, and whirled to see the mech racing away. "That tears it!" thought Court, and scrambled down from the wing.

He raced to the wheels and kicked out one of the chocks. Quickly he ducked behind the prop and jerked the remaining block loose. As the plane started to inch forward, he raced back and hopped up on the wing.

SUDDENLY a search light flicked on, searched momentarily, and settled on the plane. The brilliance was blinding, and it outlined his hard, compact body.

He swung his legs up and vaulted into the cockpit as, off to the right, a group of soldiers burst from the shadows and headed for the plane. His hand reached for the throttle, and the clumsy machine lumbered forward. A crackle of shots broke out, and somewhere off to the left he heard the staccato voice of a machine gun.

One of the soldiers reached the plane and clung to the tail, shouting furiously. Court goosed the throttle and kicked rudder. Over his shoulder he saw the Jap tear loose from his precarious hold and fall; sprawling. The taxi strip in front of him broadened, and a main runway-crossing showed ahead. The searchlight was blinding, but it illuminated the tarmac

well. He could only hope that the confusion among the Jap machine-gunners would last long enough for him to get his plane into the air.

Again he kicked rudder, and the plane headed down the runway. Off to his right Court saw a pair of moving lights. They seemed to be headed for him, and fast. As they closed in, he saw they were the headlights of a staff car. Their speed was far greater than his, but the rough ground they were traversing in order to cut him off was slowing them a little.

Court felt the tail of the Judy raise slightly, as it began to pick up speed, and he looked across at the headlights. They were much closer now, and converging a bare fifty yeards ahead. The car was not firing. Their plan was clear. Whoever was in that car was trying to crash the plane, and it looked as though they might succeed.

Court cuddled the stick in his lap, holding it just far enough forward to keep the tail up. He had almost enough speed for a take-off. He felt the plane shudder as a burst of fire found her tail, and then the car was upon them. With a prayer, Court hauled the stick back in his belly, and felt the Judy respond sluggishly. She got about twenty feet up, and then pitched forward in a stall.

But it was enough. The car slid safely beneath the plane. Again the wheels touched, but he had take-off speed now. He pulled back on the stick and saw the ground vanish. The searchlight pinned him like a butterfly on a slide. He had no way of telling what obstructions lay ahead. He could only watch the unfamiliar instruments and pray.

Another burst found the Judy, and she staggered as the lead bit at her vitals. With a curse he threw the wing down, and began to jink. The angle of the light told him that he was beyond the tower now, with at least a few hundred feet of altitude. He could even see a little.

The ground below was hilly, but he swept towards it. The searchlight followed for a moment until the brow of a conical Jap hill cut it off. He was safe, temporarily. If the searchlight was cut off, so were the airfield guns.

With one eyes on the ground, he began to search the cockpit. Among all the unfamiliar levers he managed to find one that raised his wheels. The plane flew a little easier, and he began to relax a bit. A further search of the cockpit revealed a peculiar helmet. It was a bit small for him, but it had a pair of built-in earphones. To his trained mind it was but the work of a minute to get his radio plugged in.

A screech of Japanese assailed his ears. He twisted the dials, hoping to hit one of the medium high frequencies that the fleet used. It would be pure luck, of course, if he managed to do it. Suddenly he caught a word or two that sounded intelligible, and fined the dial down. It was English all right, but it was a woman's voice. Recognition jolted him in the pit of the stomach—that was Meo's voice! He listened intently.

...will be utterly destroyed. We know you will come back, Yankee dogs. We know you plan to raid the sacred coast of Japan again. But we have a little surprise for you. A plane is aloft tonight. It is even now heading out to sea to meet you. This plane you will not shoot down. It is a super plane with a wonder pilot and a terrible bomb. A bomb you have never dreamed of, my American friends. By dawn today your fleet will lie at the bottom of the ocean..."

THE WORDS rolled on, but Court had heard enough. At first he had been startled. He had actually believed there was such a plane, and such a bomb. Then he had begun to analyze the information. Why would the Japs broadcast such a message? The fleet monitors would pick it up, and within ten mintes all the night fighters in the fleet would be launched, and gunning for the mysterious wonder pilot. Why would Meo be the one to announce it?

There was only one answer. Meo realized that if Court escaped, Japan's last hope of conquest went with him. But she knew he was flying a Jap plane, and even if the Japs could not catch him, the American fighters would be aloft.

The message was a fake, but the Fleet Admirals wouldn't know that. They couldn't afford to take any chances. They would insure that no planes got near the fleet tonight, just in case there was some

truth in that phony-sounding broadcast.

He was flying into certain death. Death at the hands of his own friends, cooked up with oriental thoroughness. Even in defeat Meo had managed to turn the tables. Her words droned on, but Court was hardly listening to them. There was still a chance that the monitors hadn't picked up the message, but if the message was repeated a few times, that chance would fade completely. He had to stop her.

There was only one place she could be sending that message from—the tower at Paramushiro. That would explain how she had been able to get to a radio so quickly. It must have been her in the car that tried to crash him on the runway.

He swept the plane around and headed back for the field. His speed was low, and so was his altitude, but he needed a little of both for the job he had in mind. "Got to make these guns work," he thought savagely, hauling the stick back and jamming the throttle up to the stop. He found the electric switch for the gun placed awkwardly behind him, and the trigger button on his stick, but he searched a long time for the arming device. Finally he found it located between the rudder pedals. This Judy was meant for bombing, not strafing. It had only *two* guns. I hope they'll be enough," he thought grimly.

The moon was out, and slowly the bare tarmac of Paramushiro grew. He had about two thousand feet altitude, and he'd have plenty of speed by the time he dove that off. A searchlight from the tower sprang into life as the sonic devices picked up the sound of his engine. It waved wildly around the sky, but Court heard Meo's voice calmly continue her monologue. Not for much longer, he thought grimly, and pushed the stick forward.

Straight as a die Court dove for the searchlight, and halfway down it picked him up. The machine guns around the field came to life and the tracers wove patterns around his plane. His target was looming large when Court pressed the trigger. He saw his bullets arc out, and almost at once the searchlight flicked off.

The tower was clear as the Judy nosed down on it. He concentrated on getting his bursts on to the building, but his ears were listening to the radio. Suddenly the words stumbled. A high pitched scream ended in a gurgle, and the radio went dead. Court knew that Meo would not broadcast again. Nothing in there could have survived that lead hosing.

Court hauled back on the stick and watched the field fade into the darkness over his shoulder. He glanced at the compass and set a course due East. The fleet was somewhere out there, and he had to find it. "Heck!" he thought with a wry smile, "they'll be looking for me as hard as I'm looking for them!"

VII

THE SHORE LINE PASSED beneath him, and the moon rays etched a long path on the Pacific swells. A low scud obscured the moon occasionally, but aside from that the sky was clear. Court looked back over his shoulder at Okamura still slumped in the rear seat. The same canopy covered them both, and only a foot away Court could see the Jap's chest rising and falling. No stray bullet had found him. Okamura still lived.

The plane droned on. Court searched the sky, aware of the double danger which might strike from any quarter, but his mind was occupied with what Okamura had told him. If the Japanese scientist had really devised an atomic bomb, the Allies were in deadly peril. Once those deadly bombs were loaded aboard the submarines of which Okamura boasted, there was little chance that all could be stopped before their horrible cargo found its target. That phony prisoner's camp must be destroyed. Too, Okamura must be made to reveal the secret of the lead atom.

The roar of the engine drowned out all noise, but Court plainly saw the red glow of the tracers slide past his nose. Saw them settle for a moment on the engine in front of him. Watched them smash his instrument board into a million fragments. Felt himself spun around in his seat like a top—all that in the fraction of a second before his reflexes took over.

Rudder and stick stood the Judy on her nose. Court felt pain lance through his left arm as he reached for the throttle. He was hit. How seriously, he had

no time to discover. Again tracers darted past him. Court shoved stick and opposite rudder, and felt the Judy whip into a violent skid. His forward speed fell off rapidly as he lurched sideways. The tracers were wide now, and suddenly the pursuing plane shot past him, climbing rapidly. For an instant the moon limned a red ball on the wings of a sleek fighter, and then Court swung in behind and beneath it.

Grimly he kept his position. His whole arm and shoulder was on fire. The Jap plane was beautifully outlined against the moon, and Court meant to keep him there. He realized that in night fighting the rules are reversed. Altitude was a hazard, not an advantage. The moon, Court knew, outlined the plane above him, but would show his opponent nothing. He must hang on until the right moment came. His Judy was no match for a fighter.

The Jap made a violent turn which Court followed. Another bank, but again Court took the inside and cut down the gap between them. So it went—the Jap searching for his prey, Court clinging to his advantage. Down swooped the Jap, heading for the water, and the advantage of the moon. Court was quicker and still lower. The altitude measured in feet now. The tail of the fighter stood out, black and ominous just in front of him. The gunsight centered, and Court pressed the button. For a moment the bullets bit squarely into the fighter, and then the pilot hauled her off into a sharp bank that Court could not match in his clumsy Judy.

Before he could follow the direction the Jap had taken the plane disappeared. But only for a moment. Off to his right a glow appeared. Moving upwards like a rocket, but slowing visibly. It reached its apex and fell off. Redder, hotter, and faster, it fell like a meteor towards the horizon and vanished into the Pacific.

Court felt no triumph, only numbing pain, as he swung back to his easterly heading and felt for the wound with his right hand. It was high on his left shoulder, and his probing hand came away sticky. He moved his left arm experimentally, and red hot fingers twisted him into a knot of agony.

This was serious. The bone seemed intact, but if he lost too much blood he might lose consciousness as well. His teeth clenched down on his lower lip, and the salty taste of blood felt good in his cotton-dry mouth. "I have to hang on," he thought desperately.

That was when he saw the other plane. It was making a slow bank about two miles away from him, and right in the path of the moonilght. It was unmistakably American. Radar had picked him out! But the fierce antics of the flying fight must have baffled the radar operator just a little at that.

Even as the thoughts passed through his head, he was swinging towards the American plane. Carefully he kept beneath it. His head was filled with a daring plan. It might work. It might, and by gosh, it had to! He was behind the American pilot now, and swinging into his orbit. Court could picture the Fighter director on board some carrier pleading with the pilot. Telling him that he was right on top of the bogey, asking him if he couldn't see anything.

FOR a long time he followed the sleek Grumman. The pain haze in front of his eyes deepened, but his eyes never wavered. He must keep his position exactly in the fighter's blind spot. So far ahead—no farther. So high above—no higher. Time passed. Off to the east the dawn began to glow. The stars faded gradually out of sight, and the moon sank beneath the horizon. For quite a while Court realized they had been flying on a set course. His compass read a steady 070. That could only mean one thing. This particular pilot had been ordered to give up the search and was returning to his carrier.

Cautiously, with one eye always on the Grumman, Court searched the horizon. There was no sign of the fleet, but as the light grew better Court saw a group of aircraft circling ahead. That, he knew, was the early morning squadron, assembling for their strike.

If they got mixed up in that group, Court knew his doom was sealed. Once in sight of the fleet he could break away and make a landing near him before they had time to realize that the plane was hostile. If the American task force ever

opened up with their ack-ack they would blow him right out of the sky.

They were high now, almost ten thousand feet up. When his unwilling guide dived, then Court would know that the fleet was near. Off to the left a speck took shape, and rapidly enlarged. Four Hellcats were heading directly for them! In a moment they would be near enough to distinguish the Jap plane tailing the night fighter. Court knew a moment of sheer panic. He wanted to pull his plane ahead and lean out of the cockpit to shout, "I'm a friend, a friend, do you hear?"

THEN the Hellcat division was upon them. So close that he could read the numerals on their sides, and see the distinguishing tail marks that told him they were from his own ship, the *Cabot*. Court could imagine their incredulity as they saw the Jap plane docilely following the American night fighter. Their twitching fingers halted on the triggers for fear that they might hit the guy in the night fighter, as well as the insolent Jap. Court knew even now the division leader held the mike to his lips and shouted the incredible warning.

His knuckles clenched on the stick, and he cast one more despairing glance forward. If only he could communicate with them. But his radio was not built to serve the ultra high frequencies that the U. S. Navy used. Off on the horizon he saw a slash of white, and his heart came into his throat. It couldn't be, but it was! That was the fleet, and it lay just ahead!

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the Hellcat division swing round and race back towards the odd pair. Just at that moment the night fighter got the message into his brain, and yanked his plane around in a terrific bank. The movement was sudden, but Court was quicker. As the plane in front spun away, he shoved the stick far forward, and held it there.

The Judy dove towards the horizon ahead. The throttle was up to the stop. The prop tightened. He was going to need every knot of speed he had, and a lot he didn't.

Ahead of him the fleet took shape. The outer lines of the destroyers—the squat shapes of the battleships—the ungainly carriers, their prows cutting through the water gracefully, and their wakes billowing out behind them. Even as he watched, they started to turn. Court felt the back of his neck prickle at the thought of those Hellcats gunning down behind him. He could almost feel the lead eating into him. He could stand it no longer. His neck swivelled and his jaw dropped. The Hellcats were turning aside. Why? Why? Could they have discovered that he was friendly? Then the answer came.

Down below he saw a group of red rosettes form at the forward guns of a destroyer. A puff of smoke escape from a row of pom-poms on a battleship. The famed ack-ack of the Fifth Fleet had opened up. And at him!

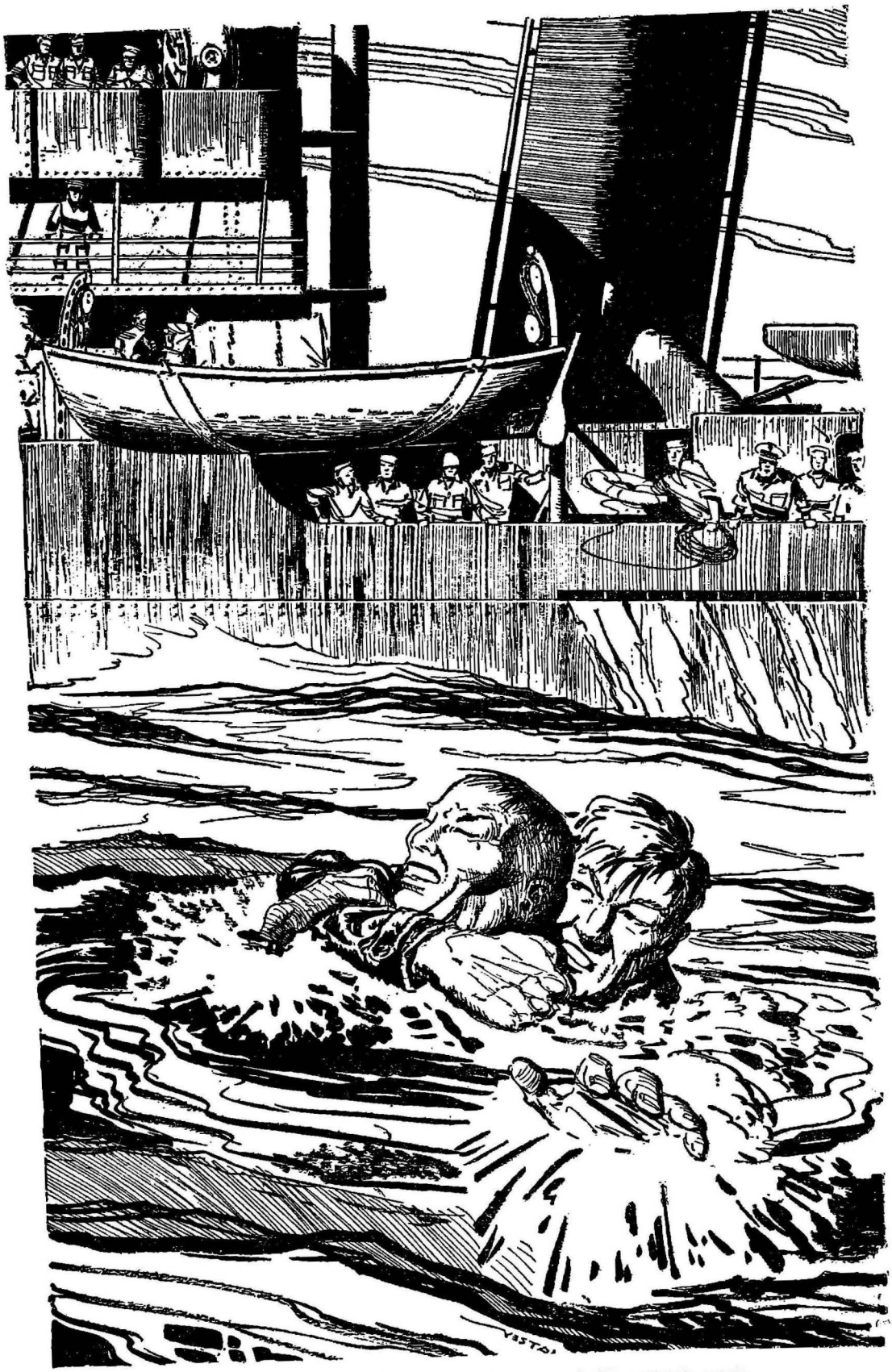
With a curse Court flung his plane into a steep bank. Then the sky itself erupted. Black puffs of smoke filled the path he had just left. More and more of them appeared, until they joined hands, and a pall hung over his whole section of sky. Tracers, dim in the early morning light, formed a wall ahead.

Wildly Court fought the controls as the Judy rocked from the projectile concussions around her. Lead bit into the plane and she shuddered convulsively. The water was coming closer, but he could scarcely see it, so dense was the flak.

Suddenly the stick snapped forward. He fought to drag it back, but it was locked in position. Desperately he kicked rudder and felt her lurch sideways. Again he dragged back on the stick, and it freed a little. Then with an almost human movement it snapped forward again.

They were under a thousand feet now, and batting down at a terrible speed. Smoke began to shift out of the engine. Some of that flak had taken effect. At any moment the flames would come. Court knew that there was little time left. He had seen too many Judies go up in a puff of smoke. The wings were still intact, and he cast a glance over his shoulder as he fought with the stick.

THEN he saw Okamura bending forward in his seat. His sallow face flushed, his beady eyes wide open. Court cursed himself for forgetting him in all the turmoil. As he watched, Okamura's face broke into a hideous smirk, and the mouth twisted open.



Court lashed out and got an arm around Okamura's neck.

