LUCKY TERRELL FLYING STORY

LOST SQUADRON

CANFIELD COOK

A LUCKY TERRELL FLYING STORY

LOST SQUADRON

By CANFIELD COOK

Those who have met Lucky Terrell and his crack fighting team in *Sky Attack* and *Secret Mission* will find in here a further record of their indomitable fighting spirit and spectacular flying skill. Now a Squadron Leader, Terrell draws the prize apple in any airman's barrel when he is given the job of leading the Stratohawk squadron to a newly won Japanese air base in China within bombing range of Tokyo.

A take off at dawn — and the swift-flying Stratohawks are winging their way over the treacherous Himalayas. How a storm scatters the squadron and cuts off all radio contact, how Terrell is forced down in Jap-infested country, and the gripping adventures that follow make a thrilling story — a story in which the fliers do their job with daring, courage and skill.

GROSSET & DUNLAP
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A LUCKY TERRELL FLYING STORY

SECRET MISSION

By CANFIELD COOK

SECRET MISSION records the further breath-taking exploits of Lucky Terrell, Texas Flying Ace, attached to the R.A.F. Flying the new Stratohawks, Bob and his fighting squadrons continue their devastating forays against the enemy, battering oil storage tanks and naval bases in Nazi-occupied Norway.

Then comes the news the Stratohawk crews have been waiting for — flying orders for a secret destination. First stop bomb-torn Malta — then Alexandria, Egypt — then farther East. Detailed for special duties en route, Bob and his squadron wreak havoc on the enemy, blasting Axis targets on land and sea.

This rapid-fire story of heroic and daredevil flying is one of the most thrilling of Canfield Cook's unforgettable tales of aerial combat in World War II.

GROSSET & DUNLAP
Publishers New York

LOST SQUADRON

SWINGING WIDE TO MISS THE RUNNING AIR CREW, BOB GINGERLY APPLIED THE BRAKES.

Lost Squadron *Frontispiece (Page 38)*

A LUCKY TERRELL FLYING STORY

LOST SQUADRON

By

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LOST SQUADRON

CHAPTER I

Excitement Wanted

In front of B Hangar at the Rawmi Air Base, some seventy-five miles northwest of Calcutta, India's largest city, stood a Flight Sergeant of the Royal Air Force, his ear cocked expectantly toward the south. But not until twenty-four specks had materialized in the distant skies could he hear the familiar and friendly drone of Merlin engines. Soon the specks took definite shape and resolved themselves into twelve Airacobras and twelve Stratohawks.

"All right, you fellows," he called back into the hangar. "Shake a leg there, and get these Stratos serviced."

Heat shimmered up from the temporary runway as the first Stratohawk rolled in for a landing. As it swung off the runway onto the taxi strip, another Stratohawk swooped down. Soon all twelve were spaced at wide intervals along the tarmac. Then

the Airacobras, which had been circling the field, came in and dispersed themselves on the far side of the airdrome. With a squealing of hydraulic brakes, the lead Stratohawk taxied to a stop directly in front of B Hangar.

Twin arcs of light shone from the whirling prop tips in the late afternoon sun. In spite of its dead black paint and two cannon muzzles protruding from each wing, the Stratohawk was a picture of streamline beauty. With the switching off of the engines, however, life seemed to leave the airplane. As the propellers swung to a stop, a door opened in the belly of the ship. Long legs felt for the ladder rungs which one of the ground crew had placed beneath.

"What luck?" eagerly inquired the Flight Sergeant of Flight Lieutenant Robert "Lucky" Terrell who descended.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Flight," said Bob as he pulled off his flying helmet, "but we didn't see hide nor hair of a Jap during the entire patrol."

"That's bad, sir," declared the Flight Sergeant.

"Bad!" interjected Flying Officer Don White, who had emerged in time to hear the conversation between Lucky Terrell and the Flight Sergeant.

"It's downright disgusting. Ten days now, and not a sign of a Nip."

"Aye," corroborated Sergeant McTavish, navigator and bombardier, who had joined the circle. "It's verra discouraging. Aw, weel," he added with unconvincing optimism, "tomorrow's another day. Now, if you'll excuse me, sir," he said, addressing Flight Lieutenant Terrell, "I'll be off and make up my report."

"O.K., Sandy," replied Bob. "See you later in the mess."

"Poor Sandy," said Bob as he and Don walked over to the dispersal hut to put away their gear. "I believe he's bothered by this inactivity more than anyone else."

"Yes," agreed Don, "I think he is. It's bad enough for us up there in the cockpit, keeping our minds on the flight and our eyes peeled for enemy aircraft. But in this kind of fair-weather flying, Sandy's only hope is that a Jap surface raider or a submarine will pop up."

The despondency of the Number One Stratohawk air crew seemed to have communicated itself to the rest of the Rawmi flying personnel. The recreation room was shrouded in deep gloom as

the pilots and navigators sat around after dinner. One would never have guessed from their appearance, as they lounged and sprawled unceremoniously over the recreation room furniture, that this group of three-score young men was ready for instant action against the enemy. In the stillness of the Indian evening, the fighting front seemed far away.

"When I think how anxious I was to come along on this mission and leave the secret Stratohawk base up there in Scotland," said Flying Officer Malcolm, "I could give myself a good swift kick."

"Those are my sentiments exactly," agreed Roy Benson. "And if you remember, I had a little more trouble getting here than the rest of you fellows."

"Aw, weél," mimicked Don White, "as Sandy says, tomorrow's another day."

"Another day is right," said Pilot Officer Colburn, "another day of playing nursemaid to a bunch of tramp steamers with a maximum speed of ten miles an hour."

"I should think," broke in Captain Taylor, Flight Commander of the American Airacobra unit which shared the station with the Royal Air Force, "that

you fellows would take this opportunity to relax. Especially you, Terrell and White, after that encounter you had with a Jap submarine."

"But that was nearly two months ago," protested Bob, "and it's about the only exciting thing that's happened since we arrived."

"Now back in the States where I come from," continued Captain Taylor, as though he had not been interrupted, "we take time out to relax."

"Yes, we do, don't we?" grinned Bob who, like many of the Stratohawk pilots of the Royal Air Force, was an American.

"I still think you fellows ought to take it easy like me," resumed Taylor, stretching his feet up over the edge of Colburn's chair. "For you never know when you're going to need that reserve energy."

"We certainly won't need it as long as the Nips stay in hiding," observed Benson.

"Or until Command gives us the green light to nick some of those Jap bases in Burma," added White.

"What bases?" asked Malcolm disgustedly. "Doesn't look to me as if the Japs had any."

At that moment the Tannoy speaker shrilled

forth blatantly, as if in open contradiction to the remarks just expressed, "Fighter pilots to the dispersal room. Stratos stand by. Fighter pilots to the dispersal room. Stratos stand by."

At the first spoken syllable, the assembled Airacobra pilots were electrified into action. Captain Taylor's long legs shot to the floor, and almost in one movement he and his pilots dashed for the door.

"Well," said Bob quietly, as the sound of running footsteps receded down the gravel path, "it looks like we may get some action at last. But then again, perhaps we'll be out of luck and they'll have all the fun. And then again, maybe not."

"What do you mean, Bob?" inquired Don, noting the eager look on his friend's face.

"I'm not sure that I know myself, Don," replied Bob. "I just have an idea, and I'm going to see if anything can be done about it." Leaping to his feet, he made for the door. "If anyone wants me," he called back, "I'll be in the C.O.'s office."

Group Captain Seaton was busy on the telephone, but he motioned Bob to a seat. The C.O.'s expression was serious as he continued his telephone conversation. "About fifty, you say, and headed toward Calcutta."

Bob wished he could make out what the sharp voice at the other end was saying.

"Right," replied the C.O. "We'll intercept as per plan."

"That means you'll need us, doesn't it, sir?" asked Bob eagerly, even before the receiver was back in its cradle.

"Yes, I think it does," replied the commanding officer. "It looks like a full-dress Jap raid. An advance spotter's report indicates that it's the heavy Mitsubishi type 96 bomber being used."

"Any idea where they're coming from, sir?" inquired Bob.

"No," replied Group Captain Seaton. "Since the American and British forces took over their advanced bases, we don't know where they're operating from. Tonight, however, I'm hoping that we'll find out."

"I had an idea on that subject myself," volunteered Bob. "That's why I hurried down here."

"Did you, Terrell?" inquired the Group Captain interestedly. "Let's have it. We still have a good half-hour before any take-off for interception is necessary. The Airacobras under Captain Taylor will try to pick them up on the way, and as soon as

they make contact they will report by radio."

"My idea, sir, is to shadow a Jap bomber back to its base from Calcutta. Although I'm anxious to get into the scrap myself, I'd like your permission to stand by to pick up a homing pigeon. If I succeed in tailing one, I'll try to return here and report the location of the Nip base. The Stratohawk range is at least five hundred miles greater than that of the Jap 96, so there shouldn't be any fuel problem."

"Your idea is excellent," replied Seaton. "As a matter of fact, I was about to discuss a similar plan with you. I'll arrange with Flying Officer Prentiss to take over command of the flight when you break off for Burma. At least I assume it will be Burma."

"Very well, sir," replied Bob, eyes shining. "We'll make ready to take off."

"Just a moment," called the Group Captain as Bob opened the outer door. "I want you to know that I appreciate your offer, especially since I'd have hesitated to ask you to do as much. We both know how much danger this mission involves. All I can say is that I hope you have the best of luck and are able to return with the information."

"Thank you, sir. You can be sure I'll do my best."

CHAPTER II

Burma Chase

When Bob reached the dispersal room, he found all the Stratohawk pilots, copilots, and navigators assembled. Dejection had given way to high excitement. The Stratos, unlike the deadly Airacobras, had not been designed for interception, and therefore combat opportunities had been rare since they joined forces with the American fighter squadron.

"What's the score, Terrell?" called Colburn as Bob entered the room. All the air crew members were eager to know what part they would have in the fracas.

Before Bob could reply, the Intelligence Officer's voice droned over the loudspeaker, giving all available facts about the size, strength, and disposition of the attacking forces. He was followed by the Meteorological Officer, who gave the weather forecast. Then Group Captain Seaton outlined the general over-all plan of attack, advising that Flying Officer Prentiss would be in charge of the squadron if and when the raiders were dispersed.

All eyes turned to Bob. What part was he going

to have in this show? Flying Officer Terrell had been in temporary command of the Stratohawk squadron since its arrival at the Indian base. Everyone admired the tall, clean-cut Texan, who wore the diagonally striped Distinguished Flying Cross beneath his Royal Air Force wings. Every man in the squadron had a distinguished flight record, but unusual qualities of personal leadership had placed Bob Terrell in his position, and they all had approved heartily when he was selected for the job.

"This should be a fairly interesting show," began Bob. "Fifty Mitsubishi 96's are on their way to bomb Calcutta, or so it seems from last reports. The Airacobra squadron is trying to make contact and we'll soon be up on top with them. We'll attack according to plan three, unless advice from Captain Taylor necessitates a change. It looks as if the Japs were hoping to reach their target while it is still light and make their getaway in the darkness. It's our job to blast those hopes. The same command plan will apply on this flight as on others, except that Flying Officer Prentiss will take over automatically when the enemy has been dispersed. I have another little job to do," he explained with a grin.

At this, Don White and Sandy McTavish looked at each other and smiled. They knew that if Bob had a job to do, they'd be in on it, too.

"O.K., fellows," called Bob. "Let's get down to our aircraft."

As the airmen left the dispersal room, Bob called Sandy to one side. "Better cut over to the Intelligence Office, Sandy, and pick up some charts they'll have ready for you. We may need them."

"Right you are, sir," replied Sandy with a twinkle in his eye, but he asked no questions.

The sun was setting as Bob and Don walked over to the Stratohawks whose engines were ticking over smoothly. The only light on the airdrome came from a last glow in the western sky and its reflection in the east.

"By the time we get over Calcutta," said Don, "there won't be any light on the ground."

"Not much," agreed Bob, "but there will probably be enough aloft for our work."

A few moments after Bob and Don had seated themselves behind the Stratohawk's controls, Sandy came running across the field and clambered up the ladder through the belly hatch. The ground crew slammed the door after him.

"Ready, Skipper," he called through the interphone. "I think I have everything we'll need."

"Everything we'll need?" repeated Bob amusedly. "How do you know what we'll need?"

"Oh, just my Scotch intuition," replied Sandy.

"Any time now, Bob," called Don, who had been watching the temperature and pressure gauges intently.

"Right, Don," replied Bob.

Releasing the brake, he signaled the ground crew to haul away the chocks. The Stratohawk lumbered along the taxi strip out toward one end of the runway. Following suit, the other Stratohawks peeled off from the long, well-spaced line. At an "O.K., T for Terrell" from Radio Control, Bob gave her the gun, and with a roar, the powerful engines surged to life. In seconds "T for Terrell" was airborne, wheels retracting neatly beneath the wings. One after another the rest of the Stratohawks rose behind the lead ship. Throttling back, Bob waited for each to drop into his assigned formation position. At ten thousand feet they swept directly south.

Sandy had climbed forward into the bombardier's nest in the nose of the Stratohawk, keeping a care-

ful watch for any signs of enemy aircraft. All other eyes in the squadron were also watching for the expected enemy planes which would be bearing along on their way toward Calcutta. Bob peered ahead intently. At any moment things should begin to happen. In the distance he could see the lingering rays of the sun catch the Bay of Bengal at a mouth of the Ganges River. The bombers would probably attack across the bay, and Bob watched eagerly, hoping to see them silhouetted against the light.

Captain Taylor's voice crackled in over the R.T. "Taylor to Terrell. Taylor to Terrell," he called. "We are engaging twenty-five Nips at fifteen thousand, approximately forty miles due east Calcutta. Believe balance attacking force approaching from south. Suggest you find them; we've already taken care of some of these babies."

"Terrell to Taylor. Terrell to Taylor," replied Bob. "Suggestion noted and being followed. Good hunting."

There was no need to relay this information to the rest of the Stratohawk squadron, for every radio receiver had been tuned in to the same frequency. So with a "Let's go, fellows" to his squadron mates,

Bob moved up the r.p.m. and swung to the southwest, below Calcutta.

The Nips had indeed chosen an ideal time for attack. Down on the ground, the last pools of daylight were gradually diminishing in size. Myriad pin points of brilliance marked Calcutta in the distance. But even as Bob watched, whole sections of lights began to go out.

Bob's thoughts were interrupted by Sandy's voice on the intercom. "I'm not sure, sir," began Sandy, "but I believe I caught a flash of exhaust flares directly ahead and several thousand feet above."

"Good work, Sandy."

Just then a report came in from the base, corroborating Sandy's observation. Ground detectors had picked up the bombers. They were headed directly from the south toward Calcutta.

"O.K.," said Bob to Don gleefully. "That's all we need to know."

Climbing swiftly he led the squadron up above the advancing Jap bombers' level. Now, well south of Calcutta, the light was almost gone. Bob could see the vague outline of aircraft two thousand feet ahead and below.

"Ready, fellows," he called through the R.T. "Plan three it is."

At his signal, the squadron quickly dispersed, each aircraft becoming an individual fighting unit. Bob swiftly half rolled, then plunged down toward the leading Japanese bomber. This maneuver allowed time for the Jap squadron to pass underneath. The Stratohawks had been sighted, Bob knew, for gunfire blazed up eerily as he dove. The Jap formation, still intact, roared on toward Calcutta. Now, Bob was almost near enough to use his cannon. Depressing the nose still farther, he saw that his optical sighting ring led the second bomber. The Stratohawk shuddered in recoil as Bob pressed the solenoid firing button.

Gently inching up on the stick, Bob let his fire rake ahead through the cockpit to the tail, nose, and fuselage of the lead bomber. As he rolled away from the terrific fire now coming from all sides, he was rewarded by a burst of flame and smoke that blotted out everything else from view. Pulling into a tight climb, Bob banked to find that the attacks of the other Stratohawks had broken up the enemy formation.

"That was about the nicest piece of timing I've ever seen," said Don. "If you'd been any closer to that Jap's right wing guard, I could have reached out and picked the red ball off his fuselage."

Bob heard, but did not reply. He was too busy estimating the number of Japs destroyed in the Stratohawk attack. At least six flamers were plunging toward the ground.

"Skipper," said Sandy over the intercom, "I'm quite sure you got both of them. The first one was smoking and fell off into a dive; and the second went down a flamer."

"I hope you're right, Sandy. Thanks for the good word, Don, but the real job is just about to begin. We'll have to leave the rest of the scrapping to the squadron, for I want to pick up one of these babies and follow him home."

"There's one," yelled Sandy excitedly. "Off to port."

Quickly Bob glanced through the greenhouse window and saw, about a thousand feet to the left, a twin-engined aircraft making a wide circle to the south. Exhaust flames were darting out hungrily into the gathering darkness, preventing any possibility of concealment.

"Oh, boy!" exclaimed Bob joyously. "Is this a piece of luck! That fellow sticks out like a sore thumb."

Throttling back, Bob watched him closely. There was no question but that it was an enemy airplane. Although the Stratohawks also had twin engines, their exhaust flares were ingeniously covered so as to emit no telltale light. The Jap bomber was similarly, but not as adequately, protected, and on one side the exhaust stacks must have been partly shot away. The enemy, in no mood to linger over Calcutta, was banking widely. He probably had dropped his bombs somewhere else, for the air-speed indicator on the Stratohawk hovered around two hundred and fifty miles an hour and the Jap was pulling away.

Slightly advancing the Stratohawk's throttles, Bob maintained his altitude and followed doggedly. The Jap, however, began to lose height, and as he did so, Bob followed him down, keeping the same respectful distance. For a while he must keep the Jap in sight but not allow the Jap to see him.

"He's either been badly hit," said Don, "or else he thinks he can make better speed down near the water."

The Jap continued to lose altitude until at two thousand feet he swung due east, heading toward the Bay of Bengal.

"This has all the earmarks of being a monotonous trip," said Bob. "Take over, Don; I want to talk to Sandy."

"At your service, Skipper," said Sandy through the intercom.

"Here's the score, Sandy," explained Bob. "The idea is to follow this Nip back to his lair so that we can find out where the Japs have established their new heavy bomber base. My guess is that it's somewhere in central Burma. If the weather holds and we can keep this Jap in sight, we'll simply follow him in, mark the spot, then check our course back home."

"Fair enough, Skipper," replied Sandy. "That ought to be easy if, as you say, the weather holds out. In any event, I'll keep tabs on our position as we go along and report back to you."

As Bob had predicted, it was a monotonous flight. The Jap had slowed down to about a hundred and sixty miles an hour, but seemed to maintain that speed without any trouble. The cruising range of the Stratohawk was a good three thousand miles

and, having full fuel tanks when it left the Indian base, there was little doubt that it could hang on and return. The moon and stars were intermittently blotted out by broken clouds. The Jap apparently was flying by compass, for he made no attempt to climb above to get sights on the stars.

"How long do you think this will keep up, Bob?" inquired Don.

"I wish I knew," answered Bob. "But we ought to be flying over the Burmese coast any minute now."

"We're over it already, Skipper," called back Sandy. "And unless this baby starts climbing pretty soon, he'll lead us smack into the side of a mountain."

Almost as if he had heard Sandy's words, the Jap climbed and swung slightly to the south. The two aircraft, now about a mile apart, were flying between two cloud layers. There had been no indication that the Jap pilot had seen the Stratohawk following him. Bob had been careful to keep his distance; but just as he was congratulating himself on the success of his maneuvering, the enemy plane was suddenly lost to view. When, a few moments later, the Stratohawk plunged into a cloud bank, he

knew the reason why. Bob held grimly to the course. If only his Stratohawk were equipped with the secret radio locator they had used so successfully back at the Scottish base. If only he could divine the other pilot's intention.

Soon they cleared the cloud, but there was no sign of the Jap. Three pairs of eyes desperately searched the darkness ahead.

"Skipper," called Sandy, "I think I saw him for just a brief moment, above and to port. I may be wrong, but I think he was climbing into that cloud layer above us."

"I hope you're right, Sandy. Anyway, we'll try to find out."

Don gave the controls to Bob, who pulled the Stratohawk up into the darkness. For several minutes they climbed, while the moisture-laden clouds whipped by the cockpit. As they burst into the brilliance of the moonlight, the clouds formed a billowy white carpet beneath them. Still there was no sign of the Jap bomber.

"What do we do now?" asked Don.

"There doesn't seem to be much left to do but go home," replied Bob. "But I'm going to stick around just a little while and hope. If he saw us before,

he may think he's lost us now; and over this territory he'll have to stay high up to keep out of those mountain peaks."

Advancing the throttle, Bob swung the Stratohawk in ever-widening circles, hoping to cross the Jap's line of flight. It was one chance in a thousand, but it worked, for Sandy's excited voice called up, "There he is, Skipper, below and to starboard at two o'clock."

This time Bob took no chances on losing his quarry. Gone was the wary stalking. The 96 dropped through the clouds as the Stratohawk closed to within a thousand feet. The Jap tried every trick in the bag to shake his pursuers, but none of them worked. In and out of the clouds he dodged, then with unsuspected speed, which Don clocked at close to three hundred miles an hour, streaked into the west without any further attempt at concealment.

"He thinks he's shaken us, Skipper," said Sandy.

"Maybe so," said Bob grimly, having now dropped back, high and above the fleeing Jap's tail.

The chase continued for another half-hour, due into the east, then suddenly the Jap bore down through the clouds and Bob followed suit. Don,

twirling the radio dials, had picked up an unintelligible jargon in Japanese. Bob listened intently through his headphones. Having frequently heard Jap broadcasts on the short wave back at the air station, he knew that this voice was more than ordinarily excited, but not a word was understandable.

"Well, anyway," said Bob, "he's probably in touch with his base, and that's something."

The Jap had now left them well below the lowest cloud layer and was losing altitude fast. Way off to the right, a thin flicker of light flashed recurrently. Sandy's keen eyes had picked it up even before Bob's, and he called out reassuringly, "O.K., Skipper. I know right where we are."

The Jap's starboard engine was now belching intermittent tongues of flame as he throttled back his engines. Bob had to weave the Stratohawk from side to side to stay in the air behind the landing Jap. The flickering light died out, and in its stead a runway was flooded with illumination. Aircraft were silhouetted sharply against the flare path. Quickly, Bob swung the Stratohawk into a swift-climbing turn. On the lighted runway he could see smaller aircraft taking off in quick succession.

Already the wheels of the Jap bomber were settling on the landing strip.

"Oh, for a full bomb well," cried Bob, as, with thumb on the solenoid, he dove steeply for the Jap airdrome.

His cannon blazed a swath of fire as the Strato swept down over the runway. The landing 96 ground-looped, a smoking ruin. A fighter aircraft, taking off, nosed straight down into the runway. Figures were wildly running for cover across the field. Anti-aircraft fire was now leaping up at them from all directions, but Bob held the Stratohawk low until well beyond their range and then, zooming high, climbed for altitude and headed directly home.

Nearly two hours later the Stratohawk's wheels bit into the metal runway at the station.

"Any luck, sir?" inquired the Flight Sergeant as the belly door swung open.

"Plenty this time," replied Bob cheerfully.

"I think you'll find that everybody's waiting up for you, sir," replied the Flight, "and Group Captain Seaton said he'd like to see you just as soon as you came in. He's over in the briefing room now."

Everybody *was* waiting up for them, it seemed, but Bob hurried directly into Group Captain Seaton's office.

"Well, Terrell," said the Group Captain with an inquiring smile. "I see you're back. With good news, I hope."

"The very best, I think," replied Bob. "We found that Jap base, and Sandy has the exact location taped right down."

"Good work, Terrell," replied Seaton. "It's been a good night's work altogether. Between the Airacobras and ourselves at least twenty bombers have been accounted for. And now that you've found their base, we may be able to account for the rest of them tomorrow. The boys all wanted to stay up and wait for you, and as long as they have, I'm going out and give instructions for tomorrow's raid."

The Group Captain's instructions were brief and to the point. "Stratohawk air crews will assemble here at three-thirty in the morning. We're going to pay a visit to a Jap air base."

"Wow," said Don, as he left the briefing room. "And I used to fuss at getting up at six back on the farm!"