"Trouble with the stick, Lieutenant? Not for long. We hit water soon, Lieutenant, very hard."

"Let go of that stick, you fool, you'll kill us both!"

"Very good idea, Lieutenant. You know too much. I know too much. Not want your friends to pick us up."

But Court was not listening. His free hands fumbled with the safety-catch on his gun. He felt it slide into the locked position. Then he whirled in his seat and threw the gun straight for Okamura's face. The suddenness of the action caught the Jap by surprise. He saw the gun smash into the grinning face. Saw the hands that came up instinctively to protect the now-bloodied mouth.

His feet braced on the rudder pedal, Court suddenly yanked back on the control stick and felt the nose lift. The water in front of his eyes swirled and began to level off. Grey mist swam before him as six G's of gravity dragged viciously at his body.

He fought for consciousness as he skimmed, much too fast, along the surface. His hand chopped off throttle and he threw a glance over his shoulder.

He found himself staring into the muzzle of his own gun. Behind it Okamura's eyes gleamed feverishly, and his bloody mouth slitted open.

"Now die, Yankee pig!!"

He saw the hands tighten on the trigger. Saw the look of surprise come into Okamura's eyes as the safety-catch baffled him. Court's trick had given him a couple of extra seconds. Would it be long enough? Would the unfamiliar mechanism puzzle the Jap until he got his plane into the sea?

His speed was still too high, Court knew, but he could wait no longer. He eased the nose forward. Felt the sea drag at the prop. Eased it up again and felt a wing tip touch. A spray of water shot past his eyes, and they struck. The nose dug in, and the whole plane cartwheeled. It was like striking a brick wall.

Court was thrown against his straps. They cut into his wounded shoulder like burning brands. Then the water rose up and struck him. The canopy shattered into fragments, and he swallowed salt water before he could close his mouth.

It was black now, and the pressure of the water told him they were sliding deep into the ocean. He fought to get out of the cockpit, but his straps were holding him. Desperately he struck them loose, and clambered through the shattered glass above his head. The water strove to hold him in his seat. He felt the plane revolve once, and he was free . . . Somewhere above was air. His lungs ached with the effort of holding them closed.

He kicked out hard with his last strength. Pushed down violently with both arms. Above him he saw a gleam of light. A great lassitude gripped him. He opened his mouth convulsively. Water rushed in just as he reached the surface.

Spitting the water out, he dragged great gulps of air into his lungs. The long ocean rollers lifted him slowly up and down. At the apex of one swing, he saw the racing bow of a destroyer cutting towards him, less than a mile away. He relaxed. He was safe. But something nagged at his dulled brain. Okamura! Where was he?

And just then a black head burst above the surface. Court lashed out and got an arm around Okamura's neck. But the wiry scientist brought his heels up quickly—and agony exploded upward's from Court's groin. He hardly knew when the Jap broke free—hardly felt the legs gripping his middle, the hands pulling his head back . . . back . . .

The water closed around them again. The blessed sunlight disappeared, and the brine seared the wound in his shoulder. Okamura tightened his grip and tensed his legs around Court's waist. His wiry forearm dug into Court's throat. Suddenly shock, weariness and loss of blood combined into a welling cloud of blackness. Bitterly Court thought, "This is it. I can't . . . I couldn't . . ."

SLOWLY Court swam back to consciousness. There was a delicious sensation of clean sheets and warm blankets. His eyes blinked open, and his blurred vision followed a light dancing on the ceiling. Gradually they focussed, and the room lost its fuzzy edges, and took on clarity.

Court glanced around. He saw a row of neatly made beds and white enamelled tables. His body rolled slowly in his bunk. He was in a ship's hospital.

"Well, I see you've finally decided to wake up. It's about time. You've slept the clock round."

Court slowly located the voice. It was Miller, the *Cabot's* doctor, grinning from ear to ear. Court tried to sit up, and felt a dull ache in his left shoulder. He glanced down, and saw that it had been neatly taped up.

"The *Cabot?*" murmured Court.

"Where else?"

"Okamura. Hey, where's Okamura?" Court yelled suddenly. "I've got to get a message off to Admiral Coyle! It may be too late already!"

"Relax, Court," smiled Miller mysteriously. "You won't have to send that message any farther than the bridge."

"Admiral Coyle is on board? But—how—when did he get here? I've got to talk to him right now. This is red hot dope. It can't wait!"

"I sent for the Admiral as soon as I saw you stirring," answered Miller, sobering for a moment. "He told me to tell you that he and Okamura have had a nice long talk, and that everything has been taken care of beautifully.

"Okamura talked? That's hard to believe! Besides, how did the Admiral know he was telling the truth?"

"Simple enough," boomed a familiar deep voice from the doorway. "Instead of treating Okamura's exposure case with morphine, Captain Miller here gave him scopalomine. After that he just left us alone."

"Admiral Coyle," said Court, struggling to sit erect. "You mean you gave him the truth serum? Then you know . . . ?"

"All about the prisoner camp?" interposed the Admiral. "Yes, my boy, the B-29's wiped it out this morning. There's nothing left but a large hole in the ground. What is infinitely more important, we now know all about the lead atom—and those phony prisoners' packages. Relax, Drelincourt!"

"Yes, sir," agreed Court humbly. "Well, anyway, you're through with me now—?"

The Admiral's face remained solemn, but his eyes twinkled. "Almost. Have to present yourself at the medal of honor ceremony, of course—but that comes later, at the White House—"

COURT swallowed in horror. The other chuckled and went on. "In the meantime, thought you might like to run a fighter squadron of your own for a change. How about it?"

"Sounds fine to me. A transfer might be a good idea, sir," Court added with a wry grin. "I didn't make such a big hit with this outfit!"

"I reckon," said Admiral Coyle slowly, "that those orders about not engaging in battle were pretty rough. I can see where the others might have gotten a little annoyed. As a matter of fact, several of them are right outside now."

Just then the group came in. MacGregor and Redding were in the lead, looking sheepish but determined. Little Doc Scott's face was alight with hero worship. The skipper spoke first.

"Welcome home, Drelincourt. Glad to have you aboard again."

"Thanks, skipper," Court replied quietly. "Darned glad to be aboard."

"Look here, Court," the skipper continued, in his southern drawl, "I guess we had you all wrong, but the Admiral has been at some pains to set us right. Will you accept my apologies?"

"Hell, yes," said Court, blushing. "Forget it. You didn't know about my orders, and I couldn't tell you."

"That goes for me too," Redding's voice broke in. "Except I want to add my thanks. Guess you saved a plane for Uncle Sambo when you knocked those Tonies off my tail over Paramushiro."

"Very touching scene indeed," broke in the Admiral. "I think all this excitement has brought on my gout. Perhaps it would be a good idea if we all had a little—er—stimulation?" His left eyebrow rose insinuatingly as he glanced at the ship's doctor.

"An excellent prescription," grinned Miller irreverently. "It just so happens that I have a small scotch stimulator handy!"

A moment later the pleasant aroma of blended spirits struck Court's nostrils. He found a glass in his hand, and saw the others similarly occupied. With one accord they looked at the Admiral.

"Gentlemen," said that worthy gentleman, raising his glass quietly, "to the United States Navy!"

Suddenly there was an earth-shattering explosion.

Flying Lead-Slinger

By JOHANAS L. BOUMA

Ball turret gunner Pete Markham was an artist—equally good at slamming m.g. death into Focke-Wulf cockpits . . . or sketching odd little Alpine villages!

SOMEWHERE ALONG THE MIDdle of '44, the brass hats decided that the Heavy Bombardment Groups in the 8th Air Force were overstocked with ball turret gunners. A dozen of the little guys who curled up in the steel blister had been knocked out of their jobs by the installation of radar equipment at the ball turret position. These same guys, including a pint-sized red head under the name of Pete Markham, were subsequently transferred to Groups in the 15th.

The brass hats figured the 15th could use a few more belly gunners, especially since the Nazis had taken to scattering secret fighter strips throughout the Italian Alps. It meant tough going for the bomber boys, because nine out of ten missions

were on the other side of the big white mountains.

The transfer, however, had been very much to Pete's liking. Pete was an artist, that is to say, he dabbled in paints. Back in the states he'd had two years at one of the top Art colleges before the slant-eyed slap at Pearl Harbor had stopped him from applying color to canvas. But it hadn't stopped him from sketching. During his first couple of weeks in Italy he was like an old lady running loose in a bargain basement. Here was life. Here was color. Here were picturesque natives, in fact, everything that could delight the heart of a budding artist.

The crew of the Dizzy Dame to which he was finally assigned discovered that half his duffel bag was taken up by sketch pads, an assortment of pencils, one small unpainted canvas and a few tubes of paint. The canvas and paint, they were told, were to be used only in the event that inspiration chalked up a masterpiece. It seemed the twin items were scarce and hard to come by during a war.

At first it was a laugh. Finally the guys had to admit that Pete was pretty good with a pencil. But when he took to making sketches on missions, there was plenty of bitching. Especially on the last mission did the crew howl. A Focke-Wulfe 190 had made a stab at the belly of their B-24 Liberator. Pete had calmly come up with a sketch showing the German making his attack. True enough, he had knocked the fighter down, but at a range that was far too close for comfort.

If it bothered Pete he didn't show it. He'd long been used to other people's assumptions that he was a little queer. But what the hell! Hadn't guys like Van Gogh, Picassro and that Frenchman, Paul Gauguin, been considered crazy?

AT THE MOMENT, Pete was squatting against a tufa-block house, a pad of drawing paper skillfully balanced on one knee as he sketched with rapid strokes an Italian farmer leading a donkey and gaily painted cart down the twisting street of Spinazzola. The assortment of grinning natives surrounding him didn't bother Pete one whit. He finished the sketch and sent his short legs flying down the street. Hearing the shreak of brakes behind him, he stepped quickly to the side of the road and looked at the rut-happy jeep skidding to a halt. Captain Roy Ambrose, pilot of the Dizzy Dame, was jackknifed behind the wheel, a disgusted look on his lean, hungry face.

Pete threw a grin. Freckles did a dance across his stub nose. "Hi, cap!" he yelled. "Heading for the field?"

Ambrose jerked a thumb toward the seat beside him. Pete placed the sketch pad carefully in the back, hopped in and plopped down. "We flying tomorrow, cap?" he inquired.

Ambrose gave the gear a vicious shove into second. "That makes no never mind, sergeant," he said. "Lissen, I meant to corner you after interrogation the other day, but you disappeared. What'n the hell happened to you when that 190 made a pass at us? You get stage fright or something?"

"Stage fright? Hell, cap, I got him, didn't I?"

"Sure you got him," Ambrose said, scowling, "but you sure took your sweet time. He might've blown us all to hell'n back."

Ambrose lapsed into gloomy silence, his jaw stubborn jutting as he skilfully piloted the jeep, using evasive action to dodge the numerous chuckholes.

Pete had a pretty good idea what was bothering Ambrose. There was a trim little Red Cross gal by the name of Beth Courtney who served coffe and donuts to the boys at the local center. It was said the pilot had gone into a spin the moment he lamped the gorgeous blond. Lately however, rumor had it that Colonel Brock, big wig at Wing's S-3, was stepping on Ambrose's toes and making a big play for Beth.

"You browned off, cap?" Pete inquired innocently.

"Huh?" Ambrose glared down at his belly gunner. "And don't call me 'Cap'!"

"Okay, skipper," Pete sighed, "but I believe in a democratic army. You been having another run in with Beth, haven't you?"

"Now look here, sergeant—!" Ambrose exploded.

"Am I stepping out of line, skipper?" Pete said. "Hell, I just thought I'd give you the low down. Beth and me are pals."

Ambrose brightened a little, but his voice still held an edge of suspicion. "Yeah? What does she say?"

"She likes you, skipper, but she thinks you're a bit crude. Now you take Colonel Brock—"

"Sure, Colonel Brock," Ambrose snorted. "All Beth talks about is that sightseeing tour he took her on to Pompeii last week. Ruins, century-old art, phooey."

"After all, she appreciates art," Pete said. "And you queered it when you told her only dopes went sight-seeing."

Ambrose groaned. "She tell you that?"

"Sure, skipper."

A farm house alongside the road caught Pete's eye. Fields of fresh-cut grain gleamed yellow under the sun. A farmer was leading a string of horses in a circle, thrashing the grain.

"You in a hurry, skipper?" Pete said.

"Why?" Ambrose growled.

"How about stopping? I want to catch that impression."

With a reluctant grunt Ambrose brought the jeep to a halt. Pete sketched rapidly. His eyes perceived, his brain registered, and the entire picture flowed from the end of his pencil. He missed nothing. He finished the sketch and said, "Okay, skipper, let's go."

Ambrose took the pad from Pete's hand. "Let's see that thing."

"Is it good?" Pete asked, looking across Ambrose's elbow.

"How should I know?"

"Not bad," Pete murmured. "I am improving."

Ambrose returned the sketch, shoved the jeep into gear. "What're you trying to be?" he asked, sarcastic. "Another Mauldin?"

"Please let's not be crude, skipper." Pete looked hurt. "Besides, Mauldin is a cartoonist. I am an artist, a painter. This stuff is kind of like milk runs. After the war I'll put 'em on canvas."

"Whatever you are we can't use it on the Dizzy Dame," Ambrose said firmly. "That means no more sketching on missions. We understand each other?"

"But, skipper—"

"You came here with a good record," Ambrose continued. "See that you keep it that way. Gunners have to be on the ball at all times. Look at what's happening over the Alps lately. Last month the 486th lost an entire Squadron to the Jerries operating from those hidden fighter strips."

"Can't reconnaissance spot them?"

"It doesn't seem so. They've photographed every inch of those mountains, and there isn't a trace of a fighter strip. It's a headache to headquarters."

"I don't get what the squabble is, skipper. We get fighter attacks almost every time we hit on the other side of the Alps."

"That's to be expected. But you notice they head for home the minute we head back across the mountains."

"That's about the time our escort leaves us."

"Right," Ambrose said. "They're low on gas by then, besides it's always been clear skies from there on in. And what happens? The bomber crews relax. They open a few boxes of K rations and shoot the breeze over the interphone."

"The Germans probably realized that," Pete muttered.

"Sure, and they know the bombers don't have enough gas or ammunition to put up much of a fight, and that the crews are worn out from the long haul. So a dozen or so Messies make a surprise attack and raise hell with the tail group."

"They must have a sweet set-up," Pete mused. "Hell, they could fly along the floor of those twisting canyons and gorges all day and never show themselves."

"That's it. They just disappear. And their heading is no indication of where they're going."

"Beautiful country, though," Pete said. "An artist's paradise."

"Not for you," Ambrose gritted. "No more sketching."

Pete lifted his hands in resignation. "Okay, okay. Say! I hear we might be going to rest camp after a couple more missions. Any chance of me going off by myself? I'd like to spend a few days at Pompeii. Lots of color down there. Be a good chance for me to get some real impressions."

"Pompeii?" Ambrose sputtered. "Definitely not, sergeant. You'll come to Capri with the rest of us."

AT 0700 HOURS the next morning, Ambrose lifted the Dizzy Dame from the end of the steel-matted runway. It was

a clear, crisp morning, with unlimited visibility. The bomber formation assembled over the Spinazzola air base, took a heading, and moved out over the Adriatic. Then the chatter started over the interphone, the old fighting spirit as the gunners test-fired their .50 caliber machine guns.

"Hey, you guys!" tail turret yelled. "Watch this one. I'll get him with one burst."

Top turret howled, "See that little old cloud up there? I'll tear it to ribbons."

"Hey, Pete! You leave your sketch pad home?"

Pete swung the ball turret facing aft, twin fifties at a 45-degree angle. He pushed his mike switch. "Lissen, you jokers," he yelled, "some day you'll be telling your kids how you flew in the same ship with the famous Peter Markham."

"Okay, lay off, you guys. No more unnecessary talk over interphone," Ambrose cut in. "Confirm."

Nine "Rogers" bounced over the interphone wire.

Pete plugged in his heated suit, adjusted oxygen mask and switched his guns to 'off'. No need to have them on 'fire' until enemy planes were sighted. A sudden movement or jar might trip the guns and send a stream of fire into one of the bombers. It had happened before.

With his booted feet on the footrest, he reached down, unzipped the leg pocket of his alpaca flight suit and pulled out a sketch pad and pencil. Be okay to keep his hand in with a few sketches between the Italian coast line and the Alps. He'd have to keep his eyes peeled, though. The skipper was right. This business of not keeping a lookout was strictly for the birds.

He balanced the pad on his right knee and swung the turret toward 12 o'clock. They'd hit northern Italy at the thumb-end of the Adriatic, between Trieste and Venice. Must be good sketching country around Venice. Streets of water and all that stuff, and gondolas and guys singing. Bare country in between, though. That would be the Livenzo River, flowing from the Alps below Belluno.

The flat country gave way to swiftly-moving foothills and the scattering of forest as the hills grew to mountains. Then the clear, white crags slid below the formation, ridge upon ridge, and down deep in the yawning canyons the silver threads of rivers shimmered in narrow, green pastures. Villages, their red-roofed houses showing clearly against the vivid green and white panorama, nestled at the bend of the numerous rivers.

Pete sketched rapidly a small, picturesque valley that caught his eye, but it faded in the distance before he could complete the impression. Well, on the return trip there'd be a chance to complete it. He called the navigator for a position report, and reluctantly put the sketchbook away. It was time to attend to the business of fighting a war.

A formation of fighters darted into sight at three o'clock. Sunlight glistened on the tail booms of P-38s. Pete worked his mike switch and called the escorting fighters out to the crew. He glanced at his watch. They were on time. Fighter-bomber rendezvous was at 0930 hours.

And then they were across the white peaks, flying an altitude of 22,000 feet. The first splatter of flak curtained the sky in the distance. It was low, scattered, but held a promise of more to come.

"There she is, boys," the nose gunner sang out. "Dear old Munich. The conference room is ready and the reception committee is waiting with open arms. I hope they manufacture 88 mm. shells at the munition plant we're gonna hit. From the looks of the sky up ahead they've got plenty to spare."

A puff of black, wreathing smoke materialized alongside Pete's turret. It was followed by three more bursts exploding in quick succession, and on perfect level. They were sudden sky-shattering blossoms of angry red flames. Jerry was getting the range.