CHAPTER III

Nipping the Nips

It was dark when the air crews assembled early the following morning.

"I understand we have you to thank for this pre-dawn flight, Terrell," called James Dawson, the long rangy Australian from "down under." "Seems like you did a pretty good job of tracking last night."

"We found one Nip airdrome, anyway," replied Bob, "and I guess that's the reason for this early morning turnout. No hard feelings, I hope."

"Just pulling your leg, Bob, that's all," replied Jimmy Dawson. "You know that we'd be glad to stay up all night for a crack at the Japs."

Don, late as usual, came clattering into the briefing room wiping the remains of a hasty breakfast from his face. "Not late am I, Bob?" he inquired.

"No later than usual," replied Bob, "if that's what you mean."

At that moment Group Captain Seaton entered the room and all the air crew members rose from their seats.

"O.K., fellows," he greeted them informally,

"please sit down and we'll get on with the business. We are happy to announce that already there are twenty verified victories in the show over Calcutta, and Flight Lieutenant Terrell was successful in trailing one of the Jap bombers back to its base. So, thanks to Terrell, we know the location of at least one of the enemy bases. Whether or not all of last night's aircraft flew from that base, we don't know. But we do know that one returned there and was destroyed while landing. The base is approximately five hundred miles from this point. It's my intention to attack there at dawn, which will mean leaving here at four-thirty, allowing for an easy two-hour flight at cruising speed. I shall lead this mission, and Flight Lieutenant Terrell will be second in command. It's my hope that our arrival over the airdome will coincide with their morning patrol preparations.

"From Terrell's report we know that enemy fighters as well as bombers are based there, and the field is heavily protected by flak. We'll carry full bomb loads and come in for a low-level strafing attack when the bombs have been released. We want to knock this base out of commission, for its primary purpose is undoubtedly to bomb Calcutta

and other near-by Indian cities and to hamper the efforts of our ground expedition into Burma. Now, Terrell, will you tell us what you know of the base?"

"There isn't much I can tell," began Terrell, "because it was dark when we arrived. But having seen the enemy fighters take off and having experienced the flak, we do know that much about it. Apparently it's a large field, with a good number of buildings scattered around. We've taped out its exact location, which you will have later on in case we become separated. It's situated in a valley among the mountains. That's just about all I can tell you, except that the Jap bomber we followed was a Mitsubishi 96, which must have a considerably longer range than we've given it credit for."

The Chief Intelligence Officer then gave details of position and topography. "From the position of the airdrome given us by Flight Lieutenant Terrell, we find that the maximum elevation of the mountains near by is six thousand feet. The surrounding country is wild and desolate, and a forced landing would be extremely difficult, for there is almost no flat surface. And besides, all the territory is in enemy hands."

After the Meteorological Officer had given the weather information, Group Captain Seaton went on, "So, gentlemen, that's about all we have to go on. Anything else we'll have to find out when we arrive. The general attack plan will simply remain as bombing and strafing, and the details will depend on our reception. I'll give them to you over the radio."

While the briefing was going on, the Stratohawks had been fueled and bombed up, and by the time the pilots had dispersed to their waiting aircraft, the engines were up to temperature and ready for take-off. Rendezvousing at ten thousand feet, the Stratohawk squadron swung toward the southeast, with Group Captain Seaton up front. Only the navigation lights were visible to the pilots, and these were shut off later as eyes became adjusted to the darkness.

"Take over for a while, will you, Don?" asked Bob. "I'm going to get myself some shut-eye. You look as if you'd had enough sleep to last you the rest of the week."

"O.K.," replied Don, "but actually I could use twice as much sleep as I've had."

Bob leaned back comfortably in the pilot's seat

and in a moment was half dozing. The rhythmic beat of the engines was a comforting lullaby, but if they should skip a single beat, he would be instantly awake and on the alert.

Their course would carry them over the Blue Mountains on the Burmese border, and the ten-thousand-foot altitude at which they were flying would clear any peaks on the way. At five-thirty, thin streaks of light appeared in the eastern sky, and the stars began to lose brilliance. As yet, however, the ground beneath was barely distinguishable.

Suddenly, without warning, the whole plane seemed to drop from beneath them. Bob woke at once and grasped the controls.

"I was about to nudge you, anyway," said Don, grinning, "for if you've had enough sleep, I'll grab some myself—until we hit another downdraft."

"Go to it, Don," said Bob, taking over.

In a few minutes Don was snoring heavily. Thoughtfully, Bob leaned over and switched off Don's chest mike so that neither he nor Sandy would be subjected to this additional noise.

"Mr. White was strangely quiet tonight," called up Sandy through the intercom.

"I guess he really is tired, like all of us are, Sandy.

I hope you've been getting some rest as we go along, for you're likely to need it before we return to the base."

"I managed to get a few winks, but I think I'll stay awake now. I've been checking the course followed by Group Captain Seaton's navigator and we seem to be going in head-on. I'm inclined to think we'll arrive a little before the Group Captain estimated, for we've had a following wind most of the way."

It was just like Sandy, Bob thought with amusement, to keep tabs on the C.O. Aloud he said, "I think you're right, Sandy. I've noticed that, too. The sooner, the better. I only hope we catch those birds by surprise."

"Would you care to have a bite of scone, sir? The cook made up some especially for me in the mess."

"I don't mind if I do, Sandy," replied Bob. "It's a good thing Don White didn't hear you mention food, or there wouldn't be enough to go around."

Sandy climbed up forward into the bombing nest and adjusted his bomb sight while Bob munched appreciatively on the scone. He knew that the little navigator would be peering down, ready to warn

of any aircraft approaching from beneath or to press the bomb button when the target was reached.

The sky had lightened considerably now, and the Stratohawks were clearly silhouetted against the light of the east. In the clear air, visibility seemed unlimited, and it was easy to distinguish the jagged terrain about which the Intelligence Officer had warned them. Bob had never seen more desolate country.

Just as Sandy called, "Ahead and to starboard," the R.T. broke into life.

"O.K., fellows, we'll attack from this altitude at four hundred. I'll take the west hangar line. Terrell, go after the east with your section. String out for a complete pattern on the first run, then we'll converge at the north end and dive in for the strafing. Good luck to you."

Bob heeled his Stratohawk over, veering off beneath the C.O.'s section. Then, climbing back to ten thousand feet, he led his section toward the east hangar line. The Stratohawks were evenly spaced and far enough apart to minimize the effect of anti-aircraft fire, but close enough together so that their following salvos would blanket the hangars beneath.

There was a flurry of activity at the airdrome on the ground: lights flashed on and off, and planes hurriedly taxied across the field. None as yet had taken to the air.

"Gosh," said Don gleefully, "it looks as if we'd caught them napping."

"At least partly napping," replied Bob soberly. "I certainly hope they aren't too wide awake."

Sandy called for open bomb well; Bob's finger flicked the switch. He could hear the grinding of the long doors beneath the fuselage.

"Skipper," called Sandy, "let's hold for those storage tanks at the far end."

"Right, Sandy."

The airdrome down below was rocketing toward them as Sandy called for a correction, "Left, left."

Then, even before the nose of the Stratohawk had passed over the near end of the airdrome, came the welcome "Bombs gone."

Instantly Bob flicked the "close-door" switch and, lightened by several thousand pounds, the Stratohawk shot toward the sky. After him came the other Stratohawks as they released their bombs. A veritable hail of flak was now pouring upward, but the Stratos were safely over. There was no time

to look back on the damage they had done to the Jap base.

Sweeping to the northwest, Bob allowed space for the turn-in with Group Captain Seaton's section. No one needed instructions on the maneuver to follow; they had done it many times before. Through the plexiglass greenhouse window Bob watched the C.O. bank sharply to the right; automatically, he banked to the left. Now the two planes roared forward side by side; behind them, nose on tail, came the following Stratohawks.

Nosing down, they dove for the target. The Stratos jockeyed to left and right, so that the fire of each would clear the plane in front and yet sweep the field from one end to the other. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four thousand feet they roared toward the ground. Ahead, the Jap airdrome was bordered with smoke and flame. Jap fighters were taking off directly toward them on the central runway.

"Take the first one, Terrell. I've got the second," called Group Captain Seaton.

The first Jap Zero was now streaking almost straight up in an effort to climb above them. Bob eased back slightly on the stick to lead the Zero in

his sights. Each movement was deliberate, but results seemed simultaneous: the pressure on the stick, the squeezing on the button, the bucking of the Stratohawk as the cannon shells poured forth, and the explosion of the Jap Zero ahead. It was there one moment and gone the next.

Pushing down, Bob now headed directly for the ground where heavy bombers were scattered along both sides of the runway. Holding the button, he gleefully watched his tracers bite into the side of a 96. Flames burst from the wing tank, and tracers from following Stratohawks licked hungrily into other bombers. Releasing the button, Bob zoomed up and over the field. Like a long disjointed snake, the other Stratohawks climbed up after him.

Don had been busily checking the following aircraft through the rear-vision mirror. "Everyone accounted for in our section," he called out happily, "but I think there's one plane missing in the C.O.'s section."

"Not so good," replied Bob. "Who is it; do you know?"

"No, I don't. They've closed in again now."

They had gone almost twenty miles south of the airdrome before the squadron was able to re-form.

"We lost Sedgwick back there," called Group Captain Seaton to Bob over the R.T. "He caught a direct hit on the first run, and I saw them bail out to the north of the field. See what you can find out about him, will you, Terrell? Pick your own targets this time, fellows. Mine is headquarters. We will re-form at fifteen thousand at nine o'clock, but not until we've either run out of ammunition or knocked every blasted Jap out of the sky."

CHAPTER IV

Crash Landing

Every man was on his own now. Bob swung the Stratohawk violently back toward the Jap airdrome.

"Keep an eye open for Sedgwick and the others," he called to Sandy down in the bomber's nest. The navigator's view from beneath would be better than anybody else's.

"Aye, aye, Skipper," responded Sandy.

Swinging in at seven o'clock, Bob saw that the airdrome itself, as well as the built-up border, was now a mass of flames. Hangars and other buildings were ablaze, and few aircraft were left intact on the ground. Bob could feel the impact of ground fire against the metal skin of the Stratohawk. One heavy caliber missile came right through and shattered the windscreen. But his sights were on a heavy bomber even larger than the Mitsubishi 96 which, so far, had escaped any damage. It was still staked down to one side of the runway and ground crews were frantically trying to release the fastenings and start the engines. As they succeeded, Bob's

cannon shells found the cockpit of the bomber, shearing away the glass nose. A burst of smoke mushroomed from the fuselage as he flashed over.

Directly ahead, yellow flame and smoke were rising hundreds of feet into the air. With his right wing tip almost skimming the ground, Bob banked vertically around the conflagration, where Sandy's salvo had found its mark. Nosing up, Bob climbed for altitude to make another attack.

At that moment Sandy yelled, "There they are, Skipper. There they are—below."

Leveling off, Bob looked down. Almost half a mile beyond the north end of the airdrome he saw three shoots billowing out and rolling along like tumbleweeds in a summer breeze. Immediately a daring plan formed in his mind. He had noted on first approach that the concrete runway was being extended and that for at least two miles to the north the ground was comparatively flat.

"Hang on, you guys, we're going down for a look-see."

Banking widely to the left, he swung around over the smoking Jap base, then cut back through the smoke and inched toward the ground. As he had hoped, it was flat enough. Up ahead, running

away from the Jap airdrome as fast as their legs could carry them, were Sedgwick, the second pilot, and the navigator. The Japs had been too busy trying to protect themselves to think of taking any prisoners.

There was no time for questions and answers but, sensing what Bob had in mind, Don lowered the landing gear as the Stratohawk headed back into the north. In a moment the wheels were bumping crazily over the uneven ground, and the tail jounced up and down like a thing possessed. Swinging wide to miss the running air crew, Bob gingerly applied the brakes. Squealing protestingly, the Stratohawk came to a halt.

Sedgwick and his companions dashed toward the Stratohawk. One of them stumbled and fell, and the other two dragged him along. Sandy was already at the hatch waiting to haul them in. Don rushed down to give him a hand. Enemy fire was churning up the ground around the now motionless Stratohawk.

"O.K., Skipper," called Sandy at the same instant Bob heard the belly door shut.

There was no time to take stock. Advancing the throttle, he swung the Stratohawk around into the

enemy fire. He must head back toward the airdrome to gain sufficient yardage for a take-off into the wind. Taxiing as fast as he dared, he weaved from side to side. Machine-gun bullets zinged against the sides of the Stratohawk. Now increasing speed, Bob inched around in a wide arc. With the skill of a racing driver who knows exactly how much power his car will take on the turns without capsizing, he crowded his throttles for the take-off. Ahead, the mountains rose starkly for several thousand feet.

Still the wheels jounced on the uneven ground. Almost at take-off speed there was a sickening crunch and a metallic rending as the undercarriage was swept away. The Stratohawk seemed to settle into the ground. For an agonizing moment Bob felt that they would never make it. Then, with a defiant roar, the boosted engines lifted them clear. Banking deeply, Bob brought the Stratohawk around as the rugged mountain rocketed toward them. Swiftly he climbed, until they were well out of range of enemy fire. Bob could feel perspiration streaming down his face, and his body seemed soggy from head to foot.

Don clambered up and settled into the second pi-

lot's seat beside him. "Thanks, Skipper," said Don when he had adjusted his mouthpiece. "Just yesterday the M.O. told me I ought to lose about fifteen pounds, but thanks to you, I think I've lost twenty in the last five minutes."

"How are Sedgwick and the others?" asked Bob.

"Fine," replied Don, "except Walton, the navigator, who has a bad gash on the leg. Sandy's down there giving him first aid. Sedgwick and Beans are back in the bomb well, so for heaven's sake, don't throw the switch."

"We're in a tight spot, Don," said Bob soberly. "We washed out our landing gear, and that means a belly landing when we get back to the base. You'll have to stow those chaps away somewhere as high as possible; we'll likely rip out the whole bottom when we come in. Tell Sandy to keep out of the nose."

"Right, Skipper, I'll do the best I can and then I'll be back."

Bob breathed more comfortably as the engines continued to function perfectly. At least no oil or fuel lines had been severed and they had now gained a comfortable altitude. If he could avoid any run-ins with enemy aircraft, he might get through. Their ammunition was practically exhausted, and the im-

properly distributed weight of their passengers threw the plane off balance.

It was gratifying, therefore, to hear Group Captain Seaton's voice over the R.T. "That was very nice work, Terrell. I can understand now why they call you 'Lucky.' Better head directly home, and we'll catch up with you after we dispose of a couple of Zeros that don't know when they're licked."

Sandy's cheery voice came over the intercom, "I have a course for you, Skipper." The incomparable Sandy seemed quite capable of giving first aid and navigating a plane all at the same time.

"I told Mr. White to tell you to stay out of that nose, Sandy," called Bob. "What's the idea of disobeying orders?"

"Oh, did you, sir?" asked Sandy innocently. "I guess Mr. White must have forgotten to tell me."

"Listen, you sinner," went on Bob, "you get out of there just as fast as you can. We've lost our undercarriage and we'll have to make a belly landing when we get to the airdrome."

"Yes, I know," replied Sandy. "But if you don't mind, sir, I'll stay here until we come in for the landing."

Ten minutes later the remaining Stratohawks

were grouped tightly around Bob's plane. Every pilot knew the danger that lay ahead, for the Stratohawk landed at approximately a hundred air miles an hour. Even with a stiff breeze, which would retard the ground speed, results were likely to be disastrous.

Bob turned a few minutes later to find Sedgwick, instead of Don, slipping into the second pilot's seat.

"How's Walton?" inquired Bob.

"Oh, I think he'll be all right," responded Sedgwick. "He was bleeding quite a bit, but I think Sandy's first aid has taken care of that."

"That's fine," said Bob. "We'll be over the airdrome soon."

There was a long silence between the two pilots until Sedgwick finally said, "That was a pretty swell thing you did, Terrell. I just want to say thanks for the three of us."

"Oh, forget it," replied Bob. "By the time we come in for a landing at the field you'll be cussing me out, if you're able to cuss."

Sedgwick went back into the waist of the aircraft and in a few moments Don returned to his place.

Group Captain Seaton called the airdrome for wind direction and velocity. "Eighteen miles per

hour at eleven o'clock," was the answer. This meant a ground speed of somewhere around ninety miles an hour when the Stratohawks came in to land. Without landing gear, these figures were not encouraging to Bob.

"I think, sir," said Bob, calling to Seaton over the R.T., "that if you don't mind, I won't use the metal runway. I'd prefer to take a chance on the parade ground."

"That's very wise, Terrell, and I'll see that everything's in readiness for you. In the meantime, I'd suggest that you keep cruising around the field until we've landed. I want to check everything myself and clear the parade ground."

"If you see any stray cushions around," suggested Bob, "you might scatter them over the surface."

Bob could make out the airdrome now, nestling in the hills.

"All right, Sandy, I want you to get out of there just as soon as we turn in to land. We'll keep cruising around until the rest of the Stratos let down. Don, you take over while I check our cargo."

Bob slipped through the narrow space between the pilot's seats. Walton, in spite of his torn leg, grinned up at him. Bob took off his chute and wedged it

between his head and the face of the bulkhead, then passed over Sandy's and Don's chest chutes. Sedgwick and Beans, the second pilot, were sandwiched into the smallest possible space.

There was nothing more that Bob or any of them could do now, except hope and pray. Don had kept the Strato cruising steadily around the station while Bob attended to the wants of his unexpected passengers. He relinquished the controls as Terrell slid back into his seat.

The rest of the Stratohawk squadron had rolled down the runway and Bob knew that their air crews and everybody else on the station would be watching, concerned about the outcome. The parade ground was being rapidly cleared; fortunately, it was free of obstructions on three sides. Though hard, the cinder-covered ground was level. It was not encouraging to see the ambulance—"Hungry Lizzy" —and the big fire truck pull in and park near by. If the plane should burst into flame, the firemen in their asbestos suits would walk right through to pull them out.

"All right, Sandy, come up out of there," called Bob. "I think the safest place for you is behind the cockpit seats."

Sandy stowed himself away as best he could. Don had removed his flying suit and handed it back to the little Scotsman.

"Here, stick that up against your face, you little chiseler," he said brusquely. "But don't you dare blow your nose on it."

Bob throttled back on the engines and came in toward the landing ground in a low glide. If anything, the wind had lessened rather than increased. The Stratohawk settled quickly, then advancing the throttles Bob swept clear of the parade ground.

"Just trying it for fit," he explained to Don.

Everyone knew that the next time would be the real thing. Flaps fully down, the crippled Stratohawk came in low again, then Bob cut the switch of both engines. There was no turning back now. Buildings flashed by at an alarming speed, seemingly faster now that the roar of the engines had died down. With but feet to spare, the Stratohawk approached the end of the parade ground. Only scant inches now separated them from the rough cinders, then with an agonizing grinding of metal and a cloud of dust, the Stratohawk was down.

It seemed to Bob, in the cockpit, as though the earth had suddenly been slid under him, and that

the rending of the metal was a protest against this rude handling. As he pivoted from the waist and his body headed toward the instrument panel, it flashed through his mind that he'd be lucky if he got out with only a black eye.

Then—darkness.

An hour later he awoke in the station hospital to see a group of concerned faces around his bed.

"Here," said the M.O. "Take this."

Before the confused Bob could gain a clear picture of what had happened, he swallowed a nasty-tasting concoction that seemed to restore his mental processes.

"Nothing much wrong with you," said the Medical Officer gruffly, "except a crack on the head. Now that these fellows are convinced you're alive, I'll rustle them out of here so that you can get some rest. You need it."

Eric Prentiss, Bob's English friend, seemed to show more concern than any of the rest.

"My word, old chap," said Eric, "that was a pretty good stunt you pulled. And I'm certainly glad you came through with no worse than a bump on the head."

"How about the rest of the fellows?" inquired Bob. "Did they get out all right?"

"Here they are," replied Eric. "You can see for yourself."

Bob looked around the bed to see the grinning faces of Don, Sandy, Sedgwick, and Beans.

"I'm over here," called Walton from the next bed. "They wouldn't let me stand around and wait with the others. And all I can say is thanks a lot for everything, sir."

"How about the Strato, Don? Is she a washout?" inquired Bob.

"Nothing that a little work won't fix," replied Don. "We bent the prop tips a bit, and the belly could stand some paint, but that's about all."

As Don said this, Group Captain Seaton hurried in. "The M.O. tells me that you're coming along fine, Terrell," he greeted, "only you're to stay in bed for a little while. That was a mighty good show you put on all around. Good show," he repeated. "And, incidentally, I have some good news for you. I knew this before we started off on our raid this morning, but I thought I'd reserve it until dinner tonight. Now that you'll be having your dinner in

bed, I think I'll tell you. Every one of the original Stratohawk crew members who flew here on the secret mission from Scotland has been cited for his part in the show. And you, Terrell, as leader of that mission, have been granted an extra special distinction. Gentlemen," concluded the Group Captain as Bob's comrades listened eagerly, "Squadron Leader Terrell is in line for congratulations."

"Two and a half piston rings," Bob thought unbelievingly after his friends had left. That was all he had time to think about, for the doctor's medicine was taking full effect.

CHAPTER V

A New Assignment

Bob Terrell was still in the hospital on the third morning after his crash landing on the parade ground.

"Listen, Doc," began Bob the minute the Medical Officer entered the room, "do you have to keep me hanging around here any longer? I feel swell."

"You do, eh? Well, that's fine. Now, let's have a look at you."

He examined Bob critically, then shook his head. "No, I'm very much afraid, very much afraid."

"Very much afraid of what?" asked Bob in alarm.

"Afraid there's nothing more we can do for you," answered the Medical Officer grimly. Then, seeing Bob's startled look, he added laughingly, "I mean there's nothing more that needs to be done, and you can get out of here just as fast as you like."

"Whoopee!" yelled Bob, swinging out of bed.

"Take it easy, now, Terrell," cautioned the doctor. "For a few days you'll be on the inactive list. No flying, not even for fun. Remember that."

"O.K., Doc," promised Bob happily. "But I'll be mighty glad to get out of here. Not that I don't appreciate everything you've done for me."

The hospital orderly scuttled off to get Bob's clothes. On standing up, Bob realized that the doctor's advice was well founded; he did feel a little weak.

"Look who's in circulation again," said Roy Benson to Don White as they entered the room to pay Bob a visit.

"Hello, fellows," responded Bob. "You're just in time to formate back to quarters with me."

Outside, Bob breathed deeply as he walked along the gravel path. It was good to be in the open air again.

"Well, what's new?" he asked finally.

"Nothing new," replied Don. "Just the same old patrols; but of course I've been grounded while you've been in the hospital."

"The same old patrols is right," agreed Benson. "There hasn't been a yip out of a Nip since we blasted their airdrome in Burma."

"Oh, that reminds me," said Don. "Intelligence is going to show us some pictures they made of the airdrome yesterday. The rumor is that we did a fairly good job the other day."

"That ought to be something worth seeing," remarked Bob.

"And also," continued Don, "the C.O. wants to see you pronto. I almost forgot to tell you."

"Never mind a little thing like that, Don," gibed Bob. "It's a mere detail. If you fellows don't mind, I'll pop over to his office right now and find out what's on the fire."

"Think you can make it alone?" inquired Roy Benson solicitously.

Bob's only reply was an indignant look, and he strode off to the C.O.'s office. Group Captain Seaton was busy when he arrived, but the adjutant assured him, "I know he's anxious to see you, sir, and I think he has some rather interesting news for you."

"Come on, Thompson," coaxed Bob. "Let's have it. You look as if you know what it's all about."

"Is that Terrell out there?" boomed the C.O.'s voice through the closed door. "If it is, send him right in."

Bob responded quickly and found Captain Taylor closeted with Group Captain Seaton.

"No, Taylor, you stay right here. We'll go over this whole business together. Well, Terrell, you look as good as ever, now that your bump has gone down and they've washed your face."

"Congratulations on that new piston ring, Terrell," said Captain Taylor, offering his hand.

"Thanks, Taylor," replied Bob, shaking hands heartily.

"That ought to get you a major's rank whenever you decide to transfer into the United States Army Air Force."

"Here, now, Taylor," interrupted the Commanding Officer. "We can't afford to lose any more of our American boys."