Bomb bay doors rolled open. Eight 500 pound general purpose demolition bombs hung grimly in their racks, waiting for the touch of the bombardier to send them down in their terrible plunge to the target below. Near hits showered the ship with jagged slivers of flak. Pete curled up in a tight ball, his eyes fastened to the target.

A reflex action touched the corner of his eye and brought him around to face the bomber flying their right wing. The ship staggered. He saw the pilots fighting frantically with the controls. A thin white flame disappeared in the prop wash of

number 2 engine. Suddenly a ball of orange flame hid the ship from view as a wing tank exploded. Two figures dropped through the open bomb bay. A gunner struggled at the waist window, fell clear as the four-engined ship shuddered and turned over. Then the main tanks exploded and the bomber became a sudden roaring furnace that disintegrated into a shower of metal and men.

PETE forced his eyes back to the target. A cold string of pain tightened around his guts. Up here in this storm of steel men were saying their last prayers, their faces drawn and tight, holding on to their courage with the magnificence of their tremendous task. And men died. They died four miles above the earth to save a world from eternal barbarian rule. They died that others might live in peace. The greatest artist could never picture the greatness of their sacrifice.

Long strings of symmetrical dots were falling from the open bellies of the lead box. The bombs stayed in Pete's sight for a moment, then disappeared. He held his breath, excitement pressing upward as he waited for them to hit. Then the sudden pin-point eruptions blazed across the city, the bombs striking in one-two-three precision, like a column of soldiers counting off. They struck short of the target area, and then the next cluster of bombs struck and a great tongue of flame vomited from the earth and licked thousands of feet into the sky.

"Bombs away!" rang through the ship, and Pete watched the iron monsters drop past his turret, fins rising as they gained velocity. He watched the huge factory building that was their target, saw the bombs hit and the building bulge outward and then disappear in a dazzling mountain of fire and smoke.

And then they were over, and Pete switched the guns to 'fire' and his gunsight to 'on'. The vertical and base wires glowed red in the automatic computing sight. These new sights were really the business. Set your sight control to the known dimensions of the attacking aircraft, and your speed, wind, and velocity of your ammunition were automatically computed.

"A dozen Messerschmitts coming in at four o'clock low!" the tail gunner warned. "Sketch 'em with your fifties, Pete! They're ME-110s!"

ME-110s! That meant a 53-foot wing span. He adjusted the sight control, at the same time twisting the turret to meet the oncoming Germans. Hot babies, those Messies. Good for 365 m.p.h. Plenty of firepower, too, what with twin 20-mm. cannon under the nose and four 7.9-mm. machine guns in the upper nose. And that flexible gun in the rear cockpit could sting, too.

They came in fast, slightly staggered, breaking toward their individual targets as they neared the formation. A half dozen P-38s cut across the formation to intercept them, but four broke through. Pete caught one in his gunsight. He moved the gun delicately until the wing span of the fighter was a thin black line between the vertical wires. Then it was no longer a line. It became a round nose that spurted flames, and on both sides of the nose he saw the blur of propellers. For a moment longer he held his fire, then squeezed the triggers. Tracers ripped a path across the sky. They chewed through the round nose, ripped through the body of the pilot, and Pete saw the twin-tailed fighter flip over like a leaf caught in a sudden gust of wind.

The bombers tightened formation, pounding a steady course for home. And now the white slopes of the Alps came in view again, and the sky cleared of enemy fighters. For a moment longer their escort hovered around, then they too high-tailed for home.

"Don't relax, guys," Ambrose shouted. "Keep a sharp lookout for enemy fighters. That means you especially, ball turret. Keep your eyes peeled on those mountains."

They were well over the peaks when Pete remembered the sketch he hadn't completed. That looked like it might be the valley up ahead there. He called for a position report. Yep, that was it. He brought out the sketch and got busy with the pencil. A few strokes and a puzzled look crossed his face. He spun the turret, scanned the small valley carefully. He looked at the sketch, looked at the valley again. "Hell," he muttered. "It can't be—"

He verified the position report. It couldn't be, but it was. Figures don't lie.

And it was the same valley. He was sure of it. Only now there was a small village at the edge of the river, and it hadn't been there before. He knuckled the top of his head. Maybe the boys were right, he thought with a grimace. Must be nuts. Funny, but he felt perfectly normal. It didn't make sense, but there was no getting around it, though. He could make out a dozen red roofs, and what might be a dirt road. Couldn't tell much about the size of the houses, not at the 17,000 feet altitude they were probably flying now.

The next instant the valley was out of sight. Well, he had its position. Tell the skipper about it as soon as they landed. With the Adriatic sparkling below them, he came out of his turret, pumped the hydraulic-operated ball up, and opened a box of rations. Breakfast! Oh, well. He opened the tin of scrambled eggs and bacon and bit into the half-frozen conglomeration.

PETE caught Ambrose on the way to interrogation. He pulled the pilot aside and told him what had happened.

"Why didn't you make a report of it during flight?" Ambrose demanded.

Pete shrugged. "I wasn't sure about it myself at first."

"And how, out of a dozen villages down there, did you happen to notice that particular one?"

"Well, I was—"

Ambrose's face hardened. "Okay, Sergeant," he said flatly. "Where is it?"

Pete flushed, bent down and pulled out the sketch pad. Ambrose snatched it from his hand and tore it across and across. Paper fluttered to the ground. "I wasn't kidding when I said no more sketching," he said quietly. "And I am not kidding when I tell you that if it happens again I'll have you court-martialed for insubordination."

Pete grasped the pilot's arm. "Listen, skipper," he said angrily. "I don't care about you tearing my stuff, but it's true about that village popping up. It wasn't there when we went across this morning. I tell you, I notice those thing." He bent down quickly and looked through the torn bits of paper until he found where he'd marked their position. "Here's the position of that village. Look, supposing they brought a transport in there from the Italian side right after we went across, set up the houses which are probably nothing but canvas and a few sticks of lumber. It's been done before, skipper. They bring a dozen or so fighters in, park one under each canvas, and there's your field."

"Sure," Ambrose snorted. "And what do they use for a landing strip?"

"There was what looked like a road down there," Pete said. "Besides, it seems to me there are enough level spots down there to accommodate a few ships. They could set the entire business up in an hour. Maybe the transport or whatever they use to bring in the camouflaged houses also carries extra gas for the fighters. Anyhow, the stuff is brought in, the pilots erect the village and sit around waiting for a formation of bombers to cross over. They wait until the last group is out of sight, take off, and—wham—with their speed and rate of climb they're on top of those bombers before the crews know what's cooking.

"Maybe after a few strikes they move operations to another spot. Maybe there are half a dozen of those fields operating. Like I said, the idea is not new. The British have entire towns set up, and they're nothing but camouflaged anti-aircraft batteries and hangars for fighter planes, and the main street of the towns are actually runways. But to see the setup you'd think they were peaceful villages."

"Sounds a little queer," Ambrose grunted, "but possible. Suppose you make a report of it at interrogation. You better leave out the part about the sketching, or you're liable to get your neck in a vise."

The interrogation officer was dubious, but on Ambrose's insistence he copied Pete's story in the report.

"But, look," Pete argued, "how about some action on this right away?"

"It'll go through channels," the officer said dryly. "What do you expect us to do? Send out an extra mission every time you guys come in with a new rumor?"

"This isn't a rumor," Pete snapped. "Those Krauts can cause a lot of damage while we're waiting for the stuff to go through channels."

"Right," Ambrose said. "I think Pete

knows what he's talking about. I demand action on this deal and, if you can't supply it I'll go up to headquarters and see the old man personally."

The officer stood up, grinned. "Okay. You want action, you'll get action. Intelligence will have this report in fifteen minutes."

The crew filed outside. Beth was out there, serving coffee and donuts to a line of weary combat men. She looked flustered when she saw Ambrose. Pete nudged the pilot. "Hey, skipper," he grinned. "You gotta make hay while the sun shines."

Ambrose scowled and turned away. Pete sighed and got in the donut line. Swell pilot, that Ambrose. Screwy where women were concerned, though. Wish he could do something for the guy. Damn nice the way he'd stood up to that interrogation officer and demanded action.

Suddenly he had a glowing, brilliant idea.

"Look, Beth," he said, as she passed over the donuts, "you gonna be down at the Red Cross center tonight?"

Beth smiled her beautiful smile. "Sure, Pete. You want to see me about something?"

"Yeah," Pete said. "and be wearing your war paint."

Beth looked puzzled. "Well, I guess—"

"It's nothing like that," Pete said hurriedly. "No date, I mean. I've been thinking a long time about doing your portrait. Kind of keep my hand in, you know. And beautiful models don't show up every day."

Beth flushed prettily. "That's a compliment, sergeant. I'll not only be there, but you can work in my private office where you won't be disturbed."

PETE had his canvas and paints wrapped in an old newspaper, ready to leave, when Ambrose came in with the news that the last group on the day's mission had been attacked on their return flight over the Alps.

"They knocked twelve bombers out of the sky," Ambrose said. "It seems like there might be something in what you saw, Sergeant. Anyhow, they've sent a squadron of dive-bombers out there for a look. They expect a report in about an hour. If it turns out like you guessed, there'll be a medal in it for you. Not that I think you deserve it. Any guy, who—"

"Hey, skipper," Pete cut in. "Not that I wouldn't like the idea of a pretty bit of ribbon, but if I am gonna get a reward, how about making it a trip to Pompeii?"

"No, dammit."

Pete sighed, started to leave the tent.

"Boy, you're stubborn," he shot back over his shoulder. "I don't blame Beth—"

"Where are you going?"

"I've got a date," Pete said smugly, "with Beth."

Ambrose stared in unbelief. "What have *you* got—"

"That *you* haven't got?" Pete finished. "Well, I'll tell you, skipper. Personality and an appreciation of art. See you later, skipper."

Beth proved to be a perfect model. Pete worked with a light, swift touch, the creative glow shining in his eyes. Colors danced from his fingertips. The impression took shape, became a living portrait.

"Oh, Pete, it flatters me," Beth said. "You're a genius, you're an angel." She put her hands on his shoulders and kissed him full on the lips. Pete had the sensation of his guns jamming.

Something resembling a growl sounded behind them. Pete's blurred gaze took in the scowling figure of Captain Ambrose.

"Look, skipper—" he started weakly.

"Oh, Roy," Beth said, taking Ambrose's hand, "look at the perfectly lovely portrait Pete is painting of me. Isn't it wonderful? It's mine, isn't it, Pete? You're giving it to me?"

Pete flushed. "I was gonna give it to the skipper when it's finished. But maybe he won't like it."

"He'd better like it," Beth said.

Ambrose wasn't looking at the painting. Pete squirmed, uncomfortable.

"You were all wet about that village, sergeant," he said stiffly. "I should have known. The dive-bombers reported a clean valley down there. Not a village within miles."

"All right, so they moved it," Pete muttered.

"Your observations and predictions are all wet," Ambrose continued. He brushed Beth aside impatiently. "From now on remember there's a war on, and you're helping fight it. We're due for a practice straf-

ing mission tomorrow, and what I said about sketching goes there, too."

Without another word he turned and marched out of the room.

"What's the trouble, Pete?" Beth said, her eyes anxious.

Pete sighed and shook his head. "Maybe I'll get a chance to finish this thing tomorrow. See you then, Beth."

THE strafing grounds were along the beach, a few miles below Bari. Ground men had stretched a long line of tufa-blocks along there, fixing them in the shape of enemy fighters. Ambrose whipped the four-engined Liberator back and forth along the course, at a two hundred feet altitude, while the gunners sprayed the 'enemy planes' with terrific gunfire.

After their return to base, they discovered that the Nazis had again struck over the Alps. This time a neighboring group of B-17s. Eight bombers had been lost in the ensuing sky battle.

"Headquarters is demanding action," the briefing officer said the next morning. "On your return run from the Brux locomotive plant today, you will be met by an extra Squadron of P-38s prior to your return over the Alps."

Pete felt a chill of premonition as the left waist gunner lowered his ball turret. He waved a gloved hand in thanks and screwed down the hatch, experiencing a grimness of purpose that quickened his movements. They were leading the high box of the tail Squadron. It was a tough spot to have enemy fighters play hell with you.

Crossing the Alps, Pete was relentless in his search for signs of enemy activity. The sketch pad had been left back at the tent, forgotten. But nothing marred the perfect view below. His lips stretched in a taut line. Brux would prove to be a rough target, no doubt about that. They'd really be low on gas coming back, because northern Italy, Austria, and all of Czechoslovakia would have to be covered before the target was reached. If a ship caught trouble that deep in enemy territory, it would be a damn tough row to get back at all.

They were crossing the Danube River, above Augsburg, when it happened.

Sudden bursts of flak fouled the sky around their box. Pete heard Ambrose's voice. "What the hell's the matter with that lead box navigator? Hey, Mike, isn't that flak area marked on your maps?"

"No flak area down there, skipper. Must be stuff coming from rail cars,"

"That's Roger," Pete yelled. "We're flying parallel to the tracks, and they're about a dozen flat cars with guns down there."

"Dammit," snapped Ambrose, "that lead box better deviate from the course before some of us get hurt."

Pete saw a burst explode under number 4 engine. Simultaneously another flashing, thumping burst threw the ship over on its side. Startled cries rang over the interphone. Giant sledge-hammers smashed against the nose.

"Bombardier's hit," shouted the navigator.

Ambrose cursed. "Oil pressure's dropping on number 4. Watch her, Joe. We might have to feather."

"The r.p.m. on number 4 is way high, skipper," Joe said quietly. "She's running away. We'd better feather her before she tears herself loose."

"Roger," Ambrose snapped. "We'll have to turn back. We're at 17,500. We'll never be able to hold our speed or gain the 24,000 feet target altitude. Call deputy lead and tell them."

Silence, and then, "Command is out, skipper. Guess we took some flak through the transmitter."

"Try VFW," Ambrose yelled. "We're already forcing our box to drop behind."

"That's out, too, skipper."

"All right. Here we go. They've seen our feathered prop. They'll know."

The crippled ship made a diving turn and slid on a homeward track.

"We'd better get rid of our bombs, skipper," the engineer said. "We'll have one hell of a time holding enough altitude to clear the Alps without carrying eight of those babies."

"I'll jettison them over the foothills," Ambrose came back. "You gunners stay on the ball. We've got a long ways to go back, and we can't holler for fighter escort."

The entire ship seemed to be holding its breath. Pete could feel that, and the crisp tenseness of the crew. Old man Death was riding with them from here on in. They'd

be wrapped-up meatball for enemy fighters. One engine made a lot of difference in the maneuverability of a heavy bomber. It meant an extra 400 h.p. strain on each of the remaining engines.

With the bombs gone the Dizzy Dame held on to their altitude easily.

Ambrose sounded relieved. "She sounds sweet, gang. I think we'll make her."

"Don't forget the Alpine boys might be hanging around," Pete remindid sourly.

Ambrose didn't answer that one because the nose gunner called, "Maybe I am seeing things, but if that wasn't a flock of fighters dropping behind that ridge over there at one o'clock I'll take a flying leap out of this crate. Watch it, you guys. They're probably up to no good."

AND then they were over the ridge that dropped steeply away to a long, narrow valley, and they saw red-roofed house tops and the sharp, eye-blinding whiteness of the crags on either side, and the swiftly-moving silver glints that settled on the green carpet next to the village.

"There they are!" Pete gasped. "Look, look, six, seven, *eight* of 'em! There's your secret fighter set-up!"

"Let's get the hell out of here before they spot us," yelled the navigator.

"What the hell do you think us gunners are up here for?" Pete offered angrily.

"Shut up," Ambrose snapped. "How long before the formation comes back, Mike?"

"They should hit about here in an hour. We weren't too far from the target when we turned back."

"That settles it." There was something final about Ambrose's words. "We can't warn them or call for fighters because radio is out. Hang on to your charging handles, guys. We're gonna do a little strafing job, and it might be your last ride, so make it good."

"Better snap it up," Pete hollered. "Looks like a fighter taking off. They've probably spotted us and figure easy pickings."

But Ambrose had already rolled the Dizzy Dame over on her right wing. He's handling her like a fighter, Pete thought.

One enemy fighter was already clear, barreling up in a steep climb. Focke-Wulfe 190. Pete adjusted his sight to a 34-foot wing span, looked down and saw another fighter ready to take off. There was no sign of a runway. So he'd been right about the floors of the valleys being able to accomodate planes.

He tried a short practise burst, but the distance was still too great. And then Ambrose barked, "Nose, tail and ball gunners concentrate on target. Waist and top turret keep that flying Nazi away with long bursts. Maybe he'll scare and stay out of firing range."

They were flattening out now, and the ship shook as the nose gun talked. Their yammer was a rivet gun in a tin shack, and then the Martin upper took up the chorus. Pete glimpsed helmeted figures running from the houses. They seemed to be coming right through the walls! He lined up the first house and squeezed the triggers. The house seemed to bulge inward where the ammo hit, and he glimpsed the unmistakable tail of another Focke-Wulfe. That meant one ship under each canvas. Flames were feeding on the canvas now, and suddenly there was an earth-shattering explosion down there and another somewhere above the ship.

"I got that last baby to take off," the nose gunner yelled. "Let's go back for some more fun."

They made runs until ammunition boxes were exhausted, and there was nothing left of the 'village' but smoldering hulks of ships and canvas.

"Good job, you guys," Ambrose grunted. "It seem that first jerk to take off took a powder. That's okay. I don't think they'll be doing business around here any longer."