"There's something in the wind, isn't there, sir?" asked Bob, addressing Group Captain Seaton. "The adjutant seemed to be bursting with information. I think if I'd had a few more minutes I might have dragged it out of him."

"Yes, there is, Terrell," replied the Group Captain, "and Taylor and I were just discussing it. You, incidentally, are very prominently involved. First

of all, we expect twelve of the new Stratohawk types to arrive this afternoon."

"That's wonderful news, sir," broke in Bob. "But I don't see how they could be much better than the ones we've been flying."

"You'll find a difference, I think," mused the C.O. "I only hope that they beat out the monsoons and arrive intact. The second bit of news, Terrell, is that from now on you'll be in permanent command of the squadron, and your first assignment will be one which I think will interest you a great deal. Although you will remain attached to my group, you and your squadron will move to another airdrome."

"Another airdrome?" Bob was startled.

"Yes, about two thousand miles from here, in Chekiang Province, China. It's southwest of Shanghai, not far from the East China Sea."

"Wow!" exclaimed Bob. "That's enemy territory, isn't it? And if I remember my geography correctly, it's not over a thousand miles from Japan."

"You're perfectly right about the distance from Japan," replied the C.O., "but it's no longer enemy territory. The Chinese have recently managed to

win back some airdromes from the Japs, including this one. We're proposing to operate from those airdromes, and that's where you'll come in, Terrell."

"I'm afraid that I don't quite follow you, sir. Maybe that bump on my head was a little harder than I thought."

"Taylor, suppose you go over the whole plan with Terrell," suggested the C.O. "It's really quite a bit to absorb at one sitting, Terrell. I'll see you chaps in the mess," added the Group Captain as he left the room.

"You are just about the luckiest stiff I've ever known in all my life," began Captain Taylor.

"What do you mean, Taylor?"

"Why, I mean, you poor fish—" replied Taylor scornfully, "I suppose I should say 'sir,' now that you're a Squadron Leader—I mean that this is just about the prize apple in any airman's barrel. You'll be sitting within bombing range of Tokyo. It burns me up to think of you guys going off on this mission while the rest of us have to stick around here in India, waiting for the push."

"Yes, I know how you feel, Taylor," agreed Bob thoughtfully, "and I wish you were coming along. The thing that had me buffaloed for a minute was

the idea of being shoved from the position of Flight Lieutenant to Squadron Commander, with a command two thousand miles away in the middle of Jap territory. I'm just as keen as you are at the chance of getting that close to Tokyo. Well, anyway, let's hear the rest of it."

"O.K., Terrell. Forget my beef; it was jealousy, that's all. We all know now, of course, that the Japs are trying to get through Burma to attack India. And to put a crimp in those ideas, both British and American troops are active along the Indian frontier. We also know that it'll be a long and bloody job to push the Japs out of Burma and across China. If we can knock out the Japs at home and cut their supply lines, we'll immobilize their forces everywhere."

"Yes, I know all that," interrupted Bob impatiently. "Let's get down to cases."

"You're to be the advance guard of this aerial push. Because your Stratohawks function both as bombers and fighters, the command apparently figures that you can do the best job in holding those airdromes until the wherewithal is flown in to staff and service them. So far as I'm concerned," he added, grinning, "I figure that half a dozen Aira-

cobras under my command could likely do a far better job, but I'm not the joint command."

"So that's all I have to do," said Bob, adding, under his breath, "Holy Moses!"

"'Holy Moses' is right," agreed Taylor, "and you're going to need every bit of luck attached to that nickname of yours. Speaking of luck," he added, "I think you ought to get an Oscar for that airdrome pickup you did the other day. Sedgwick told me when he first saw you coming down he thought you were a Japanese Dragon, then as soon as he saw the rondels he knew you were an angel."

"I don't know about the angel," laughed Bob, "but I agree with you about the luck. I'm sure going to need it."

During lunch, Group Captain Seaton announced that photos of the bombed Jap airdrome would be shown after dinner. He also stated that twelve new Stratohawks were due that afternoon and the new air crews would remain at the station. He said nothing whatever about the China flight assignment, nor did Bob mention it to any of his pilots. He could not refrain from discussing it with Sandy and Don, however, when the afternoon patrols had taken to the air.

"Well, Skipper," said Sandy, "I felt that we were about due for something exciting."

"Wait a minute, Sandy," interrupted Bob. "Do you hear what I hear?"

All three strained their ears to note the unfamiliar, high-pitched throbbing, which grew louder in intensity.

"I'll bet it's the new Stratohawks," said Don.

The three rushed for the porch. Sure enough, winging in from the west was a squadron of twelve aircraft with the familiar Stratohawk silhouette. One by one they peeled off for the landing. Bob led the way to the tarmac and broke into a run not befitting the dignity of his new office. The first of the new Stratos was pulling up in front of the hangar as he arrived.

"There's the reason for that high pitch," exclaimed Don. "See those new coaxial props!"

"Oh, boy!" shouted Bob. "Are they something!"

"Skipper," said Sandy, "do you see what I see, sticking out of the tail?"

"I certainly do," said Bob, "and will that be a surprise to the Japs!"

"I'm looking for Squadron Leader Terrell," said a tall R.A.F. Flight Lieutenant, approaching the three.

"I'm your man," replied Bob genially.

"How do you do, sir." The Flight Lieutenant was obviously surprised at Bob's youth. "My name is Woodson, and I was told to report to you, sir. We've just come in from Cawnpore on the last leg of our flight from England—or rather from Scotland, your old base. I heard quite a lot about you up there, sir," he added.

"I'm glad to know you, Woodson." Bob extended his hand. "This is Flying Officer Don White, and this is Sergeant Major Sandy McTavish, my navigator. And congratulations on bringing the whole squadron through intact. What do you think of the new Stratohawks?"

"There's nothing in the air like them, sir," responded Woodson enthusiastically as they walked up to headquarters. "You couldn't possibly understand what I mean, though, until you fly one of them."

"Any trouble on the way?"

"None at all, sir," replied Woodson, "except a bit of rain east of Curaco. We had orders," he added, "to stay out of trouble on the way, so we had to pass up any excitement."

When they arrived at headquarters, Bob introduced Woodson to Group Captain Seaton.

"I'm afraid it's going to be a little tough on you, Woodson," said the C.O., "for Squadron Leader Terrell is going to take over your new Stratohawks."

"I'm pretty much resigned to that, sir, because they told us about it before we left. They're pretty rich for the blood, though."

After the new air crews had been fed, Bob and Woodson went back to the tarmac where Woodson explained the Stratohawk's new features, one by one. Major changes were the coaxial propellers, which enabled the Stratohawk to climb almost straight up into the air, and the fixed high-velocity gun firing from the tail. Woodson explained the ingenious sighting system which enabled the pilot, while sitting in the forward cockpit and looking ahead, to aim his fire at an enemy in the rear. Otherwise, changes were a general cleaning up of the design for greater streamlining. This, Bob knew, would be reflected in greater speed.

"I wish I could take her up now," sighed Bob ruefully, "but they have me on inactive duty for a couple of days."

"She'll keep, sir," said Woodson, "but I'm going to hate to give her up to you."

"Well, at least," said Bob, knowing how every pilot feels about his ship, "you're going to get a good one in exchange. I'd take you over right now and introduce you, but she's in the maintenance hangar having her face lifted."

It was a happy crowd in the mess that night. The crews of the twelve Stratohawks were the first arrivals at the Rawmi station since Bob and his crew had been stationed there. For the Britishers, it was a great chance for first-hand news from home. All the men, both British and American, were interested in hearing about the secret base in Scotland, where the new arrivals had received their Strato training and operational flight experience. In an impromptu speech, Flight Lieutenant Woodson brought greetings from Wing Commander Cranbourne, their former commanding officer.

It was Bob's first appearance with the two and a half rings around his arm, the mark of his new rank as Squadron Leader. Seated beside him was Eric Prentiss, who had been promoted to Flight Lieutenant. Many of the other officers had been

moved up a peg, too, but what pleased Bob the most was that Sandy had been made a Sergeant Major.

During a lull in the conversation, Bob was suddenly startled to hear Flying Officer Sedgwick say, "You have nothing to worry about, Woodson, with Squadron Leader Terrell around. Why, just the other day we were shot down over a Jap airdrome in Burma. As we were beating it out of there as fast as we could, down comes Terrell, leans out of the greenhouse window, and says, 'Gentlemen, are you going my way?' He waited there as cool as a cucumber and then took off after we'd gotten on board."

Bob looked down the table, finding it hard to believe that Sedgwick would show such poor taste. Just as he was about to crawl under the table from sheer embarrassment, he noticed that Sedgwick's lips were not moving, although the voice continued. Sedgwick was glowering across the table at Beans, his navigator, who was giving a first-rate impersonation. Bob's scowl stopped him cold.

"Sorry, sir," said Beans to Bob, with a good-natured grin. "I just like to get Sedgwick's goat.

Ever since you saved our necks the other day, I can't get him to talk about anything else. And as for me, sir, it goes double."

"Come on, Beans, give us some more," everybody was yelling.

Beans obliged by next imitating Group Captain Seaton, who took the fun in good spirit.

Finally the Group Captain rose to his feet and, from his serious expression, everyone sensed that the time for foolery was ended.

"So far, gentlemen," he began, "the dinner has taken the form of a welcome for the newcomers to the squadron. But two of you, Squadron Leader Terrell and Captain Taylor, realize that this is more than a welcoming dinner. It is also, in a sense, a farewell dinner, for Squadron Leader Terrell and his squadron will be leaving us very soon."

A chorus of surprised exclamations greeted this announcement.

"At the moment, I can't tell you exactly what you'll be doing, except to say that you'll be off on a very special flight mission and, while still under my group command, Terrell will be your commanding officer."

The roar of approval which greeted these state-

ments showed Bob's popularity with his air mates.

"Speech, Terrell," came insistently from all directions.

"Well, fellows," acknowledged Bob, "it looks like we'll be on the move again. Having been given the details myself, I know that the move will be to your liking. Not that we want to leave here, sir," he said, turning to Group Captain Seaton, "but I know just how the fellows feel about getting more action, if it's possible to find it. I don't think there'll be any question about that on this particular hop. It's been arranged," continued Bob, "that we take our replacements on a familiarization flight tomorrow to introduce them to that most interesting of all operational flight work—convoy duty." Loud laughs from all the boys in Bob's squadron greeted this remark. "And if I can get clearance from the M.O., I'll be along with you. If the squadron is ready, we will pull out of here day after tomorrow."

A little later the pictures of the blasted Jap airdrome were thrown on the screen, leaving no doubt as to the success of their recent mission in Burma. The photographs showed that fires were still burning on the day following the attack, that every hangar was completely wrecked, and that the

airdrome was littered with the wrecks of Jap aircraft.

The Intelligence Officer summed up the situation adequately with, "It doesn't look as though a return engagement will be required for some time."

Bob spent the rest of the evening trying to convince the M.O. that he was sufficiently recovered to take off the next day when the new arrivals were to be introduced to the air over the Bay of Bengal. Finally Bob clinched the argument by saying, "Well, after all, sir, if I'm going to start off in a few days in charge of the squadron, I'd better have a little practice."

"I guess you're right, Terrell," conceded the M.O. "Anyone who can argue as well as you must have a reasonably good head on him. And it was your head that was injured, so I guess you're O.K. now."

CHAPTER VI

Careful Plans

The air was bright and clear on the following morning when the two Stratohawk squadrons took off on their patrol. The smaller Airacobras were already up and away. The repairs on Bob's ship were finished and he turned it over to Flight Lieutenant Woodson. In spite of the improvements on the new model Stratohawks, he was loath to lose his old ship. Don and Sandy felt the same way, although eagerly anticipating the flight in the new model.

From the moment of the take-off, they knew that Woodson had not exaggerated. Not only were there two propellers on each engine, rotating in opposite directions, but each had an automatic variable pitch. Gone was the seeming inclination to swing to one side, for the contrarotating propellers dampened out the torque, and the automatic variable pitch gave maximum efficiency at all altitudes. The old Stratohawks had climbed fast, but Bob was stunned as he watched the rate of climb on this new model.

"All I hope, Skipper," called Sandy from his spot beneath, "is that we never have to come in as fast as we've taken off. At least not as long as I'm up here in the nose."

Don's only comment was, "Great guns! What an airplane!"

"Here, Don," said Bob, "take over for awhile." Then, a few moments later, "Did you ever feel anything like it?" he asked, watching Don's jubilant face.

"Never before," replied Don, "and likely never again. They can't improve on this plane."

"I wish a Jap would come sneaking in on our tail," said Bob, "so we could use that stinger back there. They should have called this the 'Hornet,'" he added.

Though they ranged in wide circles around the convoy from Calcutta, not a Jap could be found to break the monotony of the flight.

"I don't like the looks of that sky over there," called Sandy through the intercom.

"I don't either," replied Bob. "And I've been keeping my eye on it, although there was nothing in the weather forecast to indicate that we'd have any trouble.

"Our relief is due in about five minutes," said Don.

"I think I'll get these chaps out of here right away," replied Bob. "This country is brand new to them."

Bob talked with newly promoted Flight Lieutenant Eric Prentiss over the R.T. and instructed him to carry on with the patrol until the relief arrived. Then summoning the replacement squadron, he led them back toward the station.

"We're getting into the monsoon season," he explained to Woodson over the radiotelephone. "You'll have plenty of dirty flying from now on, but I don't want you to get caught on your first flight. We'll high-tail it for home just as fast as we can. We may be lucky and beat this storm; if not, do your best to keep me in sight."

Within thirty miles of the airdrome the storm hit with all the fierceness of a line squall. There was no going around it or above it, so Bob drove the Stratohawks straight ahead, while water poured down on the greenhouse in seemingly solid sheets. Ten minutes of steady battling and he was over the field. Occasional breaks in the rain allowed intermittent views below.

"Terrell calling Woodson. Terrell calling Woodson," sang out Bob into the mike.

"Right behind you, sir," replied Woodson.

"The son-of-a-gun," said Bob to himself, but aloud, "Good enough, Woodson. That was pretty thick stuff to tail anyone in."

A radio check revealed that all the other members of the squadron had been able to hang on.

"O.K., fellows," said Bob, "open it up and we'll land in formation. And don't worry if you don't feel the runway, for there won't be any. There may be a few pools instead."

Bob passed his new squadron twice over the field before he set them down. He was taking no chances on cracking up his new charges. It was the first time he had attempted to land the new model Stratohawk, and he hoped that the landing characteristics of both types were the same. Lower and lower they bored through the gusty rain.

Soon the broad expanse of the field loomed up comfortingly ahead. As he had predicted, it was filled with pools of water. The wheels bit into soft earth and cascades of water enveloped the Stratohawk as it rolled along hub-high to a landing and finally stopped near the end of the runway. The

vague shadows trailing off to his right and left had stuck with him all the way. With a feeling of sincere thankfulness Bob led his new charges to the hangar entrance, where Group Captain Seaton awaited them.

"I'm not surprised to see you back, Terrell. But I must admit to some misgivings over the new arrivals."

"You don't need to worry about them, sir," said Bob. "They came in as though they'd been here all their lives."

"Yes, I noticed they came in all right," replied the C.O., smiling. "And I also heard your instructions to them aloft."

Fifteen minutes later all aircraft were safely on the ground. Bob's first major effort as a Squadron Commander came after lunch when he met with the air crews in the briefing room. The squadron's departure was scheduled for the following day, and much had yet to be done. Bob had gone over general plans with Group Captain Seaton, but the details were up to him. For the first time he realized the full import of his responsibility. Thirty-five other fliers, plus their ground crews, depended upon him for their future well-being.

"Well, fellows," began Bob, "we're scheduled to take off tomorrow, monsoons permitting. They'll be here off and on for the next five months. Now hang on to your seats, for when you find out where we're going you'll need some support. We're headed for the other side of China, and just about the only thing between us and the Japs will be the China Sea."

It was several minutes before his listeners could fully assimilate this amazing news. There had been considerable speculation among them as to their destination, but this was beyond their wildest dreams. Then the room filled with cheers. Bob had guessed right; they were raring to go.

"All right," he quieted. "So much for that. Our objective is somewhat less than two thousand miles from this point—actually around seventeen hundred air miles, but that's far enough over unfamiliar country. We'll have to make it in one hop, because there has been considerable Japanese infiltration along our route. You will receive complete particulars of our destination, so that if we become separated, you'll be able to make your way alone. The airdrome is one of several recently seized by the Chinese. We will be the advance squadron,

and it will be up to us to make it so hot for the Japs that the Chinese will be able to hang on to the newly won airdromes until other squadrons arrive.

"It will be a long and uncomfortable trip, but there should be plenty of excitement at the other end, if not on the way. Every inch of space must be used. We will have to carry ground crews and enough supplies to service our Stratohawks. The C.O. and I think that we should be able to pack enough in to maintain ourselves until the main push develops. Arrangements for food and fuel have already been made with the Chinese. Now, are there any questions?"

"Why, yes," said Flying Officer Malcolm. "Just exactly what is our destination?"

"The airdrome," replied Bob, "is about two hundred and fifty miles southwest of Shanghai, at the city of Kingsha. From all accounts it's not much of an airdrome, just a flat space with a few temporary buildings. Altogether, it will be pretty much of a camping-out proposition. We'll be taking some pup tents along with us."

"Aren't we going to run smack into the northeastern monsoons?" inquired Roy Benson.

"Yes," replied Bob. "I'm afraid we are. We'll

simply have to push through them. Because we must travel in a roundabout way to avoid the Japs in Burma, our air line distance will stretch out to nearly twenty-five hundred miles. Therefore, in addition to ground crews and supplies, we have to carry a full fuel load. There's one compensation, though. The first part of the trip will probably be the worst, for our air route will take us over the Himalayas.

"Now, I can't speak for the rest of you fellows, but I know very little about the Chinese, except that they're doing a mighty swell job against the Japs. Fortunately, one of our number has spent many years in China. In fact, he was born there; he is Flying Officer Robertson. As pilot and interpreter, he'll do double duty on this trip. I've asked him to tell us about the conditions we'll find, and particularly, how to act with the Chinese people, our allies."

Robertson was a quiet, studious chap, who kept pretty much to himself. All were surprised to learn of his unsuspected talent.

"It's hard to know where to begin," said Robertson, "and having been born and brought up in

China, my impressions are probably different from those of anyone who goes there for the first time. It doesn't seem to me, however, that there's much difference between the Chinese and the English or the Americans, except in appearance.

"My father was in government work there, and so we moved around quite a bit and saw different parts of the country. The Chinese have a sense of humor and enjoy a good joke. Although we hear a lot about the mandarin class, actually there are few class distinctions in China. People from the poorest classes have risen to high positions, like Chiang Kai-shek for instance. Living conditions in China are, of course, very different than they are in America or England. Some of the smaller villages and towns are completely without modern sanitation. While we think a great deal of our families, we don't carry our relationship to the same extreme as the Chinese. There you'll find several generations living together. Older people are treated with great respect because of their greater wisdom. One thing you'll notice, and one thing you should remember, is that the Chinese place great emphasis on courtesy. They are careful not to hurt anyone's

feelings, and do not go in for as much free criticism of each other as we do.

"Up in North China, the people are tall; in the central portion, they're of medium height; and in the South, they're short. But wherever they come from, all have dark hair and dark eyes. The Chinese may look funny to us, but remember that we look just as funny to them. Don't be surprised if you're regarded as a curiosity and people follow you down the street. But don't let it get your goat, for if you take it in good part they'll like you for it. I think, sir," he added, turning to Bob, "that that's about all I have to say. The main point is that, in spite of differences in appearance and customs, the Chinese people are fundamentally the same as we are."

"Thanks a lot, Robertson," returned Bob. "I think that gives everybody a better understanding of the Chinese."

The balance of the day was spent in familiarizing the pilots and navigators with their route and flight plans. Bob instructed each Stratohawk captain to check his ship thoroughly in preparation for tomorrow's take-off. He himself kept busy checking

supplies and apportioning them to the various aircraft. As second in command, Eric Prentiss worked closely with Bob.

"This," said Eric, "may well be our greatest adventure together."

"Yes," replied Bob. "I have a hunch that it may."

CHAPTER VII

Over the Himalyas

Group Captain Seaton was down on the tarmac the following morning to see the squadron off. "Just one final word, Terrell," he said, "and I can't impress this upon you too strongly. Remember that your main job is to hold the fort until the heavy stuff arrives. So don't get any big ideas about trying to level Tokyo to the ground even though you'll be within range."

As Bob climbed into his Stratohawk, he felt that the Group Commander's warning was hardly necessary since they were carrying no bombs. Instead, each aircraft was loaded down with vital freight.

The rains had broken on the previous evening and the squadron took off in clear bright air. Five Stratohawks flew in step-up echelon formation on either side of Bob's plane. The squadron climbed rapidly for the distant Himalayas on a course slightly east of north. Through the rear-vision mirror, Bob could see Roy Benson weaving back and fourth along the open edge of the V.

As they neared the formidable mountain range, the going became rough. They were climbing steadily and even at twenty-five thousand feet some of the distant mountain peaks appeared to tower still higher. Bob had never seen such magnificent scenery. After an hour's flying, the snow-capped giants were still beneath and around them. Climbing the squadron to thirty thousand feet, Bob tried to get away from the turbulent air. Twice he had opened up the formation to avoid dangers of collision.

"Kind of tough on our passengers," said Don.

"It certainly is," replied Bob. "I can think of more comfortable places than those bomb wells."

Sandy had been keeping a close check on the course, and now called for a slight swing to the east. "We're in China now, Skipper," he offered. "I'd give her five more minutes, then turn due east."

"How much margin will that allow us around Burma?" inquired Bob.

"A good fifty miles, sir, which ought to be enough."

"Yes, I should think so. There won't be much danger of running into Jap patrols in that area,

and this weather is a break. I only hope it lasts."

"It's too good to last, Skipper," replied Sandy pessimistically. "And I don't like the look of the sky right now."

"We'll get a weather report from Chungking as soon as we're far enough away from Jap-held territory," replied Bob. "But that will be our last chance until we reach Siangtan."

For another hour the Stratos flew along in radio silence. To conserve oxygen, Bob had dropped the squadron down to fifteen thousand feet. Heavy cloud layers blotted out all view of the ground.

"O.K., Don," instructed Bob. "See if you can raise Chungking now."

After several attempts, Don succeeded in making contact with the Chungking air station. In perfect English they were given complete weather data. The information was not encouraging. Visibility was zero at the Chinese airport and Bob was further advised that a similar condition prevailed throughout most of China, except along the coastal area of the East China Sea. All information was given in code, and it was reassuring to know that headquarters had paved the way so thoroughly. In spite of instructions sent to the Chinese forces, Bob had had

some misgivings as to how well they might be understood.

"What a relief!" he said. "Maybe they'll even have a band out to meet us when we arrive at Kingsha! But I don't like that zero ceiling. It's likely to close in on the east as well."

Since there was no longer any need to keep radio silence, Bob passed the information along to the other captains of the Stratohawks in case they had not picked it up. Now there was a perfect babel of talk back and forth among the pilots. Dick Burton had long since relieved Roy Benson as tail weaver. Those two planes carried lighter loads, as did Bob's, to allow greater maneuverability in case of a Jap attack. Well away from the Japanese lines now, the chances of enemy interference were remote, unless they should meet Jap raiders going to or from their targets.

Since crossing the Himalaya range, Bob had dropped the squadron down so that they were skimming the cloud layers, but the altitude was still too high to fly without oxygen. They were fast approaching the dark cloud area that Sandy had observed some time previously.

"I don't like the look of it, Skipper," he called.

"I'm certain we're in for some rough weather."

Bob did not like the look of it either. The black front stretched to the south as far as the eye could see, but breaks appeared in the north, somewhat like passes through a mountain range.

"I think, Sandy, that we'll try to go around it to the north. We haven't enough gas or oxygen leeway to attempt the top."

For another fifteen minutes they flew steadily north along the cloud wall, but the openings closed tightly on their approach. The whole front seemed to be moving steadily southward. Any further deviation from their course, Bob knew, would jeopardize the gasoline margin at their disposal. With a range of three thousand miles, the Stratohawks could afford to go a thousand miles out of their way, but almost half of that had been used up already in the detour around Burma. Bob checked fuel reserves with the other pilots and learned that one of Malcolm's tanks apparently had sprung a leak in the turbulent air over the Himalayas, for his reserve was considerably less than the rest.