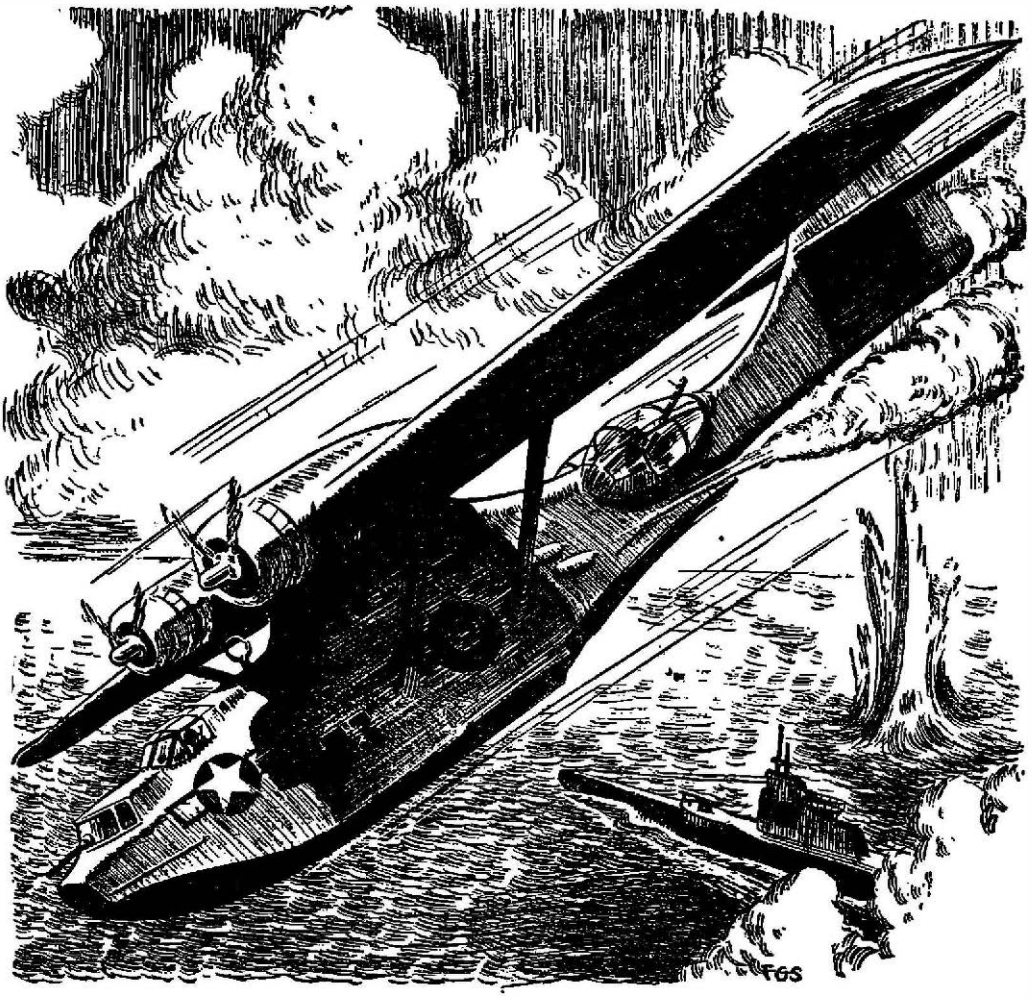
The Dizzy Dame pulled the length of the valley and fought for footage. And just in time to find the first returning groups winging overhead.

"I hear 'em calling us," Ambrose told his crew with a chuckle, "but they'll just have to wonder a bit longer."

"Isle of Capri, here we come," sang a voice.

"You guys'll miss Pete, though. The guy wants to go to Pompeii." Pete, in his turret, swallowed, and then he heard Ambrose say, "Maybe I can fix it. Just maybe. That is if he'll part with a certain painting of a certain girl."

Pete glowed. "Yea, man!" he yelled.



Dive-Bombing Dumbo

By LYNDON RIPLEY

Captain Tatehiko——he laugh at fat old Dumbo —but he no savvy Tato—and catch himself a K.O.

WE CAME DOWN through the Kiyushu line squall with Dumbo —that's our PBY-5A—shrieking and leaking in every joint of her fat amphibian body. Lieutenant (jg) Lucius Steel—Ace "Lucifer" Steel—eased back on the yoke and shook his cropped black head in exasperation.

"That's the fifth time the slimy pigboat's beat us to it!" he grumbled in a resonant baritone. "Why don't the Commander assign Smiley's blimp? I hate to admit it, but that Jap shark's too darned fast for this flyin' truck."

"Maybe it's your reputation," I said, grinning. "Thirty-one missions with carrier crates and a propelled bladder graduate to boot. Perhaps Base thinks you can take a Catalina and jerk her into a needled rocket job."

"An' I will, Jeff," Ace snapped, shifting his long rawhide body to avoid the drips. "So help me, I'll flatten the gun blister's tryin'." He tore off a line of Jap jargon, something about Tokyo's Honorable Special Attack Corps. He could deliver the stuff like an Osaka house boy.

Combined Operations had given him

a slow, lumbering patrol bomber and pitted him against underslung monkeys filled with *yamato damashi* or fanatical fighting spirit. Right now it was one U-boat in particular.

This tin fish had a red sun painted on the black conning tower and on the deck grill. It was some of Captain Takahashi Tatehiko's bold advertising to flagrantly annoy us.

As far as we were concerned, he simply thumbed a dirty yellow nose and, in favorable weather, sun bathed to his heart's content. When he heard our Wasps, he'd wait, just to irritate us, then submerge a good thirty seconds before we even reached his oily wash.

We resumed patrol. I had a .50-caliber in the plastic nose. There was similar armament in the tail blisters for Carson, the machinist's mate, and Raymond, the radioman, for emergency use. In addition we had a new bombsight, bigger rafts for dunked fliers and even retractable landing wheels. Not to forget an electric grill on which to make meals and heat jamoke.

But the best of all were the jatos. They're new gadgets like the inside of thermos bottles, only steel and larger, with rear instead of top nozzles. The name's taken from "jet-assisted take-offs." Two of them were installed on each side of Dumbo's plump tail. After firing their cartridges propellants could be replaced. They gave us brief rocket power equal to an extra engine.

And directly below us, three thousand feet down, was a familiar black cigar. Clothes fluttered on a line and brown ants sprawled on deck.

Ace ripped out an order and took the controls from me. The siren wailed. I leaped for my station in the bow and clapped on headphones. The crew did the same. The Wasp's roar went up a few keys.

"Now, you blasted hippo," snarled Ace, "tear out or tear apart! Ray, when I burp the horn, drop the cans. We're swoshing!" He pushed a dash button, snapped the yoke forward.

We headed down like twenty tons of bricks. The Nips below waved and sauntered toward their conning tower. Suddenly they made a mad scramble for the hatch.

With a white plume of smoke hissing out each side of Dumbo, we catapulted toward the Pacific, screaming and vibrating in every strut and rivet. Ray's face was chalk white and Carson looked a bilious green.

The horn chirped and Dumbo jerked free of weight. The jatos died as Ace leveled off. Loggy and spent, we waited for the dull explosion. We waited in vain.

Ace swore and circled. Only one depth charge had wrenched loose. Due to our doubled speed it had somehow slapped the water, bounced up on the sub's deck, become fouled in hand line cable near the deck gun. In such a spot it was useless. And, too crafty to submerge, the Jap U-boat captain waited.

ACE ABRUPTLY chuckled and nodded to himself. He motioned for me to take over. Jumping across the aisle, he fiddled with the radiophone and started jabbering. It was that Jap jargon he was so good at. I headed us away from the tin fish temporarily. In about a minute a figure crept out of the conning tower, ran to the depth charge, untangled it and pushed it overboard. The brown ant then dove back into the hatch.

Throttling Dumbo down, I waited and listened. There was a deep concussion and a geyser rose beside the sub that had been trying to crash dive. It rolled wearily, shuddering, then rolled back. A greenish oil slick began creeping over the sapphirine sea. The black stern poked above water, then was gone for good.

"Ace, for cripes' sake," I yelled, whirling around, "what in heck'd you say into our radio gimmick?"

Lieutenant "Lucifer" Steel leaned forward and smiled smugly like a pelican discovering a school of smelt. "Why, Jeff old boy, I simply talked to Radio Tokyo, suggesting that hero rites be performed in Yasukuni Temple for Tatehiko's crew. That a new kind of American time bomb on the sub's deck was going to send Noble Sons Of Heaven winging into the Celestial Blue within three minutes. That is, unless it was ceremoniously placed in water.

"I couldn't help it if Captain Takahashi intercepted the message. No matter what we sent, he always did."

I understood then what Ace had meant.

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, beat your gums, 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

WORLD WAR I OR BUST

U. S. Navy Recruiting Station,
Richmond, Virginia.

DEAR EDITOR:

I was a youngster when WINGS made its first appearance. I liked it from the moment I picked up that first copy; every issue thereafter was grabbed the moment it hit the stands. WINGS was something to live for, every issue a gold mine. Stories of the *Casket Crew* and the Air-Spy stories were masterpieces; writers like Emery, Sheldon and Scholtz were at their best.

What's happened to WINGS? Sure, sure, I know the recent war provides a bumper crop of stories of how we slapped the Japs, and it's apparent that your authors like to write the new type of air story. Well, okay for the fellow that didn't make this war to want to read of the old German Jagdstaffels, of the hair-raising adventures of the *Casket Crew*, the old meaty kind of air fiction of the first World War. Let this past war gather a little dust, so it can mellow with age.

Down to brass tracks—and straight from the shoulder—why in the devil don't you fellows put some World War I stuff back in? Bring us back the *Casket Crew* and the real air stories, and cut out this modern stuff or, better still, give us a World War I Magazine? You'd better get hot, because some day some company is going to come out with a WWI mag and scoop this modern air stuff. *I want* WINGS *to stay on the market.*

You guys sit there, telling us poor suckers out here that the public wants this new air-war stuff. Oh, rot! Have you asked the readers? No! You dish out that old story about "we must keep abreast of the times." That's the answer you give when a reader who grew up with your magazine asks, "Why can't the WWI stories come back?"

My prayers tonight and every night to the last dying gasp of my lungs is to wake up some morning and find that some publisher has circulated a World War I Magazine to the waiting world.

Why can't it be you?

Respects,
R. HISE, CCM, USN.

(How about it, gang? Brother Hise says we haven't asked you. Okay. The way we read it, he thinks you'd rather fly a Spad than a Thunderbolt. Could be he's right. Give us a fast buzz, boys. Over!)

WANTS US MONTHLY

15 Bush Street,
Brooklyn, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

I'm coming into your field of TOWER TALKING for the first time because I am a new reader of WINGS and wish to comment on the stories in the Summer issues.

Mission of the Madmen—Very good and exciting.

Hellcat Fury—Another exciting and action-packed story.

Ghost of a Zero—Very active; kept me in suspense.

Thunder Over Annam—A little complicated, but Okay.

The Eggbeater Ace—Just above average.

Dark Angel of Lorient—Could have been better.

One Against the Luftwaffe—Very thoughtful and considerate (excellent).

Bomber Skipper—Same as last.

Last but not least is TOWER TALKING, which I hope you will make longer.

I'd like to mention one more thing and that is why don't you let WINGS be published more often? I'm sure all the readers would agree.

Pilot to tower: Off!

Respectfully yours,
SALVATORE GIAMMUSSO.

(Paper, Brother Giammusso, paper. We haven't any! Know where we can get some?)

REFUSES TO SPLIT AIR

Costa Mesa, California.

DEAR EDITOR:

I've just finished reading your Summer Issue and enjoyed it very much, except for one thing. Steuart Emery, it seems, has invented a new maneuver called "split air." Why didn't the Army adopt it? Other than Mister Emery the mag is excellent. I like Joe James about the best.

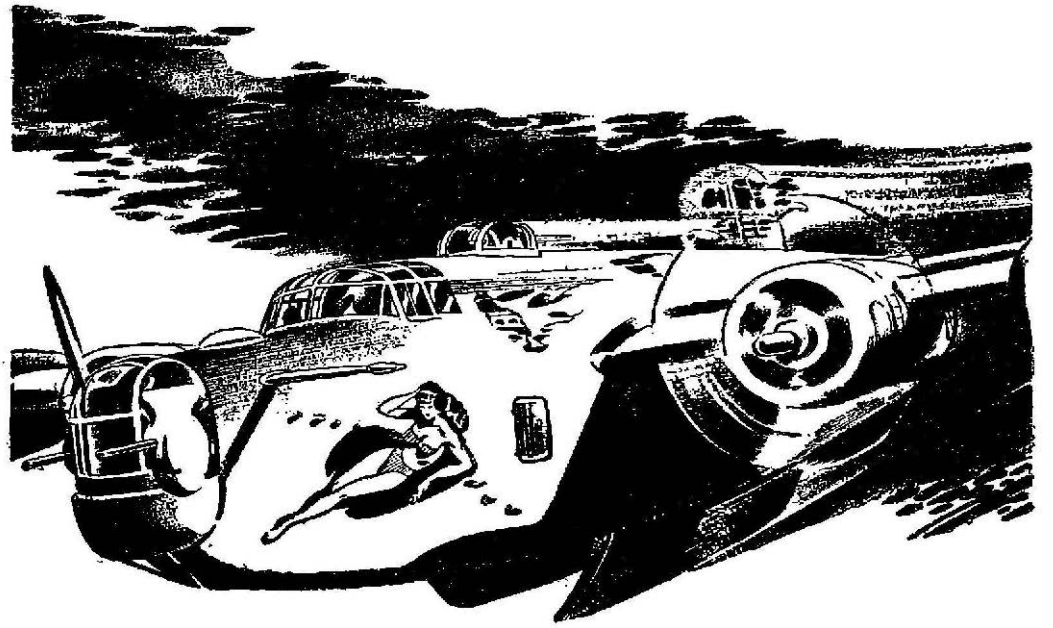
As for the stories, I rate them as follows:

1. *Mission of the Madmen.*
2. *Hellcat Fury.*
3. *Thunder Over Annam.*
4. *Ghost of a Zero.*
5. *The Eggbeater Ace.*
6. *Dark Angel of Lorient* (pardon me while I gag).

I also like TOWER TALKING. There is an awful lot of teeth chipping, but it's interesting. Why not put in some Marine aviation stories?

Very sincerely,
NORMAN LE GENDRE.

(Our aim, Norm, is to get the boys who really flew this fightin' war to sit down now and write us our stories. We got a new one coming up. Bob Kuehnle (writing under the name of R. Keene Lee, which should help you to pronounce his name) fought all over that there Pacific, flying Bolts and Mustangs, and then came in—the seat of his pants still smoking, you might say—and edited this very mag for a year. Then he got his writin' suit on and left us to fly free lance. We just got a beaut from him which we'll try to run next issue, but certainly in the one following. Watch for it, Norm.)



CAPTAIN LUCK

By LLEWELLYN HUGHES

Three engines conked and a pint of gas in her tanks . . . air screaming in and out of flak-holes and blood dribbling from the bomb-bay . . . only one thing could coax that staggering Lib home—the fierce heart of Steve Dillon!

STEVE DILLON, skipper of the B-24, could hear the message in his ear phones, constantly and urgently repeated. *"B5 calling Dillon! B5 calling Dillon! Go ahead, Dillon."* Bierman, the assistant radioman, could also hear it. But the sending gear was shot to hell and he couldn't talk back except through the telepathy of his soul. And that, right now, wasn't going to help them.

It was pitch black over the Pacific, threatening one of those deluges of rain. Thunberg, their navigator, estimated they were still two hundred miles from "home" with gas enough, at the best guess, for no fore than fifty. If that. They had ditched everything that could be thrown overboard to lessen their weight. Dillon had thought of flinging Gene Herchel out of there, but couldn't bring himself to give the word.

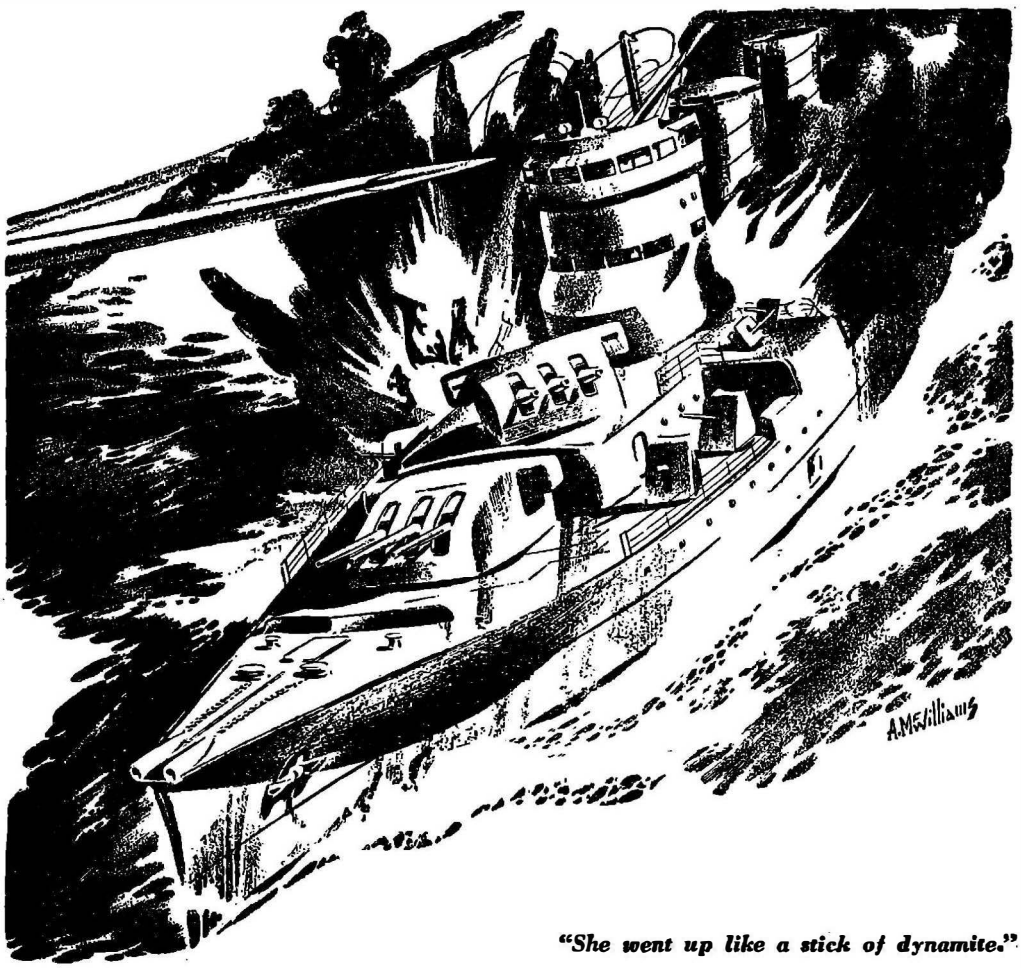
"B5 calling Dillon! B5 calling Dillon! Come in, Dillon."

Come in!

Steve Dillon grinned. They were coming in, all right. Into the drink. Every second he kept putting off the order to bail out. Gene Herchel couldn't bail out. He was lying dead, a bloody mess in his turret. Robbins, Bierman, Williams, and Reed couldn't bail out. All were wounded, though Bierman continued to stand by his radio. When Dillon gave the order to bail out, he'd stay at the controls and try to bring his battered and beloved B-24 down on an ocean he couldn't see even from an elevation of 500. It was that black.