"We'll have to push right on through," Bob said. "It will be tough going, and we may run into icing conditions. Do your best to keep formation. If we

become separated, make a beeline for our destination. Your maps show the position of enemy troops, but you know that their positions change every day. If you are forced to land, don't take any chances on getting inside the enemy's line. Allow a wide margin for safety. In any event it would be a pretty tough job to land between here and our objective, so here we go—and hang on."

Bob banked to the right and forged into the lowering clouds. Almost immediately the plane began to bounce. The Stratohawks were buffeted around like pieces of cork on a rapids, and the farther they flew, the rougher it got. Now and then the blackness ahead was rent by streaks of lightning. The pointed wing tips of the Stratohawks arched as though pulled back and forth by giant hands. Bob marveled at the engineering genius that made them capable of standing the strain.

Radio communication with the other ships was no longer possible, for the static from the electrical discharge drowned out their voices. Experimentally Bob climbed, then dropped down to lower levels. There was no improvement in either direction. Desperately he tried to get another report from Chungking, but the answers, if any, were unintel-

ligible. Nature did not seem to be cooperating with the Stratohawks' new commanding officer.

"Sedgwick and Prentiss are hanging on, in any event," called Don through the intercom. "But that's as far as I can see."

More like black smoke than clouds, the mist whirled around the greenhouse. Suddenly Bob's ship shuddered at the impact of heavy rain. It poured in torrents; in seconds, visibility was cut to nothing.

"We may be out of it after this, Don," called Bob.

It was pitch dark now, and if the sun was out it was nowhere to be seen. Then the rain stopped as suddenly as it had begun, to be replaced by yellowish white clouds of such thickness that the visibility remained almost as limited as before.

"I think I caught a glimpse of Sedgwick's plane," said Don, who had been watching intently through the greenhouse windows. "But I'm quite sure Malcolm isn't with us."

"It'll be a wonder to me," replied Bob, "if anybody's with us at all. No formation could hang together in this weather. I'm going to see if we can't climb out of this stuff."

For ten minutes they climbed steadily, but there

seemed to be no top. The ship felt sluggish in Bob's hands. Don noticed it, too, and as he took over the controls, there was a sharp crack on the cockpit window. Not a word was said; there was no need, for both pilots knew that the crack on the window was caused by a piece of ice hurled back by the prop blast. Bob realized what this would mean to the other more heavily laden planes.

The de-icers were hard at work, but would they be sufficient to overcome this danger? Spattering like machine-gun bullets, the broken pieces were flung against the ship's hull. There was little climb left in the Stratohawk now. The expanding rubber boots on the leading edges of the wings would break the ice off as fast as it formed, but Bob knew that as it formed behind, the wings would lose their lifting ability.

"Sandy," he called, "do your best to figure out where we are right now."

"I'll do my best, Skipper, but that's a pretty tall order. With no radio or sunlight for the last couple of hours, it'll be pretty much guesswork." In a few minutes Sandy called back, "I would say, Skipper, that unless our drift has been completely different from the way this whole cloud mass seemed to be

moving, we should be somewhere in the neighborhood of Lake Tungting, just south of the Yangtze River, which would mean that we're just about four hundred miles from Kingsha."

"We'll go down and try to find out."

Both Sandy and Don knew there was no other alternative, and for some time Don had watched the altimeter's slow unwinding. The powerful engines and the contra-rotating propellers were not enough to overcome the tremendous drag of the ice. Some of the turbulence had now disappeared. At five thousand feet the clouds were somewhat thinned, but the icing continued. According to the charts, the highest elevation within several hundred miles was not over two thousand feet. Bob dropped down to twenty-two hundred; the ground was still enshrouded in fog.

Don, meanwhile, had been doing his best to bring in Chungking, but without avail. Nor could he raise any of the other aircraft. The static, though lessened, was still too strong. His shrug told Bob only too plainly that no help could be found on the radio.

The Stratohawk was now losing height more rapidly than ever and, even with full boost to the engines, the altimeter continued to drop. At a

thousand feet the ground was still invisible; at five hundred Bob could see a confused pattern rushing by beneath. Now, barely two hundred feet above the earth, a group of buildings flashed behind; ahead, the yellow ground stretched into the mist. There was no choice.

Praying that there would be no obstructions, Bob waited for the crash that he felt must surely come. Desperately he jockeyed with the controls. The port wing was dipping dangerously low, and he had visions of it digging into the ground, but it lifted slightly as the port wheel struck hard. Then, with a vicious lunge, the aircraft was thrown to starboard. Bob had cut the engines, and it seemed an eternity before the right wing dropped and the heavily burdened Stratohawk lumbered along on an even keel. Bob groaned in relief as the tail settled. Then quickly he applied the brakes and the Stratohawk came to a halt well up the side of a gently rising hill.

"I'm certainly glad," called Sandy from the bombardier's nest, "that I was wrong about that lake. And don't ask me where we are, Skipper, because I haven't the faintest idea."

"A great navigator you turned out to be," teased

Bob. "If there were a little more sand here, I'd say we were on the Great Gobi Desert. Come on and let's see if we can get rid of some of that ice."

Setting the brakes to keep the Stratohawk from rolling backward down the hill, Bob dropped out through the hatch. Don and Sandy followed.

As they emerged, Sandy motioned to Bob. "Do you hear what I hear, Skipper?"

All three stopped and listened. From above came the familiar sound of Stratohawk engines. Sandy rushed to the door, anticipating Bob's instructions to set up a flare. Dashing back from the plane, the little navigator handed Bob a Very light pistol. As Bob tore behind the tail assembly, he fired into the air. A ball of fire rose, then fell in a wide green arc. At the same moment, Sandy's red flare sputtered out from the ground.

Seconds later, a dark mass loomed behind them as the hitherto unseen Stratohawk came boring in. It struck with a dull thud, then bounded dizzily, finally coming to rest not more than a hundred feet away.

"That's Sedgwick," called Don.

The three rushed over to the now motionless aircraft to greet Sedgwick, Walton, and Beans as they

dropped to the ground. The red flare was still burning brightly as they met.

"Boy, am I glad to get down out of that stuff," said Sedgwick. "In another minute, I'd have piled up right on top of you. What a day!"

"Well, anyway, two of us are down," said Bob practically. "But I hate to think of what has happened to the rest. A fine commanding officer I've turned out to be."

"Cut it out, Bob," said Sedgwick. "After all, you don't make the weather; you just have to fly in it, and no one could have anticipated this kind of stuff. I managed to stick to your tail almost up to the last minute, then I lost you and kept circling lower and lower until I saw the flare. Luckily I had enough space left to turn in toward it."

"The only thing left to do," said Bob, "is try to crack off this ice and hang around until the weather clears, and then attempt a take-off."

Just as the boys turned toward their respective planes, a high-pitched voice called out, "Please to not move."

Bob whirled in the direction of the voice and his hand shot for the automatic in his breast pocket, but it dropped helplessly to his side as he saw a de-

tail of soldiers with submachine guns pointed directly at them.

"You are our prisoners, please," said the high voice. There was no doubt as to the nationality of their captors, for the hissing "s's" gave them away. Three of the Japs took up stations behind the airmen, aiming machine guns solidly at their backs; the others formed a half circle around them.

The six fliers looked at each other dejectedly.

"If anyone asks," began Bob, "just remember that we . . ." His remarks were cut short by the muzzle of the submachine gun in his back, and Bob knew that any further remarks would merely be added to the long list of famous last words.

CHAPTER VIII

PRISONERS

THEIR captors led them for almost a mile over the dry brown earth to a sentry box, where Bob and his companions were forced to wait while the sentry telephoned excitedly. The visibility had now increased enough to afford a view of scattered buildings another mile in the distance.

Apparently the instructions were to bring them in, because as the sentry hung up the receiver, the soldiers again prodded Bob in the back and the six airmen walked on toward the distant buildings. As they passed through the gate of a barbed wire enclosure, Jap soldiers eyed them curiously. After entering a low building, they were lined up against the wall in an anteroom. One of the guards left the room and in a few moments he returned and motioned them to follow him down the corridor.

Again the guards prodded them. They were ushered into a large room, bare except for wall maps, a large table, and a chair. Again they were stood against a wall, the submachine gun muzzles

pointing at them threateningly. Possibly fifteen minutes later, a dapper Jap officer came through from an adjoining room.

"Well, gentlemen," he began in perfect English, seating himself behind the table. "To what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

"We were just flying by and thought we'd drop in," said Bob.

The dapper little Jap shot a rapid order to the guard. Two of them snapped their tommy-guns to clasps on their sides and methodically searched the six airmen. Hands probed at Bob's flying suit from head to foot. With a sense of relief he felt the hands miss his breast pocket and drop to his hips. The soldier searching Sedgwick was more thorough, and found the automatic in his slanting breast pocket. When the Jap officer hurled a torrent of abuse on the man who had searched Bob, the soldier roughly jerked the automatic from Bob's pocket, ripping the lining of his suit and scraping his chest. Trying not to wince, Bob clenched his fists to keep from grabbing the Jap by the throat and choking the life out of him.

"Now, gentlemen," said the Jap officer when the search was concluded, "if you will be so good as to

remove your flying suits. I think you will be more comfortable."

Slowly the fliers removed their helmets, masks, and coveralls.

"So!" said the Jap officer, sucking in his breath. "We have some distinguished fliers of the Royal Air Force. And you," he said, looking directly at Bob, "are the Squadron Leader."

Bob marveled at the Jap's English.

"I see that you are surprised that I speak your language so well," he said to Bob, looking for all the world like a little bantam rooster preening himself.

"Yes, I am surprised," admitted Bob. "Your English is excellent."

"Yes," agreed the Jap, "it is very good. You see," he went on. "I graduated from one of England's great universities—Oxford. Now, will you be good enough to tell me where you were headed?"

The six airmen stared straight ahead. Each one knew it was vital that the enemy get no wind of their plans.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that," replied Bob, "because I don't know."

"You don't know!" screeched the Jap officer.

"Don't think you can make a fool of me. No squadron leader of the Royal Air Force embarks on a flight without knowing his destination."

It sounded to Bob as though at some time he had been on the receiving end of Royal Air Force bombs.

Outwardly unmoved, he replied, "What I have said is quite true. We did not know where we were headed, for we could make no radio contact with our station."

"What station?" snapped the Jap.

"Chungking," replied Bob. "You see, we got one weather report but then could not re-establish communication with the station."

"But you're almost five hundred miles west of Chungking," objected the Jap, then stopped short, biting his lips.

"Yes," said Bob placatingly, "I guess we're a long way off our course. As a matter of fact," he added confidentially, "we had no idea where we were. When we left New Delhi this morning, the weather was fine and clear and it was beautiful all the way over the Himalayas."

The Jap commander made rapid notes as Bob spoke.

"So," he said, "you flew from New Delhi? And what time did you arrive at Chungking?"

"We didn't arrive," answered Bob. "We only talked to them over the radio. That was about one o'clock, but I don't think we were very far from there then. Their signals were coming in loud and we figured that we weren't over fifteen minutes flying time away, even in these old crates of ours."

"They must be crates," agreed the Jap commander, "if it took you nearly four hours to fly from Chungking here."

He gave a staccato order to the guards, and Bob was left in the room while the other five were marched away. Another order, and the remaining guard brought Bob a chair.

The Jap nodded toward the seat, "I think you had better sit down."

"No, thank you. I'd rather stand," said Bob.

"You will be more comfortable," replied the Jap.

This was hardly the manner Bob had expected the enemy to take toward a prisoner. His only other experience as a prisoner—in occupied France—had been somewhat different. Certainly it seemed the wisest course not to excite this explosive little man, so Bob sat down.

"I'm glad you are disposed to be reasonable," said the Jap. "So many are unreasonable, and so many unpleasant things happen to them. I would hate to have anything unpleasant happen to you."

It was not so much what the Jap said, but the smile with which he said it that made Bob's blood almost freeze in his veins. Behind the polish and enforced gentility he thought he could sense the brutality of which he had heard so much. Japanese savagery would stop at nothing to achieve its end.