"Only one seventy five now," Carl Thunberg said. "I figure we're dead on line—but I'm only guessing by that beam."

Only 175 miles to a nameless island in the Pacific, its position a fly-speck on the maps. Not that it didn't have a name of sorts. Third Fleet Headquarters called it AB-B5. Even that designation hadn't yet made its appearance in the communiques, nor in any report filed under the name of



"She went up like a stick of dynamite."

a war correspondent. Only the Army and Navy Departments in Washington knew exactly what AB-B5 meant. It was the Advanced Base, Bomber Group 5, of the Far Eastern Air Forces under the command of Lt. Gen. George C. Kenny.

It has been said that during his last moments a drowning man can see his whole lifetime in detail. Lieutenant Stephen Perry Dillon didn't feel like a drowning man, at least not yet, though he believed the minutes and seconds were ticking away the end of his life on earth.

"B5 calling Dillon..."

He could clearly remember when he was a kid of six, going to church with his father to attend the funeral service for his mother. The memory of her being on earth was vague. He could remember in detail going with his father on a hunting trip in Canada. He was twelve years old then and owned a .22. That was the time when he had shot a deer...

"Come in, Dillon. Come in, Dillon..."

But clearest of all his memories at this moment was a day at a Texas airfield when he and nine other kids, all having completed their individual training, met and came together for the first time. A brand-new four-engined Liberator bomber had come off a California assembly line and was on its way to become their property.

Boy, was that something! Even before its arrival they had christened it Mother Goose by general acclamation. Kid stuff.

STEVE Dillon lived it all over again, every single moment of it. They had celebrated at a little dinner party to get better acquainted, and he saw it again in detail.

A cross-section of American boys, from college and high-school, from the slums, the sandlots, the factories, the office buildings. Clark Hummel, Tony Dale, Mel Blaine—and a guy named Stephen Perry Dillon, still wet behind the ears.

"Hey! let's have some more beer."

"How about a song, Tony?"

"Sure, what'll it be?" The U. S. had taken Tony Dale away from his radio job where he had been way up there in the list of crooners, favorably compared with Bing Crosby.

"What were you studying in College, Mel?"

"Oh, the usual things. Our native Indians in particular. Some day I hope to write a detailed history of them, their ways and customs."

Then kids, strangely bound in life and death together. Four of them engaged to be married. All with special girls they hoped to marry—that is, all except Steve Dillon. His love, apart from his interest in bird and insect life, hadn't gone beyond baseball. One of them was married, the short, comical little Mose Goldstein. It was hard to know when he was telling the truth, or only spoofing "Holy Smoke! Hey, listen, fellers—he's not yet twenty-two and he's been married twice! What happened to your first wife, Mose?"

"What happened, he asks. For a mink coat I am paying three thousand dollars, money I am winning on the races. I am giving my wife the coat for a wedding present. Next day from the races I am coming home flat broke. Goodbye she is writing in a letter. With her she is taking the mink coat and I am owing two thousand dollars on it yet—"

That Texas airfield. Of the ten of them only five were left; he, Dillon, Reed, Robbins, Bierman and Mose Goldstein. A thousand years had gone by.

That Texas airfield. Their promised Liberator failed to arrive. Nobody knew what had happened to it. They were shipped to a base near Glendale, California, where a B-24 was waiting for them. Was it the same plane they had already christened Mother Goose? Nobody knew. Somebody had painted the figure of a Pretty Girl on the fuselage, and they let it go at that.

They took off from Glendale one morning in September for their flight across the Pacific, a breathless adventure in itself, all of them so crammed with excitement and derring-do they couldn't eat. Christmas on Guadalcanal. Assigned to B5 Bomber Squadron in New Georgia. First mission with orders to bomb small island off Rabaul. Missions 2, 3, 4, 5.

By this time they scarcely bore resemblance to the kids who had gleefully met and come together on a Texas airfield. In a few months all had changed in appearance. Aged. Clark Hummel was the first one to go. Then Blaine, Tony Dale, others hospitalized, Dillon himself twice wounded.

The B-24 was patched and re-patched time and time again. They moved to other bases, bombed Guam, Saipan. New faces came and went. Mission 11, Mission 17, Mission 28, Mission 39—

"—regret to inform you that—"

Those were his thoughts in the blackness of the Pacific, in the fleeting minutes prior to a meeting with his Fate. The same B-24, the same Petty Girl painted on her fuselage, the same Steve Dillon in the driver's seat...

IN THE RADIO DUGOUT OF THE CP, down four wooden steps, a corporal sat naked to the waist with phones clamped to his ears. Around him stood crew personnel, an executive officer, and the pilot leader for the group. All were hushed, dragging on soggy cigarettes. Down the steps came a lean, harassed-looking man, Colonel T. M. Nelson, Commanding officer of the Base.

"No word?"

"Nothing, sir."

Major Averill, the Exec, his gaunt, malarial-yellow face showing strain, went up the dugout steps into a night so oppressive and still that it seemed as though some iron roof had been drawn across them overhead.

One of the bomber pilots had followed the major, and he said, "They must have run out of gas by this time."

"Just about."

"This wound up Dillon's quota, didn't it, major? Due for home leave, wasn't he?"

"That's right. And Bierman, Goldstein, Reed, Robbins, and Gene Herchel with

him. Their ship, too. They'd been given permission to fly it home, starting for Hickam Field tomorrow."

"Gee!" the bomber pilot whispered.

"You say you last saw him as you were leaving the target at 1420 this afternoon?"

"We all saw him. He was way off to the left of formation. He seemed all right. No sign of trouble or smoke. But we figured something must be wrong, otherwise he wouldn't have left formation. We ran into clouds about that time, and when we came out of them he was nowhere to be seen. We kept calling him without reply, so we knew his radio was on the fritz."

It wasn't the first time Steve Dillon had left formation on his own, and there seemed little that Averill or B5 Command could do about it. You didn't punish men like Dillon. There was too much *flame* in him to douse with the cold water of discipline. In a way he was a king, and you didn't wave a book of rules under the nose of a king.

Well, now it looked as if a Higher Command had taken a hand in it. Steve Dillon was down somewhere in the waters of the Pacific—he and nine other men with him.

Major Averill glanced at the luminous hands of his wristwatch. 1930. Dillon was four hours overdue. "Better take your mind off it," he told the pilot. "Go see that USO show."

"I'd planned on it, sir, if all went well."

Things had been moving fast for B5 lately. What was an advanced base only yesterday was now an abandoned island hundreds of miles in the rear, once more given back to the natives, along with useless bits of war machinery, rusted nails and barbed wire, roads over which the jungle would slowly creep again blotting them out from sight, the smashed and broken remnants of a million dollars worth of labor and equipment.

At this advanced base a 6000-foot bomber strip had been laid out by the latest and quickest method to date. It consisted of a sort of cloth between two other layers, the whole impregnated with asphalt, which came in rolls three feet wide and three hundred feet long. It weighed one-tenth as much as steel matting, thereby solving a difficult shipping problem, was strong and durable enough to take care of any plane and could be laid at top speed by machinery.

Roads were gouged through the jungle by giant bulldozers and tractors. A hospital had been built, men's quarters set up. Machine shops were installed, so that damaged planes would be repaired and, if necessary, entirely rebuilt right on the spot. All that work took in a lot of men—Seabees, engineers, carpenters, mechanics, ground crews. They worked day and night in shifts, and now that the construction of the base was practically complete, Colonel Nelson had rewarded them with a USO troupe headed by a famous comedian and Diane Stewart, movie starlet and torch singer.

Around the hut provided for her and three other American girls, men swarmed like flies, hoping for a smile, a word of greeting. It was like being home again.

They had flown in there that morning, had already given two afternoon shows. The next performance was slated for 2000 hours, and Colonel Nelson had no thought of canceling it. B-24s had failed to return before and would do so again.

When the men told her about Steve Dillon, the little lady of the screen was sad. Diane Stewart was twenty years of age and wondrous to behold. Furthermore she had something in addition to her figure and talent, for she was possessed of courage and the intestinal fortitude to stand the gaff of soldiering with the best of them. In fact in this respect she had the G.I.'s beat. Long plane flights under the most galling conditions, wilted by the heat, plagued by flies and mosquitoes while still trying to keep her smile. The G.I. who didn't squawk at his discomforts was never born. Diane Stewart was never heard to complain.

"Tell me more about this Steve Dillon," she asked the men gathered about her hut. "He would seem to be something of a god around here."

"Some guy, all right."

THEY told her that his crews both loved and feared him. They loved him because he was a mad plummeting eagle, flying on reckless pinions. They feared him because they felt he was bound to kill them sooner or later. He would ask for the toughest missions, then go out of

his way to make them tougher still, making certain that every bomb hit where it hurt the most.

Diane listened to them with grave attention, straining her ears for the sound of a returning B-24, her face so anxious that her loveliness had flown from it.

They told her more. They said Steve Dillon was kind of crazy, alternating between gentleness and plain murder. In his spare time he'd go looking for birds and butterflies on the island and was poison to anyone who sought to harm them. He once knocked a guy's teeth out for torturning a snake. Think of that!

"What's he like—to look at?" she asked them.

"Six feet tall, broad-shouldered, thick black hair with a streak of white down the middle of it. He says it happened to him overnight while he was sleeping in his bunk."

"How old is he?"

"Just a kid of twenty-four."

"He's got a dimple in his chin," one of the men told her. "But don't let that dimple fool you, sister. You only see it when he shaves. Most of the time he lets his whiskers grow, and then he looks like Cary Grant playing the part of the Wild Man of Borneo."

"Oh, my," Diane said weakly. It was all she was able to say.

FROM the black overhead big drops of rain began to fall, hitting the ground like pebbles and puffing up the dust. Men of the AB-B5 scattered, knowing what to expect.

The raindrops came faster, suddenly becoming a deluge. In a few minutes the lush jungle earth was turned into a quagmire, the bomber strip flooded. If anything more were needed to prevent Dillon and his crew from reaching home—this was it.

Major Averill made no move to seek shelter, he and the bomber pilot beside him already drenched to the skin. Down in the CP dugout he heard a shout coming from the technical sergeant at the listening set.

"It's a B-24, sure enough! Coughing badly. About a mile away from here. Coming in, by the sound of them."

Cupping his ears with wet hands, Averill could hear no sound of an approaching plane as he mentally cursed the rain.

In the dugout Colonel T. M. Nelson was shouting into the phone. "Put the 3 and 7 units on. Tell them to flash from east to west clear across the sky. To hell with Japs. They're not out in weather like this. Light the strip borders. Tell 4 to be ready to lay a light down the runway when I give the signal."

The blackness was crossed by two powerful jets of searchlight cleaving the night like gigantic silver swords. Suddenly the bomber pilot beside Averill heard somethink like the coughing of an engine. "Good Lord!" he shouted. "Look at that!"

Two pinpricks of red light had appeared low down above the tree tops at the north end of the island. Wingtip lights!

The rain was a perpendicular sea, roaring down to cancel out every sound other than its own. Averill and those who had now joined him outside the CP had to yell in order to be heard, and since they were all yelling at the same time, nothing they said made any sense.

"That's him. Just above those tree tops. He'll crash into them at that level."

Two wobbling red lights in an avalanche of rain, rain that was bearing the big plane down. To clear those trees, to clear anything, seemed difficult for four sound engines. Impossible for only one, and that one sputtering.

Men were shouting from different parts of the field, cursing and shaking their fists at the rain. On orders from Colonel Nelson the bomber strip exploded into view as the No. 4 searchlight illuminated the runway awash with rain.

A northwest gust of wind blew in, driving the rain before it, dashing it into men's faces, tearing back the fronds of palm trees. And now, carried by this wind gust, everyone could hear the roar of a plane's engine. It sounded like a tornado.

In the light from No. 4 there was a great cascade of water mixed with palm leaves at the far end of the field—and in came a monstrous apparition of the night and rain.

Those watching became rigid with fear. The plane's landing wheels were slashing through the tree tops. What held the big bomber up? Two of her props were not turning, scarves of smoke clinging to them.

Another engine was on fire, burning with an orange glow. Still the plane came on—now only one of its landing wheels to be seen—and that one bent from hitting into the trees.

But Dillon, or whoever sat at the controls, was actually going to make it, even if he crashed right there at the home plate.

The No. 4 searchlight shortened so as not to blind them, and the bomber rode in, her bent wheel skimming the asphalt, sending up a V-shaped wave of water. Maybe the rain deluge helped after all. For the B-24 bellied along the strip like a surfboard until it skidded around in the wash. A wing dipped. With a loud crack it tore in half. The plane, still skating, completed a semi-circle. It came to a stop facing the direction from which it had come.

II

AND there it was! Pungent with the whiff of hydraulic fluid, gasoline, burning oil, the rain putting out the last curling tentacles of orange dancing about the No. 3 engine.

Men began running over the strip from all sides. Two ambulances splashed over the asphalt. The No. 4 searchlight was snapped off, leaving only the green border strips, the headlights of the ambulances, and the flashlights in men's hands.

The B-24 with the Petty Girl on her fuselage sizzled and stank like a skillet of frying onions. Not a movement of life showed in her. Corpsmen shoved landing steps against her middle, and as they did so a flak-perforated door opened. Down the steps came a man with wide shoulders, black whiskers about his chin, eyes gleaming with hostility and accomplishment. He should have been carrying a cutlass between his white teeth, because he was a dead ringer for Captain Teach, the pirate.

"What ho!" he said.

Somebody managed a hoarse word. "Gee, Steve—how did you manage it?"

Dillon didn't reply. "Get those stretchers up here." He called back to those inside the plane. "Come out of there, fellers, and make room for them."

Staff Sergeant Neely came down the steps, followed by Carl Thunberg, the navigator, and the armorer gunner, Mose Goldstein.

On the ground, Steve spoke to Colonel Nelson. "We lost Gene Herchel and Tim Spence," he said in a level, almost matter-of-fact tone. He called to the corpsmen in the plane. "Get Bill Robbins and Bierman out first. They're in worse shape than Reed and Williams." He stared at a big hole in the bomber's nose. "Some plane!" he congratulated.

Major Averill said, "How about you, Steve?"

"Jake."

"I still don't know how you lifted her over those trees."

Dillon didn't answer. He was still looking at his plane. "She'll fly again," he said. "But she won't be taking us to Hickam Field tomorrow. Some other plane, maybe. Not her." His gleaming eyes softened for a moment as he glanced at the Petty Girl on the batered fuselage. "Gene Herchel and Spence are already home," he said grimly.

Rudy Bierman, the radioman, was lowered on a stretcher. He gave every indication of being dead in the glow of flashlights trained on him, the rain pouring down on his waxen face and the lifeless hand trailing over the side of the stretcher as they gently slid him into the ambulance.

They brought out the bombardier next, Second Lt. William Robbins, a fearful and bloody sight as he lay there, his eyes closed. Technical Sergeant Hollis Reed also was a stretcher case, though he remained conscious.

Steve Dillon laid a hand on his head. "Swell going, Holly."

Stan Williams, engineer of the crew, clung to the door of the plane, swaying a little. "I'm all right," he said to the helping corpsmen. "I'm gonna walk down these steps on my own. Nobody's gonna take that away from me—" But he had miscalculated his strength. He took one step and fell headlong. Arms gently caught him, carried him to the ambulance.

The rain continued without let-up. Major Averill took a flask from his pocket and passed it to Steve. Steve took a pull at it, handed it to Mose Goldstein. "Looks like you and I are the only ones for the home-leave party tomorrow," he said.

"Going home I'm sick," Mose said. "Leaving Rudy Bierman and Bill Robbins back here." His face was drawn white.

The first ambulance had sloshed away over the flooded strip to the hospital, and Steve told them to hold the second one.

"You better climb aboard it," he told Goldstein.

"Not me, skipper. Right now I am hoping I never go any place again excepting I am walking there on my own legs."

The rain had soaked all of them, and under it the personnel of AB-B5 still stood around the smashed and sizzling bomber. Nobody spoke while corpsmen went inside and lifted out the bodies of Lt. Timothy Spence, co-pilot, and Gene Herchel. The latter was in such a mess that he was carried in a blanket. It looked like a load of sand or stones the corpsmen had in there.

"Well, Lieutenant?" Colonel T. M. Nelson tried to make his voice sound like the Commanding Officer of the Base, but he failed. "What's the story, Steve?" he asked.

"What say we all get the hell out of this rain?"

"Good idea. Let's go over to the CP."

THE RAIN had turned the island swamps into lakes. It formed cataracts that raged and fought their way to the sea. It poured down on the roofs of hangars, hutments, hospital and repair shops. It seeped through chinks in the concert hall, drops of it sprinkling the golden hair of Diane Stewart as she bravely smiled and sang her songs to hundreds of men jammed together on benches, all of them in soaked uniforms. Rain fell on the macaws trying to shelter in the palm trees. It drenched the ground crews working to clear away the wreckage of a B-24. It washed from the plane's broken wing the stains of battle. It trickled through flak holes in her fuselage and cockpit and turret. It obliterated the fingerprints from her machine-gun handles, from her wheel, her instrument panel. It erased footprints from her decks and washed the blood from her bomb bay and navigating room.

As many as could gather in the CP, those permitted in there, watched Steve Dillon remove his flying suit and toss it in a corner. He then took off his boots and poured a quart of water from each down the cracks of the floor boards. With the streak of white hair salient in his raven locks, he was picturesquely handsome. Lacking big gold earrings dangling from his lobes, all he needed to complete the picture of a cut-throat pirate was the roaring song, "Yo ho ho!—and a bottle of rum!"

Reached across the colonel's desk, he helped himself to a cigarette. A pot of hot coffee made its appearance, and he grinned at the negro cook who had brought it. "Thanks, pal," he said.

"How come you lost formation, Steve?" the colonel prompted him.

Steve poured coffee into a cup, sipped it. Everybody was watching him, waiting for him to talk. "How come I lost formation?" It seemed hard for him to remember it. "Oh, yes. A hunk of flak slammed into the bomb bay. That was it. It locked the bomb doors tight."

"When did that happen, Steve?"

"Just as we were making our run over the target. Bill Robbins got hit, so Holly Reed went down there. Neither of them could budge the doors and we were approaching the target. I yelled to them, 'Smash 'em open! Hack 'em open!' No could do. Bombs rolling around in there like pins in a bowling alley."

"What did you do?"

"Had to pull out of there," Steve said mildly, drinking his coffee. "Nothing else to do but fly around there until we could send for a plumber—a hack-saw—a blow-torch—anything to open those lousy doors."

He poured more coffee, all of them watching his slightest move, anxious for him to continue.

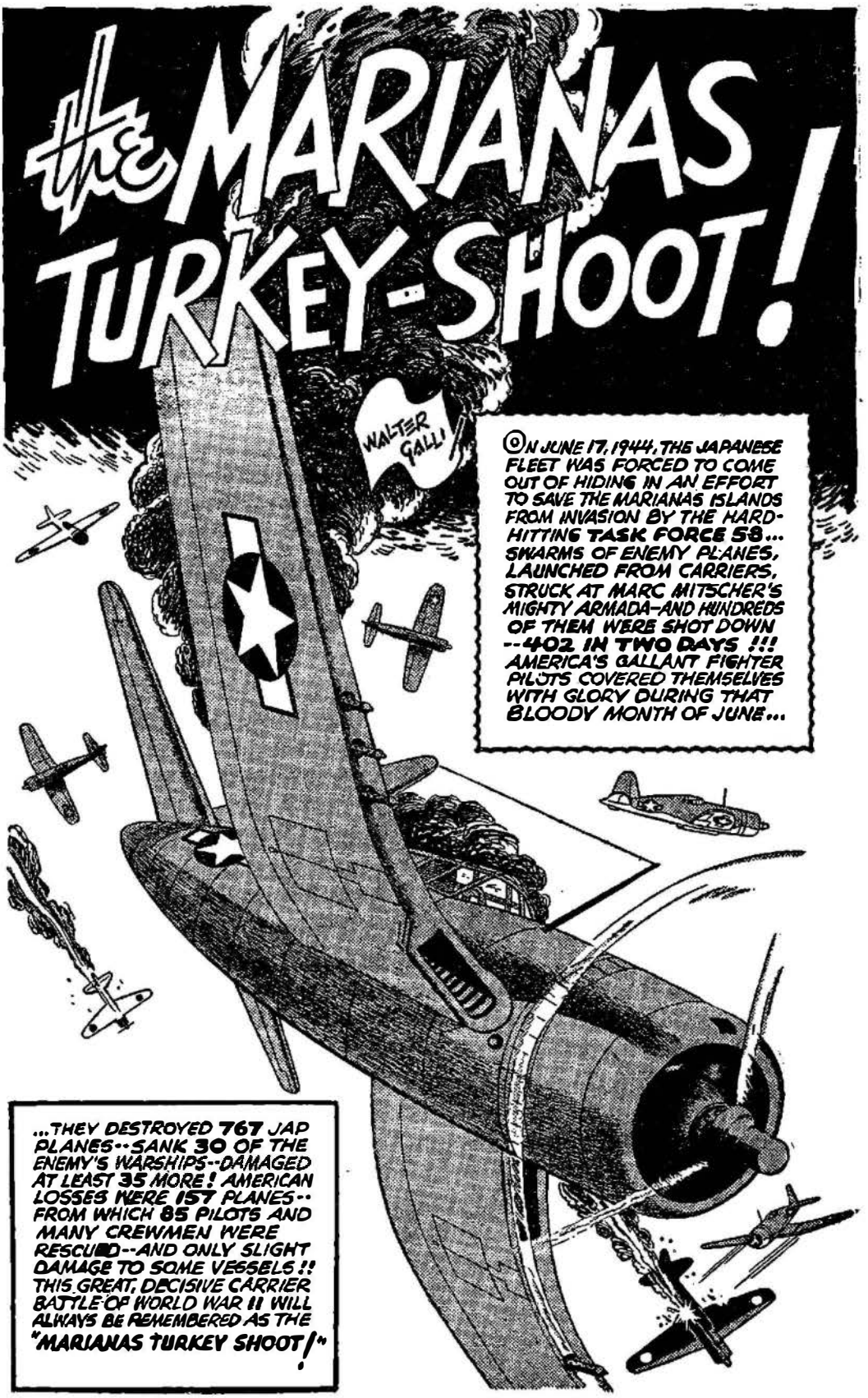
"So we joyride around there, enjoying the lovely scenery—until we suddenly get ourselves a Jap heavy cruiser!"

Colonel Nelson almost bounced out of his chair. "What's that?"

"One of the Horoda class," Steve said calmly. "She looked brand new. We put two direct hits in the middle of her, and one aft. It touched off her magazine. By our timing she sank in four minutes and fifteen seconds."

"Holy cat!" Major Averill gasped. "That's terrific news."

WITH a sweep of his hand Steve cleared a corner of the desk and with a grimy oil-stained finger sketched the outlines of the Philippines. "Here's Panay," he said. "We're over here, still working on


the MARIANAS TURKEY-SHOOT!
WALTER GALL!
ON JUNE 17, 1944, THE JAPANESE FLEET WAS FORCED TO COME OUT OF HIDING IN AN EFFORT TO SAVE THE MARIANAS ISLANDS FROM INVASION BY THE HARD-HITTING TASK FORCE 58... SWARMS OF ENEMY PLANES, LAUNCHED FROM CARRIERS, STRUCK AT MARC MITSCHER'S MIGHTY ARMADA—AND HUNDREDS OF THEM WERE SHOT DOWN --402 IN TWO DAYS !!! AMERICA'S GALLANT FIGHTER PILOTS COVERED THEMSELVES WITH GLORY DURING THAT BLOODY MONTH OF JUNE...
...THEY DESTROYED 767 JAP PLANES--SANK 30 OF THE ENEMY'S WARSHIPS--DAMAGED AT LEAST 35 MORE! AMERICAN LOSSES WERE 157 PLANES-- FROM WHICH 85 PILOTS AND MANY CREWMEN WERE RESCUED--AND ONLY SLIGHT DAMAGE TO SOME VESSELS!! THIS GREAT, DECISIVE CARRIER BATTLE OF WORLD WAR II WILL ALWAYS BE REMEMBERED AS THE "MARIANAS TURKEY SHOOT!"

the bomb doors, taking plenty of ground stuff. Out of the sun comes a swarm of Zs. In order to live and tell the story I take it on the lam, going low over the roof tops of a Panay village. I'm running east—but northeast instead of southeast because I'm still figuring to return to the target as soon as we can start tossing bombs."

He reached for another cigarette, lighted it, taking his time. "I am about here," he indicated on his map, "on the far side of Panay's coastline, and I have shaken the Zs. They're busy elsewhere, tangling up with the rest of our B-24s. By this time Holly Reed has blasted open those damn doors and got things a bit shipshape down there.

"I am on the point of turning back to look for protection when I suddenly think there might be something to see in a sort of inlet just ahead of us. It was no more than a hunch on my part, so I put it up to the boys. We're using up gas and getting farther and farther away from school."

He took a slow puff on his cigarette, exasperating everyone.

"Just a quick look-see—and there she was! Carl Thunberg spotted her first. Then she opens up on us with all she has, at the same time steaming out of there like crazy for the open sea."

Steve made a graceful movement with his hand. "I make the run. Bill Robbins—and don't forget he is badly wounded—has to kick the bombs out because his mechanism is shot to hell. So what happens? We miss by a mile. I come around for a second helping, and Gene Herchel gets one of the cruiser's AA's in his lap that blows him to pieces. There are also a couple of M4s on our tail dishing out murder until Mose Goldstein and Neely pop them out of the sky."

He made another extremely graceful motion with his arm. "Here we go again. The battlewagon is zig-zagging like all get-out. Bill Robbins keeps shoving these bombs out, Holly Reed helping him." Steve struck the desk with such force that everything on it jumped. "Bam! Bam! Bam! Three direct hits. And then she went up like a stick of dynamite. Boy what a fire-cracker that was."

The dugout buzzed with enthusiasm and excitement.

"Then what?" the colonel asked.

Steve Dillon stared at the cigarette in his fingers, his contemplation of it eloquent of so much he had left untold. "Then," he said dreamily, "we lit out for home."

"And made it" Averill marveled.

"Yep, we made it—after a fashion. She'll fly again." He spoke drowsily, his eyes closing in sleep. "Slap a little glue on her and she'll fly. Maybe I'll stick around for a while and take her home with me. She deserves a rest more than I do." He listened. "What's all that laughter I hear?"

"One of the USO shows dropped in here this morning—with Diane Stewart."

"Who?"

"Diane Stewart—the Hollywood cutie. She wants to meet you."

"She does, eh? Well, you tell Diane I'm passing her up for some chow, and when I get that into me I'm hitting the hay." He put on his boots, rose, looked at Colonel Nelson. "Will it be all right to file my report in the morning?"

"Sure, Steve. And—and congratulations."

Picking up his flying suit, Steve went up the dugout steps and sloshed across the strip to the mess hall. Mose Goldstein was still there. He wasn't eating. He sat at the table with his chin cupped between the palms of his hand, staring at nothing. He didn't seem to know that Steve was there.

"Coffee," Steve said to the cook.

"There's hot soup for you, roast chicken, fried potatoes, ice-cream."

"Just coffee—that's all." His appetite had suddenly gone out the window. The very thought of food gagged him. He glanced at the motionless and staring Goldstein. "Better get some shut-eye for yourself, Mose."

Goldstein looked at him. "Oo-oo-oooo!" he said. He got up, walked out like a man walking in his dreams.

The rain was slackening and again from the USO hall came whistling and hand-clapping, followed by a burst of full-throated laughter. Laughter was good to hear, and Steve Dillon listened to it, soaking its tonic up into his soul. He also drank his coffee, then went across to crew quarters. Taking off all his clothes, he flopped on his bunk, covering himself with a light blanket.

He slept instantly.

III

THE TORRENTIAL RAINFALL ceased during the night, as suddenly as it had begun. Morning broke in gray tones, clearing somewhat out to sea. The sun's rays warmed the luxuriant foliage, cloaking the island in jungle steam, the mist clammy, tasting like creosote. Everything was damp.

There was still a heavy ground mist when Lieut. Stephen Perry Dillon awoke. He looked at his watch. 1020 hours. All the other bunks in the hut were empty, and he glanced at the one opposite him. Bill Robbins' bunk. Fastened to the wall beside it was his pin-up girl. Diane Stewart. She was here in person on the island and Bill was lying in the hospital gravely wounded.

War did things to a man. Lord, if ever there was an understatement that was one! With crushing force Steve now realized something for the first time. War was making him a semi-brutalized individual who no longer gave a curse for what was laughingly called civilization. He had been brought up to set great store in churchgoing and the refinements of behavior toward his fellow man. All that stuff was gone. Or nearly gone. He was obsessed by the desire to kill. That was the one and only thing that activated him. And in that hellish pursuit he was be-deviled by the vast pantomime of making believe he wasn't scared of death himself.

Then why, he asked himself, did he want to go home again? Why were the evanescent scenes of his boyhood tugging at his heart-strings? Why did every fibre of his being ache to return home? Was it to try to recapture his former pride in decency and exemplary living? To once again —if only for a fleeting day or so—cleanse the blackness from his soul? Perhaps to meet a girl who—who—

In the bitterness of his misery, Steve quietly cursed.

He flung the blanket aside, stood up. Looking at his face in the mirror he suddenly hated his black-whiskered appearance and savagely reached for his shaving materials. At least he'd look less of a cutthroat when he went to visit Bill Robbins at the hospital.

Clean-shaved, the dimple in his chin offsetting the murderous glitter of his eyes, he suddenly felt famished. Hurriedly getting into some clothes, he walked to the cafeteria. Seabees and ground crews stopped their work to gaze at him. That's Steve Dillon! Some baby! Climb aboard his crate and you're on your way to a CMH, given you when you've got wings on your back, or you're sitting in a wheelchair with an arm or leg off! Yes, sir!

In the mess hall he ate a man's size breakfast during the roaring arrival of a new B-24 group swooping into the big strip in single relays and causing plenty of speculation. Something cooking, all right!

A corporal made his way through the almost empty hall and came to the attention beside Steve, saluting him.

"Major Averill would like to see you, sir."

"O. K., son."

Leisurely finishing his third cup of coffee, he sauntered over to the CP where Averill stared at the transformation brought about by the missing whiskers.

"All right, children," the Exec joked, "you can come out now. The terrible pirate has gone away." Without a pause he said, "Take the weight off your feet, lieutenant."

Steve sat down on a camp stool. "Any word on Robbins and Bierman?"

"Nothing good. Holly Reed's doing fine. So is Stan Williams. They'll be round and about again in a short while." Averill picked up a communication from his desk. "I'll tell you why I sent for you, Steve. There's something big coming up, as you've probably guessed by the arrival of B-6 group here this morning. Can't tell you what it is, because I don't know. Colonel Nelson doesn't know."

"We have a directive here from FEAF canceling all prior orders until further notice. That means that you and Goldstein are out of luck for immediate airborne transportation to Broadway."

"That's all right," Steve said. "I'd just as soon go by boat. Some of those oilers or supply transports must be going back."

"I can do better for you than that. That USO troupe is scheduled to leave here on Wednesday. You and Goldstein can squeeze in with the dolls as far as Henderson Field and pick up another plane from there. How does that suit you?"

Steve nodded. "B-6 has joined us, eh?

Come on, major," he urged, "I can keep a secret."

"Steve, honest, I don't know! *You* won't be taking part in it, anyway. You're through for the time being."

"I wish I were through for good."

"Like hell you do."

"Yes," Steve said with pronounced savagery, "like hell I do. If she were alive, I'd kill my own mother next."

ON THE WAY to the hospital he looked in at the shops where a dozen planes were being repaired, mechanics swarming over them like tree lice. Steve noticed that two of the planes were F4U Corsairs which had either failed to return to their carrier and flown in to the base, or had been towed in. Three B-24s were almost ready for business again, looking as good as new.

In one section of the hangar, pathetically alone and unattended, was his miserable B-24. The stench of her came to his nostrils as he approached, and in the light of day he saw the extent of her injuries—the jagged hole in her nose, the feathery splintering of her propellers, the flak and bullet holes. It was a miracle of miracles that she had brought them home.

But she had always brought them home. Forty-nine times in all. Think of it! For all her wounds and miseries she had somehow managed to fly them home, one or two of them dead aboard her, others bleeding, most of them miraculously alive.

Conscious of the sentimentality of it, Steve saluted her.

He wondered who would pilot her the next time she gallantly took to the air. He wondered where she would finally rest her bones. At the bottom of the Pacific, on the shores of some unknown atoll, in the jungle of a Japanese-held island. Maybe she would never fly again, he thought, a lump in his throat.

Staff Sergeant McGregor came into the section, walking, as was characteristic of him, as though he were treading on eggs. Some sort of trouble with his feet. He was in charge of the shops, and men said he could repair an engine with empty sardine cans and run it with their residue of oil.

"Know how much gas you had when you flew in her last night?"

"You tell me."

"A pint. Exactly one pint. We measured it, just to see."

"Shucks, we didn't need gas. She works on rain water when she has to. How soon can I fly her to San Francisco?"

"Fly her!" McGregor spat. "Hell, we're going to scrap her for kindling wood. Brand new 3 and 4 engines—plenty of work on her radio compartment—new tail turret—new bomb bay. Six weeks, maybe."

Steve Dillon turned away. "Well, the lucky guys who next handle her can go to sleep nights. She'll bring 'em back. She's a tough and faithful old lady."

"She sure is," McGregor said.

AT THE HOSPITAL Steve spoke to one of the doctors he knew. "How's Bill Robbins?" he asked.

"Not so good."

"And Rudy Bierman?"

"He'll live—but not to fly again."

"All right for me to have a word with them."

The doctor nodded. "Bierman is in Ward D. He needs cheering up more than Robbins. We took one of his arms off this morning."

Steve winced. "Holly Reed—Williams?"

"They're fine."

At the end of Ward D, Rudy Bierman, the radioman, was scarcely recognizable because of the aged appearance of his waxen face. "Hello, skip," he said, trying to smile and failing, "I guess that San Francisco party we planned is kind of shot."

"Hell, no. We're holding it up for you, Rudy."

"Even if I was going with you, it wouldn't be the same. Just you and Mose Goldstein, out of all of us. Gene Herchel. He's dead—isn't he, skip? They won't tell me."

"Yes, Gene is gone."

"And Bill Robbins. I know he's dead. They keep saying he's O. K., but I know . . . I know . . ." His voice was agonized as he turned weakly on his bed, twisting his mouth to keep his tears back.

"Take it easy, kid," Steve said, ruffling his flaxen hair, wet with sweat. "Bill's all right. I just came from seeing him. He's sitting up there in bed—raring to go—and cracking jokes. Shucks, we'll all be home

together one of these days, and we'll have a swell time—you, and I, and Bill Robbins, and Holly Reed, and—"

With his remaining hand young Bierman feebly pulled the covers over his face, for in his weakness he was sobbing and he didn't want his skipper to see him. A doctor motioned Steve away from there. Outside he whispered, "Robbins. He's been asking for you. It's only a question of minutes."

They walked down the corridor to Ward C. At the entrance to it Steve could see Bill Robbins whose gaze was enraptured by a visitor beside his bed. She was holding his hand. Steve couldn't see her face, but she was young, golden-haired, her feminine clothes refreshing as a garden of morning flowers.

Suddenly glancing toward the door, Robbins said, "Hi, skipper—come here." Steve entered the ward. "Meet Diane Stewart, Steve. Diane, this is the guy I was talking about. The one and only Steve Dillon—without the whiskers. Ain't he handsome, though? Cary Grant ain't in it."

The girl's blue eyes lifted for an instant in acknowledgment of the introduction, and Steve was shocked by her pallid face, the gauntness of her cheeks. What the—! He couldn't believe she was the same glamorous laughing Diane Stewart whose picture decorated Robbins' bunk in the crew's quarters. It was all the difference between a golden dancing butterfly and a—a colorless little moth!

"I must go now, Bill," she said, smiling at him. "Don't forget our date this afternoon, will you?"

Something in the way she said it, some mysterious magic in her voice, her manner, lighted her with beauty away and far beyond the photographer's art. The twenty-year-old Diane Stewart had worn her strength to the breaking point. The tropical climate had sapped the bloom from her cheeks. She had looked on death and mutilation and the horrors of war far too often for her tender years. But her loveliness still remained. It was more than skin deep. It was heart deep.

Bill Robbins followed her departure with his dying eyes, a mere flicker of light showing in them.

"She's going to sing for me," he told

Steve proudly. "She and the rest of the gang are coming over here this afternoon and—and—they're going to—to—" He closed his eyes.

"Looks like you made quite a hit with her," Steve said, trying to shove a note of jealousy into his voice.

"Yeah?" Bill Robbins reopened his eyes. "Why not? She's my my pin-up girl. Gee, I forgot to ask her."

"What's that, Bill?"

"I meant to ask her for a regular picture. You know, not one cut out of a magazine. One of her real photographs. Signed."

"I'll ask her for it, if you like."

"What you trying to do, skip?" It was a gallant challenge. "You trying to cut me out?"

Steve tried to keep it up, and failed. Where, now, his vaunted pretense of indifference to death? It was all right to go out there at the controls of a B-24, letting the plane and crew do the actual fighting for him. Nothing to it. This was somehting else again. This required a greater courage, and Bill Robbins had it.

"Sure glad you came, Steve," he said. Robbins spoke with amazing cheerfulness. "Will you do something for me?"

"Whatever you say, Bill."

"You're going home on leave. Will you take my stuff with you—that Jap sword I found on Guadalcanal . . ." His voice was failing . . . "see that my folks . . . I know they'd like to have my things . . ."

With a terrific effort Steve Dillon tried to hold up his end. "What kind of talk is that?" he demanded.

"And—and there's a letter I'm expecting from—from my girl." His voice cracked as a china cup might crack. "Please tell them I'd—I'd like it buried with me. S'long, Steve. Say hello to . . . to home . . . for me . . ."

Steve reached for a limp hand, trying to transfuse his own life into it so that Bill Robbins might live. The hand seemed to grow smaller and lighter as he held it, and then suddenly it was without life.

IV

AT 1400 HOURS THAT AFTERnoon the USO troupe gave their first performance of the day, every inch of the hall packed with men starved for entertainment and the solace of Diane's Stewart's loveliness.

Recovering part of his hard-boiled attitude following the momentary let-down caused by Robbins' death, Steve was half-inclined to take in the show. It was the turn for his particular squadron, ground-crew and personnel. There might not be another chance for him.

"Hey, Steve," Mose Goldstein said, "you coming or not?"

Steve shook his head. "I guess I'll see enough of 'em on that jaunt to Henderson Field tomorrow."

At 1450 hours there was an air-raid alert, and soon afterwards distant gunfire could be heard out at sea.

It could not be ascertained what particular target the Jap bombers had in mind. There was a unit of the U. S. Pacific Fleet in those waters, a carrier, two light cruisers and their escorting destroyers. From the carrier a flight of Corsairs flitted upward to intercept the enemy and succeeded in breaking up one formation, flaming many Nips into the ocean.

If that approach was a feint of some sort, it succeeded to an extent. No naval ships were lost. Not one of them was even hit, though their decks were drenched with spray. Then a formation of Jap bombers suddenly appeared over the island, approaching it from the south end and flying north at a high elevation.

All the batteries blazed into action. Fighters rocketed into the sky. The loudspeakers told everyone to stay put and dig holes for themselves pronto. There was little protection for the men on the ground except for the speculative cover of the jungle. Men packed in the USO hall sat where they were. The show went on by its traditional standard, the performers giving no visible sign of wavering other than their rather hectic laughter.

The actual bombardment was over in a few minutes at a disastrous cost to the suicidal Japs, yet also at considerable cost to the base in men and materials. One of the bombs scored a lucky hit on the new squadron of B-24s flown in there only that morning, completely obliterating seven of them and setting fire to as many more. The machine shops were squarely hit. They went up in flames and in the holocaust an already damaged B-24 with a faded Petty

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Girl on her fuselage was caught with her wings singed. This time the old lady never had a chance. She was mincemeat. There was a near hit on the hospital, where a lad by the name of Rudy Bierman, raving in the loss of his right arm, had crawled out of bed and was fighting with the corpsmen to get into the air and defend—so he said—his loved ones in Falmouth, Cape Cod. The Seabee huts were blown to kingdom come. With an increasing roar a 500-pound bomb arrowed down straight for the center of the USO hall. By every rule in the book of mathematics it was to hit plumb center. It didn't. It missed the building by some five feet, exploding outside back of the stage.

But let's go back a few moments.

ALTHOUGH Steve had decided not to take in the show, something drew him to the vicinity of the hall. He sat on the wooden steps leading to the stage at the back of the building. He could hear the announcer introducing Diane Stewart to the lads who thundered their applause of her. The alert was on, of course, and there was a tense note in everything, the jokes, introduction, even the applause. In the intervals of silence the anti-aircraft guns took the show away with their angry barking.

"And—*here she is!* Diane Stewart!"

Applause rose wildly. The orchestra started to play, and in a low-pitched and plaintive tone Diane began to sing the popular number she had probably sung a thousand times before. Not so good. Listening to her Steve tried to figure out what it was in her that so urgently appealed to him. Not her pallid little face. Not her slim and attractive figure. Certainly not her singing. There were a thousand other girls who had her licked in point of looks and voice.

He glanced up into the sky. Shading his eyes against the brilliant sunshine and following the puffs of flak smoke, he could see the Jap bombers. There were three, four, five, six earth-shaking *crumps* as their bombs fell and exploded. Steve couldn't see the fighter planes, though the chatter of machine-gun fire was distinctly audible.

One of the enemy planes was falling, trailing a plume of black smoke. Steve ran from the steps on which he was sitting in order to get a better view. Something violent happened behind him, throwing him flat on his face.

The havoc of the explosion caused instant pandemoninum. Bits of the hall went screeching upward, other bits, boards and splintered timbers, burst out fanwise in banshee-like howling. There was the immediate crackling of blazing wood. There were women's screams, the hoarse shouting of men.

The back of the hall was a shambles, the roof shattered, one side of the building in flames. The stage door had disappeared, though the steps to it remained. Steve ran up them into the utter confusion of the hall, full of smoke and the acrid smell of explosive.

The bomb had had its own peculiar form of destruction. It had hurled part of the stage platform through the length of the building, killing and maiming men sitting in the rear and leaving those in the front rows untouched. It had blown the saxophone from the hands of the soldier playing it without hurting him. It shattered every window in the place to pieces and completely blasted out the west wall of the building.

Now fire had become the greatest danger because of so many men packed into so small a space. There were calls for help, moans, screaming, and a woman's cry. Officers were yelling orders.

With part of the stage smashed away, there was a six feet drop to the ground under what remained of it, and it was down there that he saw Diane Stewart, a bundle of flounces and silk legs.

He jumped down there. "Are you all right?" he asked her. "Miss Stewart—are —you?"

She was lying on her face, unconscious, apparently unhurt. Gathering her up, she was limp in his arms. There was no way out of there. With the ugly roar of flames in his ears, the heat increasing all around him, Steve laid her down again, ripped off his leather flying jacket, wrapped it about her—and with all the strength he could summon he tossed her up on to the stage flooring. From that precarious position one of her legs dangled downward into the hole.

Steve grabbed the smashed edge of the

stage, pulled himself up there. A breeze from the ocean on the open side of the hall had whipped the flames into a fury, and the escape to get out of the inferno had developed into a panic. Picking the girl up again, he jumped with her to the floor of the hall. Struggling through the obstacles of over-turned benches he carried her outside.

"How is she? Here, let me take her." The face of the comedian and manager of the show was sick with anxiety.

"I'll carry her," Steve told him. "Just tell me where."

"To the hut over there. Boy, I was scared stiff when I couldn't find her. I thought sure she'd been blown to—"

"She's O. K."

"Where did you find her?"

"Under the stage."

"Gee! if it hadn't been for you, mister . . ." The comedian's lips were white.

THEY reached the indicated hut where two other girls were seated on a camp bed, their arms tightly clasped about each other, their faces vacuous with fear and thankfulness. Steve placed Diane on another camp bed and was gently removing his leather jacket from around her—when she opened her eyes and stared at him.

"I knew it was you," she said.

"Yes?"

"I dreamed it. You found me in some sort of a foxhole in there, didn't you? You jumped down and carried me out, didn't you? I was unconscious. I couldn't move. There was fire all around us. If you hadn't come—"

"Now just you forget all about it. You're safe, and that's the main thing."

"I knew it was you," she repeated, her eyes wide with the amazement of it. "I—I was singing to you—"

"To me?"

"Just before the explosion. I was singing to you—and to Bill Robbins in the hospital. That's where I first saw you this morning. Bill Robbins!" she gasped. "I promised him I'd return to sing one of his favorite songs." She sat up. "I'm going over there right now. It must have been terrible for him lying there during the air raid."

Steve put his arm before her, refusing to

let her rise. "Bill didn't know there was an air raid," he said quietly.

"Didn't know?"

"He died just a few minutes after you left the hospital."

Diane Stewart flung her shapely body down on the camp bed, suddenly bursting into tears.

With the other girls and the show manager taking care of her. Steve left the hut. The raid was over, the anti-aircraft batteries silent, the all-clear having been given. There was plenty of work for the ambulances and hospital staff, for the fire-fighters and those searching in ruins for mangled bodies.

Considering the crowded concert hall, surprisingly few casualties had occurred there, and not one of the gallant USO troupe had suffered serious injury. To their everlasting credit it was announced over the loud speaker that the five o'clock show would go on as scheduled, the performance to be given from the back of a truck in the No. 7 hangar.

There were a lot of new faces in the mess hall that evening, pilots and crews of B-6. Mostly they were silent, mourning the loss by death and injury of forty-three of their group. Their numbers would be further reduced in a day or so, and perhaps for this reason they were being royally fed on thick juicy steaks and mashed potatoes, lima beans, corn bread, snow pudding, and lemon pie.

On this sumptuous fare Steve Dillon put in his share of licks. At the table with him were Sergeant Neely, Carl Thunberg, Goldstein, and the surprisingly-recovered Stan Williams, a bandage around his head. They had just come from attending the burial of Bill Robbins, and with him in his final resting place, Steve had placed an unopened letter written in a girl's handwriting.

Stan Williams said, "This time tomorrow night, Steve, you'll be on your way back home."

"I guess so." He looked worn out, the strand of white in his dark hair whiter than ever.

STEVE was crossing toward crew quarters when Colonel T. M. Nelson hailed him. "You're something of a hero with that USO troupe, Steve."

"For what? I did nothing any other guy wouldn't have done."

"I reckon Miss Stewart would have burned to death but for you." The colonel smiled. "Looks like you've won yourself a pleasant time with her on that journey tomorrow."

"What time are they leaving, sir?"

"After the last show. Nine o'clock or so."

"What about your own show, sir? Any further word on it?"

"Yes, Steve, but I'm not at liberty to tell you."

"When's it to be?"

"Thursday morning, as of now. Subject to a last minute change or orders. That Jap raid this afternoon knocked things a bit out of kilter. We're still worried as to whether the Japs knew B-6 had flown in here, and that they might have attacked to forestall our plans. But they couldn't have known," Nelson said. "It was just one of those things, as we figure it. A sort of 'Let's look the place over.' Like that unscheduled look-see of yours the other day when you bagged a Jap cruiser. The Japs know we're here, of course. But we're pretty certain they don't know what we have up our sleeves for them on Thursday."

Steve said, "Is it a B-6 job alone?"

"No. 5 and 6 groups." Colonel Nelson offered his hand. "Again my congratulations, lieutenant, for what you did this afternoon. Better be careful Miss Stewart doesn't fall for you. You're not bad looking when you come out from behind those black whiskers of yours. I'll see you before you leave tomorrow."

"Goodnight, sir."

He walked on to his hut. Neely, Thunberg, Williams, and one of the newcomers bunking there, were playing a game of bridge, Goldstein looking on. Steve called to him.

"Hey, Mose, come out here for a minute."

The highly efficient armorer gunner walked through the hut out into the soft darkness of evening.

"What's on your mind, skip?" he asked.

"I won't be going back home with you tomorrow."

"No?"

"I figure they're going to be short-handed for something they've got planned for

Thursday morning. Something big, from all I gather. I'm aiming to get in on it."

Mose Goldstein clapped a hand to his forehead. "A headache he is giving me. I'm not listening to you, Steve. Tomorrow night I am flying on my way back home to the Bronx holding hands with Diane Stewart and nobody in this world is going to—"

"Who's asking you to do anything. All I'm saying is that you'll be going on your own."

"The colonel won't be needing you," Goldstein protested, almost in tears. "He won't be needing you."

"When *didn't* he need me?" Steve said.

Again Goldstein slapped the flat of his hand to his forehead. "Mose," he said to himself "don't be listening to him. For once in your life Mose think like you had some brains in your head. Mose, go home to Minnie now you got the chance." He checked his misery long enough to say, "Listen, Steve, if we had our own plane to take us there and bring us back again—maybe—"

"Yep, I've been thinking about that, too. But she got her discharge papers this afternoon. No, Mose, it'll be a different bomber this time, one we've never flown in before."

"You're crazy," Goldstein accused him. "Crazy like a quilt. I'm going home—I'm going home."

"That's O. K., Mose."

"Some other tail gunner you are getting for yourself."

"I'll take anybody they give me."

"The guy's nuts. It's a mental hospital he's needing."

"All I ask," Steve said, "is that he's half as good as you are, Mose. I'll settle for a tail gunner one quarter as good."

"No brains," Goldstein lamented at his own wailing wall. "But then if I am having any brains I would be joining the air force in the first place—signing my own death warrant."

"You've been a fool for luck, Mose."

"Luck! You're Captain Luck yourself. Now I got to gamble maybe a thousand to one against it just so he is getting back safely."

"If you want to know it," Steve grinned at him, "that's about what I had in mind."

He held out his hand, and Mose Goldstein took it.

At the conclusion of the final USO show the following evening, Steve made his way through the darkness to the back of the stage. Diane Stewart was surrounded by a swarm of men. Steve had to wait his turn, and might not have spoken to her at all if she hadn't seen him.

"Just wanted to say goodbye," he smiled at her, "and to wish you the very best."

"But—but—" Her mouth flew open. "Aren't you coming with us?"

"I'm sorry to say no."

"But why? I thought it had been all arranged?"

To his surprise he found he couldn't look at her, at least not into her eyes. And, quite suddenly, Steve Dillon knew why. He was in love with this girl and wanted, if only for an instant, to hold her in his arms. He said, "Why, I—they've made other arrangements for me. I'm flying back in a B-24 some time tomorrow."

"I'm dreadfully disappointed." She spoke candidly, revealing her disappointment. "I —we all looked forward to having your company."

"I sort of looked forward to it, too. But I guess it wasn't to be."

"The chances are you'll be back home before we get there," Diane said. "We're giving shows at Henderson Field and also at Pearl Harbor on our way home. I'd— I'd so much like to see you again, Steve," she said, her voice trembling. "I'll—I'll never forget what you did for me." She was crying. "Not as long as I live."

"I won't forget you, Diane," he smiled. "I mean it. I think you're one swell kid."

"Will—will you write to me?"

"Would you like me to?"

"I'll never speak to you again if you don't."

"Sure, I'll write. Diane Stewart, Hollywood. That ought to find you. Well, s'long, soldier—and maybe one of these days we'll —we'll meet again. Who knows?" he grinned.

And suddenly she was clinging to him.

"Steve—will you—kiss me?"

He half lifted her in his arms, intending to kiss her cheek. But she turned her face and for an exhilarating and insane moment their lips touched and were suddenly pressed together.

An hour later, from the distance, he watched the USO plane take off and safely leave the field, headed homeward. Mose Goldstein stood beside him. "She kissed me," he told Steve. "She kissed me because she said I was a friend of yours."

"I guess you are a friend, Mose—and a damned loyal one at that."

V

IN SILENCE BOTH OF THEM started walking back to crew quarters, but Steve didn't enter the hut. He wanted to be by himself for a while. Some time tomorrow morning he would go out on his Fiftieth Mission, and he was conscious of a curious tension different from any he had experienced before.

Waiting for the actual take-off was always the toughest part of the whole cursed business. As a rule the tightness in a man's stomach would leave him when he was in the air and on his way. Steve knew it wasn't going to be that way this time.

He went to the west side of the island, sat down facing the ocean. It was light enough to see the coils of barbed wire strung along the beach and, back of this fortification, sentries making their rounds. The night was perfect, a full moon making a silver path along the waters—a broad and glittering highway inviting the sick and weary to a distant land where there was no war, only peace and tranquility. For a long while he just sat there looking at that silver road. He *knew* he was going to walk down it. For, quite suddenly, the small fear he had felt when Diane Stewart was in his arms, and he had kissed her *goodbye*, now became an absolute conviction.

Calmly he composed a letter he would write before morning.

"Dear dad,I was all set to be home with you for that fishing trip we planned, when this thing came along. I want you to do something for me. I want you to go to Hollywood and find a girl there by the name of Diane Stewart. You may have seen her in the movies. I want you to do this for me, dad, because she's the girl I would have married. She'll tell you how we met. Just tell her I loved her, and am sorry I couldn't keep my promise to write . . ."

Still gazing at the silver highway, ready

to walk down it unflinchingly, Steve knew he would be at the controls of a B-24 tomorrow and that he would not return in it. Oddly the conviction brought about a great peace within him. It was as though he had been sailing a fragile craft through great sea storms and had suddenly put into the calm of a harbor.

In this strange feeling of rest, his head actually nodded in slumber. It was good. The mere thought of a surcease from killing was good.

It was something he himself would do! Some mistake or other he would make. Wrong rudder? Banking too steeply? Suddenly losing his grip? Who was this, trying to take over the controls of the plane? Some kid with flaming red hair whom he had never seen before. What was he doing aboard the plane? Where were the others? Yes, they were all there. Mose Goldstein, Neely, Thunberg, Stan Williams. And by Golly! Bill Robbins was with them—and Holly Reed—and Rudy Bierman. Rudy hadn't lost an arm. He was in there as sound as a bell.

But this red-haired kid? No, he wasn't taking over the controls. He was lying dead in the cockpit. He, Steve, was flying the plane, and now he could see gray water under him. They were going to hit it! They did hit! The whole Pacific Ocean engulfed them—

"Hey, buddy! you sick or something?"

Steve lifted a heavy head. One of the sentries of the shore detail was shaking his shoulder.

"I guess I fell asleep—sitting here."

"In case you don't know it, buddy, you're out of bounds." The young sentry stared, came to the attention. "Pardon me, Lieutenant Dillon—I didn't see who you were at first."

"That's all right. Glad you woke me." Steve got to his feet. "I came out here to cool off for a minute and try to puzzle out why I was put on this earth. Sometimes it takes quite a bit of figuring, but it's O. K. when you find the answer. Good-night."

"Goodnight, sir."

At this hour all the men of Groups 5 and 6 had turned in for the night. Some were asleep in their bunks. Others tossed fitfully. Still others remained awake, their eyes open into the darkness. In the CP,

telephone and radio communications were busy.

"You say seven-tenths target density possible? Get another check on that."

"Report weather conditions Formosa."

"Call back as soon as Third Fleet disposition available."

"Get weather 3N4 Luzon. Repeat. That is 3N4 Luzon. Over."

In the hangars, as on the bomber strip, hundreds of mechanics were going over every part of the B-24s. They checked panel instruments. They listened to the ticking of motors. They tightened this and that connection, and eased others. They examined bomb bay releases, gauges, tires. They oiled the machine-guns and propeller shaftings and everything else that required oil.

At 0305 hours in the morning the pilots and crews were briefed by Major Averill, their target displayed on a large pinned-up map with the usual red, blue and green circles and lines about it, so that it looked like a gigantic "doodle" scrawled by some one whose mind was on other things.

At 0415 hours Steve met his crew. Ser- Goldstein would be popping corn at his same old stand. Thunberg would navigate them. Despite his head injury, Stan Williams was going along as engineer. The rest of theme were new men, although all had seen plenty of action with their B-6 Group. Second Lieutenant Watson in the radio room, along with his assistant Technical Sergeant Post. The bombardier was Second Lieutenant Godowski and with him Sergeant Green . . .

"Steve," Major Averill said, "meet your new co-pilot, Second Lieutenant Ronnie Harkness."

The two men shook hands and without batting an eyelid Steve found himself staring at a young kid with flaming red hair!

ALL of them had breakfast together, their laughter, their joking, a bit on the artificial side, and under his black brows Steve studied them as he listlessly sipped his coffee. All were in his hands. All depended on him to fly them to a designated target and bring them back again.

Was he taking nine men to their deaths along with him? Neely and Thunberg? The already-injured Stan Williams? Mose Goldstein whom he had bulldozed into going along?

At 0600 hours the Operational Staff gathered outside the CP to watch the rise of the curtain. Crews climbed aboard the massed B-24s, disappeared into their bowels. From each dispersal station came the steady throb of motors.

Steve's plane was to lead his flight, the first to make the run over the target, the Jap-fortified island of Mindora, the submarine and naval base there. Steve rested his arm on the wheel, his eyes on the second hand of his watch. He had never felt such a deadly calm in his life.

One minute and seventeen seconds to go.

Exactly on time his plane began to move, gathering speed. He ran 4000 feet over the strip, imperceptibly became airborne, clearing the palm trees that, only the other day, he had barely skimmed coming home in a deluge of rain.

The roar of sixty B-24s seemed to shake the island. Each thundering run over the strip tested the nerves of those watching on the ground until thirty tons of ship, guns, equipment, bombs, and men were safely lifted into the air.

Formation 21 of B-5 was in the lead, slightly to the right of 27. Formations 16 and 17 immediately followed. Time passed slowly. Ronnie Harkness, the red-head, took the wheel, Steve going back through the ship in routine inspection. Unseen fingers were already probing into the reaches of space for them from enemy detection instruments on Luzon and elsewhere. There had been no fighter opposition as yet. All planes were receiving their own code calls.

"Beta to Mercury. One—two—0—nine. Repeat. That is now one—two—0—ten. Twenty four north. That is F.O.U.R. Target at six at two—two—five M.P.H. Say hello to Joe in seventeen That's all from lead in twenty-one."

The heavily-defended Japanese island of Mindora came up over the horizon like a mass of floating seaweed. Smoke was rising from it. That meant that the lighter bombers of the Third Fleet had been in there as arranged—north of the target, pulling the defenses off balance.

The first enemy fighters were spotted flying high, their location instantly given. The guns of Formation 21 silently swung

in their direction, the Mitsubishi 4s coming down like gnats, all in line.

"Here we go again," Mose Goldstein shouted. "High one o'clock. Also at two o'clock."

Tracers left the M4s like colored streamers, the fire of twin-fifties sounding like the rattle of a stick along a picket fence. A Jap fighter tumbled down, and in a haze of flak smoke a B-24 exploded in midair, bombs and all. The Mindora base was sending up plenty of stuff and Steve drove through it, the naval base now visible below and directly ahead of him. M4s buzzed like hornets into the attack, adding to the difficulty of keeping formation. Stan Williams was shouting jubilantly at his station, and Thunberg began yelling some sort of a message which nobody could understand. In the roaring confusion of it all, Steve coolly made his run.

"Pilot to bombardier. Going straight in. Get set."

Second Lieutenant Godowski got his aiming point and pushed a switch that opened the bomb doors. He watched the indices move together and checked with the red lights above the rack. He turned a knob slightly, and in response to the correction Steve ruddered a trifle to his left. Godowski made another adjustment. The cross hairs on the finder were cutting the power-plant down below, the bomb-sight now working on its own, computing all elements for speed, drift and dead center target. The lights on the rack indicator faded out.

Bombs away!

"Enemy fighters coming in at ten o'clock," the intercom was saying. "They look like SB-99s—and they are!"

It was like flying blind through an erupting volcano. In coming out of his run, pouring on the gas and seeking to gain altitude, Steve was aware of doing something fateful, something his *dream* had told him he would do. Yet it was nothing in error, nothing panicky, nothing he wasn't fully conscious of doing.

ALMOST at once a rending sound made the bomber tremble from stem to stern. Beside him Ronnie Harkness seemed to reach across as though to grab the controls. But it wasn't that! A lump of flak

had torn through his side of the cockpit, killing him instantly. He pitched across Steve's feet, his helmet blown away, exposing his flaming red hair.

The twin fifties were firing without letup. The pungency of powder and high explosive filled every compartment of the plane. Steve had put the target behind him, was headed for the open sea as planned. Two M4s came in very fast out of their climb, their tapering noses making an impossible U-turn as they fired their .37 shells.

Staggering the B-24, something heavy slammed into her. A stray object flew into the right wing, embedded itself there. Steve shot a quick look at it and saw it was the main exit door from another B-24. A Group-6 bomber right behind them disintegrated in a brilliant explosion of bluish light. Her engines shrieked downward, four separate balls of fire.

Second Lieutenant Watson messaged that the intercom had been smashed and was out of working order. Stan Williams came through the ship to say that Neely was dead. He said that Post and Godowski were badly wounded in the bomb bay which was in a hell of a mess and would act like a dragging anchor on the progress of the plane. With the crippled ship roaring on, screaming in her agony, Steve told Williams to climb down to the bomb bay if he could and salvo all remaining bombs by using the emergency release.

The No. 2 engine was burning furiously, and he tried to feather it so that the flames wouldn't spread. Oil smoked from the hot engine. The plane began to nose down rather steeply, and Steve pulled back hard on the wheel. He couldn't stop the downward glide and didn't know what was causing it, so he called for Thunberg to come from the navigating room and pull on the co-pilot stick.

"Better get Harkness out of the way, first."

Getting Harkness out of the way was not a pleasant job and there was not much time in which to do it. Then Thunberg and Steve pulled back together. A very blue ocean—not gray—was rushing up toward them.

Steve's teeth bit into his lips. "This is it, sure enough," he thought to himself.

By some manner or form the plane's plunge was checked about two hundred feet from the sea. The No. 3 engine went out, after losing all its oil. Not getting any power, it began smoking dangerously and Steve was forced to cut it off.

At reduced speed they were now very much on their own. What was left of Formation 21 had left them. 27 passed by. The depleted 16 and 17 Formations were passing overheard, two of the bombers coming down, asking if they could help. Steve told them to go on and report his position.

He flew on at a low altitude. In the expanse of ocean within his vision there wasn't a ship to be seen, nothing at all in the air now. At 1230 hours an island showed ahead of them on their right, Steve giving it as wide a berth as possible. Clouds had formed above them, and soon they were skidding along through rain squalls.

"We're not going to make it," Steve told Thunberg. "Go back there and tell everybody to stand by when she hits. Get your rafts ready. Don't leave any of the injured if you can save them."

He fought the damaged plane tooth and nail, trying to hold her up there in order to get all the homeward distance he could, giving them that much more chance to escape being picked up by the Japs and taken prisoner.

They were only a few feet above the water now, and when they hit it wouldn't be like hitting cotton. Steve issued new orders, telling Williams to open the escape hatch. All the uninjured men took off their boots and braced themselves against armor plate, waiting for the crash. The No. 1 engine sputtered out.

THERE was a roar as the B-24 nosed into the water and drove through a running wave that suddenly appeared enormous. The shock of the immersion was paralyzing, all of them being knocked dizzy by the impact, gasping for breath. Because of the flak holes the plane was instantly filled with sea-water. The escape hatch slammed shut with violence, trapping all of them.

The whole Pacific Ocean engulfed them!

Entirely under, Steve was washed back through the plane, landing against the escape hatch. He tried to open it and failed. Dimly he saw Williams and Goldstein

threshing around near him—then with his lungs bursting for air his head struck against something and he lost consciousness . . .

THE next thing of which he was aware he was vomiting. He seemed to be in a raft of some sort and one of his legs felt broken. It was night, warm, and a drizzle of rain falling. There was a funny slapping noise under him that kept on interminably, and he thought that someone was beating a hand on his naked flesh. He suddenly realized that it was the sound of waves slapping against a rubber raft.

He didn't feel so badly then and thought, "I'm going to die, but not in the way I expected."

Still retching his insides out, he was faintly aware that two other men were in the boat with him. He couldn't see who they were. The nearest one spoke to him.

"How d'you feel now, skip?" It was Stan Williams.

"What—what happened? How did I get out of that plane? Why am I still alive?"

"Mose got you out—through the open section of the tail. We sort of washed through there and Mose had a grip on both of us."

"Did he—is he—?"

"Right here. Hasn't got a mark on him. That guy could be hit by a ten-ton truck and nothing would happen to him. He's sleeping now—like a baby."

"What above the others?"

"Just the three of us, Steve, that's all. You got a piece of steel through your leg when Harkness was hit. I have a slug in my left shoulder. If it hadn't been for Mose, you wouldn't be alive. Nor would I. We figure we haven't got much of a chance, even now. We're in Jap waters—pretty sure to be picked up tomorrow and sent to a concentration camp until the end of the war. Here, take a swallow of this water." He held out an emergency canteen and said, "You should have gone home when you had the opportunity, Steve."

"Oye!" Mose Goldstein lamented from the other end of the raft. "When I think such a crazy thing I am doing. 'All I ask' he is telling me, 'is a tail gunner one quarter as good as you.' And like a chump I am falling for it. Oye!"

"Sorry, Mose," Steve managed to say. He was now aware of a dynamo-throbbing in his leg. His head reeled with pain. He put his hand to it, felt the gooey stickiness of blood, not knowing how he had suffered the injury. Until Stan Williams had told him, he had not known that he was wounded in the leg.

From loss of blood, he became unconscious again. And then—it seemed right away—a scorching heat was pouring down on his head, face and hands—and he saw it was broad daylight. Little waves were kicking the raft with sledge-hammer blows.

Stan Williams, his face badly cut, both his eyes blackened, passed him another sip of water, and placed a piece of chocolate in his mouth.

Sometime during the day Steve knew that his senses were completely befuddled by a high temperature. Night appeared to come on with unbelievable suddenness. Then it was day again—the pitiless sun—then night—then day. And there seemed to be an island, a very small island, and cocoanut milk, and something everlastingly crawling over his body. In a moment of clarity he heard Mose Goldstein say:

"We can't stay on this lousy atoll. We've got to find help for him—"

THEN it seemed as if they were at sea in the rubber raft again, and in another brief moment of awareness Steve suddenly heard himself speak.

"How—long—have—we—been?"

"Almost ten days," some one said. And the same voice, with a ring of elation in it, "Gee, Mose, I think he's going to pull through after all."

At night he chattered with cold. At day he felt like a piece of putrid meat cooking on a griddle . . .

"No!" Goldstein was shouting "she's a U. S. destroyer, not a Jap! We are getting the whole thing wrong. Those fighters are not Corsairs like we thought. They're M4s coming down on a U. S. destroyer. She's trying to dodge them—"

Try though he might, Steve couldn't see a thing. The morning was full of sound and fury, loud bangings under him, off to the side of him, over him. He heard Stan Williams say, "There must be a U. S. carrier somewhere around here, because here come the F4Us. Look at 'em tangling up with those Jap fighters!"

Ten days. With possible help near, it seemed another ten days before Steve realized that U. S. sailors were lifting him aboard their ship. They carried him to the hospital ward where a doctor examined him, probing the wound in his leg with a red hot poker. Williams and Goldstein stood beside his bed, and he heard Williams give his name and rank to one of the officers of the destroyer.

"Second Lieutenant Stanley C. Williams, sir. And this is Technical Sergeant Goldstein. We wouldn't be here but for him."

"Glad to have been of assistance to you, Lieutenant. Your skipper should be on his feet again before very long. He's pretty high in our books for sinking that Jap cruiser the other day. We've been searching for you, and Colonel Nelson at your base and a lot of other people will be glad to know you are safe. We're going to radio the base. Is there any message you'd like to send?"

Mose Goldstein said, "Would that mean a personal message, sir?"

"A brief one, maybe."

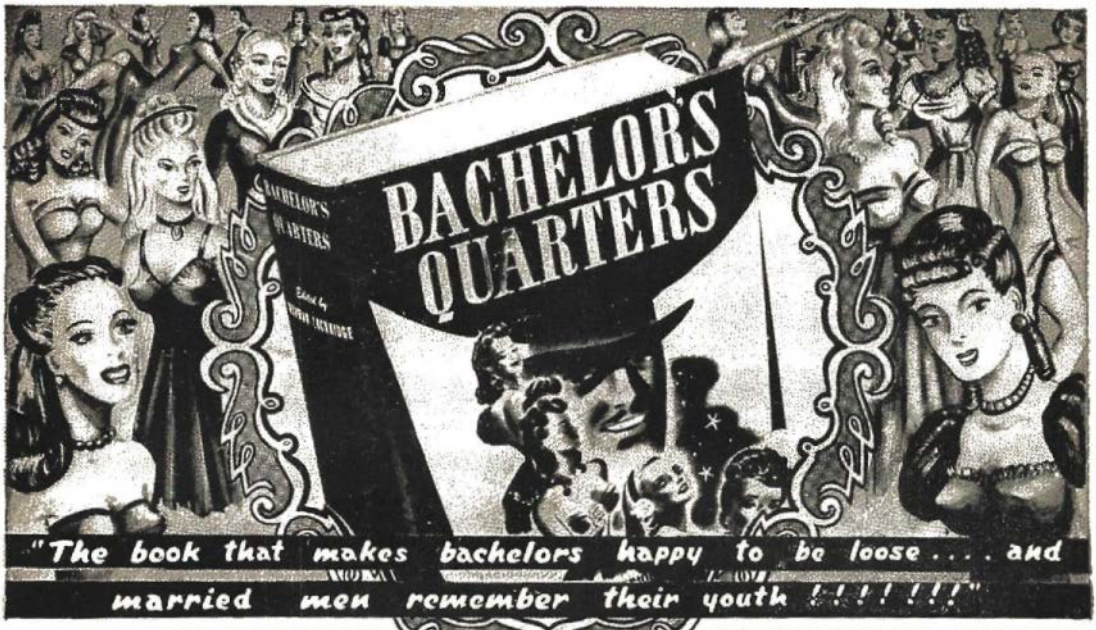
"I'd like my wife she is knowing that this time I am on my way to the Bronx and nobody is stopping me."

"That might be arranged," the officer smiled.

"And," Mose added, "a message from Lieutenant Dillon. For ten days he is raving about Diane Stewart, the movie actress. Tell her he is coming back home he should ask her to marry him."

With a prodigious effort Steve asserted himself in this matter. "Nothing doing," he said. "That Miles Standish stuff is out. Dillon is going to speak for himself. Dillon will do his own proposing to her when he gets back to the U. S. A."

He grinned and fell back.



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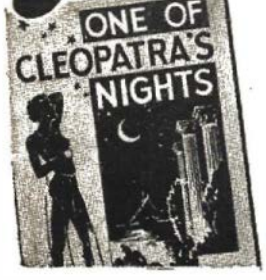

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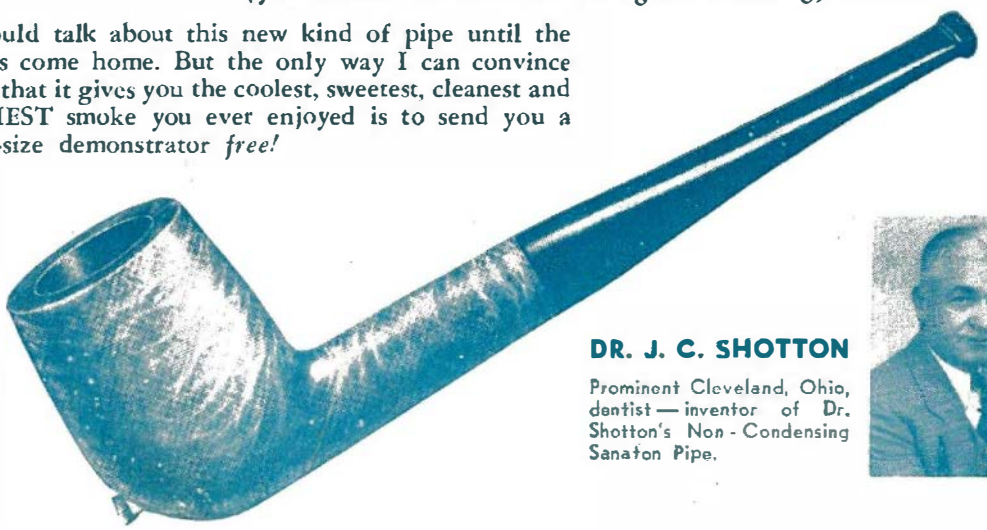

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