"It is so very nice for me that this happened," said the Jap, "for you are our first prisoners since we arrived at this new outpost. You are very important prisoners and of course we must guard you very closely. Now, if you will please let me see your papers."

"I have no papers," replied Bob, "only my identification tag."

"No papers?" questioned the Jap unbelievingly. "But surely you must have papers."

"No," replied Bob. "Not with me. The only ones I had are in the plane."

For a brief moment it flashed through his mind that this might give him a chance to get back to the Stratohawk. Once there, he might, by hook

or crook, manage to get the engines started up and be away, if the ice had melted off the wings in the meantime.

"In that case," smilingly replied the Jap, "we will have them in a few moments, for your aircraft are being thoroughly searched."

At this, any small hope Bob might have had dwindled to zero. As he braced himself for the next question, there was a discreet knock on the door, followed by the entrance of a junior officer bearing the charts from the planes. The Commandant spoke rapidly to the junior officer, who regarded Bob with bold curiosity. The reply was lengthy and ended with an almost Latin, negative shrug. Bob deduced that he was giving details of the planes, the supplies carried, and the fact that no further papers could be found.

Bob had no worries about his own charts and knew that Sandy could be depended upon to have eaten up the navigation flimsies, carrying instructions to be followed in case the aircraft were lost and required wireless assistance. Even now he could imagine that Sandy would be tasting the ink from the flimsies, the flavor of which left much to be desired. He hoped desperately that Sedgwick's

navigator, Beans, had done the same. It was doubtful if any of the marks on the charts would identify either the point of take-off or the objective. There were, however, false marks on the chart, in case of such an eventuality as the present one, and every pilot was prepared with fictitious information in case of capture.

The Commandant seemed pleased with what he saw on the chart. "It is well," he said, smiling at Bob, "that you told me the truth. For you can see that it would have done no good to have lied to me. But now I want you to give me information about your base."

Bob smiled dejectedly and tried to look just as helpless as he felt. He gave what he hoped sounded like convincing facts and figures about the base at New Delhi, explaining that he knew little about it because of having so recently arrived from England. It was evident that Bob's manner had impressed the Jap Commandant and that he was thrown at least somewhat off his guard. He seemed to grope over the figures given him as though they were rare morsels to pass on to his superiors. Bob only hoped that they would act on the information, and he gained no little satisfaction from the thought

of what would happen to any Jap raiders who attempted to bomb that well-guarded base.

"That will be all, I think, for the present," continued the Jap, who seemed at pains to be cordial. "We cannot provide you with many comforts, but we will make your stay as endurable as possible under the circumstances. That is," he added, "until you are taken away." Abruptly calling the guard, he returned to his perusal of the charts.

Once they had left the room the guard's attitude changed. Apparently he was trying to offset the Commandant's cordiality. Prodding Bob in the small of the back with his tommy-gun, he literally pushed him into the open courtyard. Small groups of Japanese soldiers stood along the way. A vicious jab in the back preceded their arrival before each group, and Bob's stumbling passage caused great merriment among the onlookers. Bob clenched his fists. Some day it would be his turn; now, if he were to save his life and the lives of the others, he must control his temper.

On the far side of the courtyard he was shoved unceremoniously into a small, low-roofed hut. The door slammed behind him. It took several minutes for his eyes to become accustomed to the semi-dark-

ness within. A long, spraddle-legged bench was against one wall. The other wall was a partition, dividing the hut into two parts. A few rays of light filtered in from windows at both ends, and the partition had been built along the centers of the windows. Where, he wondered, were Don and Sandy? What kind of treatment had they received? And Sedgwick and Beans and Walton—how were they faring?

Disconsolately Bob slouched on the bench in the far corner. What a mess he had made of the whole business! He had been in the air force almost three years now, with a distinguished record as a fighter pilot and then as a fighter-bomber pilot. He'd been decorated, and had had three promotions from his original pilot officer's rank. The Royal Air Force believed him capable of taking command of a squadron, and Group Captain Seaton had recommended it. And now he had let him down; he had let the entire air force down. He had flunked his first major assignment as a commanding officer, allowed himself to be taken prisoner and had failed to keep his squadron intact. Dejectedly he sat on the bench, his head buried in his hands.

CHAPTER IX

Enemy Test Pilot

When Bob roused himself several hours later, moonlight was streaming in through one of the windows. Stretching out on the wooden bench, he tried to make himself as comfortable as possible, but his light-weight tropical uniform gave him little protection against the damp and cold.

As he lay there, wondering just what the future might hold, he heard a muffled conversation beyond the partition. Although the low mumblings were indistinct and meaningless, it was nevertheless comforting to know there were other human beings in the same hut. As Bob listened, he suddenly realized they were not Jap voices. Excitedly he sat up. If they were not Jap voices, they must be friendly voices.

Quietly he crossed the damp earthen floor and glued his ear to the partition. He could not distinguish the words, but they were unquestionably English. Stopping one ear with his finger, Bob listened intently. One voice was a woman's, the

other a man's. Now the voices were more distinct, and he could make out occasional words. The man's name was John, and the woman was called Dorothy. But who were they and where did they come from?

Bob was just about to speak when a door was thrown open on the far side of the hut and a loud Japanese voice roughly addressed the man and woman. Instantly there was silence, but Bob knew now that there had been no guard in the room. That was something.

Instantly Bob decided on the most silent means of communication—a note. He searched his pockets for pencil and paper, but both had been removed. Desperately he looked around the room for something on which to write, but it was too dark to see. The narrow beam of moonlight penetrated into only one corner.

As he looked up at the window, another idea came to him. There was a small space between the window and the end of the partition. Softly and stealthily he tapped on the partition. There was no response, and he tapped again. After a long delay, there came a soft tap in return. Again and again Bob tapped on the partition, making sure that

each tap was just a little nearer the window than the one before. The return taps likewise approached the window. Finally Bob put his finger on the small pane of glass. Another finger was placed on the glass from the other side. Standing on his tiptoes, Bob breathed hard on the windowpane, and in the cold night air his breath condensed quickly. Before it could disappear, Bob wrote, "U. S.?" Immediately came the answer, "Yes."

For almost an hour they wrote back and forth in this way, and Bob learned that his companions in the hut were an American missionary and his wife, who had been captured when the Japanese had made a sudden thrust into Honan Province. Like Bob, the missionary had no idea of their present whereabouts. After their capture, they traveled for several days and were finally brought here.

In the midst of his writing, Bob suddenly heard the shuffling of feet outside. With a sweep of his hand he rubbed the writing off the glass and dropped hurriedly to the floor, then stretched out full length on the bench as though sleeping. The door was flung open and an electric torch flashed on him. Five figures stumbled into the room, and bundles of clothing were thrown after them.

Flinging caution to the winds, Bob whooped with joy at the sight of Don White, Sedgwick, and all the others. The guard shouted at him in Japanese and pointed his rifle menacingly at his chest. There was no doubting what he meant, so Bob kept still. But when the door had banged shut, the men shook hands thankfully. No words were needed to express their joy at being together again. The bundles turned out to be their coveralls which they had removed in the Commandant's office. The helmets and oxygen masks had been retained, but the coveralls were sufficient to keep them warm.

Crouched together at the far end of the hut, away from the guarded door, they exchanged news in scarcely audible whispers. One by one, each man had been questioned, just as Bob had been. He sighed in relief when he learned that their answers corroborated everything he had said. Sedgwick had made no marks on his chart except the misleading ones at Chungking and New Delhi; both Beans and Sandy had destroyed the flimsies. In lowest whispers they discussed the possibilities of escape, but all agreed that unless the camp were taken by storm from the outside there would be little chance of their getting away.

"One thing is certain," said Bob, "if we're to escape from here, it will have to be within a very short time. The missionary told me they expect to be moved to a concentration camp any day, and we probably will be too. Bad as it seems here, that would be twice as bad. We'd better think fast and figure out something that offers possibilities."

"Whatever we do, we'll need all our strength to carry it through," Sedgwick said practically. "So right now we'd better get some rest."

Sedgwick promptly lay down on the bench and Walton and Beans stretched out on the floor. Bob, Sandy, and Don continued their whispered consultation. Like all real navigators, Sandy's first thought was to find out where they were. The skies had gradually cleared, and Sandy walked softly from one end of the room to the other, gazing intently up through the small windows.

"Well, Skipper," he said finally, "the end of the hut with the door is north and this end is south. The missionaries are on the west side and this other is the east. And I think that by tomorrow night I can tell you fairly accurately where we're located."

"I don't know that it's going to matter a great deal where we are so long as we're prisoners," said

Bob, "but if we can break away, it would be a help to know where we are."

Don, as usual, was becoming concerned about food. "I must say they've been more decent than I ever expected Japs could be, even with those tommy-gun muzzles prodding us in the back. But I don't trust that Commandant; he's up to no good. If he'd really been serious about being nice to us, he'd have given us some food by this time."

"Forget about the food," laughed Bob. "Let's get some sleep now. Maybe our hosts will serve us breakfast in bed."

Sandy and Don did not argue. The three fliers followed Walton's and Beans' examples and tried to woo some sleep on the hard earthen floor. The lamb's-wool lining of their flying suits helped a lot, and by pulling up the heavy collar above his head, Bob was able to make himself a sort of pillow. Although his mind was tortured by prospects of the future, fatigue at last overcame his worries and he finally drifted off to sleep.

A short time later he was awakened by loud talking in Japanese. The door was wide open and daylight was streaming in. Three Jap soldiers entered, two of them with tommy-guns and the third with a

large wooden bowl filled with an unappetizing mess of rice mixed with something else. Later, the boys discovered it to be dried fish. There were no utensils, so everyone had to dig for himself. Sandy solved the problem by peeling off six strips of bark from the side wall to serve as spoons.

Don tried the rice mixture first. "Not bad," he remarked judicially after the first mouthful. "But I wonder how it will be after we've had the same thing for every meal."

"With your appetite," replied Bob, "it will probably taste all right; but as for me, this alone is reason enough to try to get out of this place as fast as we can."

Hunger and the knowledge that they must retain their strength overcame any aversions to this primitive way of eating. When they had finished, there wasn't a scrap of food left in the bowl. The guards had left the door open and every now and then one looked in inquiringly, as though watching the progress of the meal. When the food was gone, the guards came in immediately and took away the large bowl. Not, thought Bob, that they were interested in their prisoners' appetite, but they feared the bowl might be converted into a weapon.

"I could certainly do with a drink of water," remarked Walton when the dish had been taken away.

"So could the rest of us," agreed Sedgwick, "but I'm afraid we won't have much to say in the matter."

Bob could hear the stirrings of the American missionaries on the other side of the partition. Now that both doors had been closed, he whispered quietly, "How are you getting along?"

"Not very well," replied John Wheeler. "Dorothy took sick during the night, and I'm worried about her."

Bob cursed under his breath. "Tell her to hang on," he replied. "We'll figure out something."

"They've been taking us out for exercise in the morning after breakfast," went on the missionary, "so they may be coming in any minute. But I'm afraid Dorothy won't be able to make it."

"Tell her to try it if she possibly can," urged Bob, "and keep a stiff upper lip."

Bob told the others of this conversation, adding, "Now listen, fellows, if we're lucky enough to get outside, make a mental note of everything you see, particularly the number of troops around, what they're doing, the locations of the buildings, and everything else that may be valuable later on."

The sound of approaching footsteps put an end to Bob's remarks and he broke away from the others just as the door was pushed open. The airmen were herded outside and in a few moments John Wheeler, supporting his wife by the arm, emerged from the other door. As the two walked toward them, the guard struck Wheeler's hand away from his wife's arm. Wheeler, a tall, powerfully built Southerner, started to lunge at the guard. Bob called out warningly. Mrs. Wheeler, a fair-haired little wisp of a thing, was obviously determined to stand and walk without assistance.

The group was marched toward the center of the courtyard, where Jap troops with full service kits were drilling. For a minute or two Bob had a clear view of the Stratohawks, perched precariously on the hillside where they had been left the previous evening. He could see figures walking around them, but the next minute the view was blotted out.

About a hundered yards farther on they were halted at a primitive well. At a motion from one of the guards, Don stepped up and began winding the windlass. An old wooden bucket filled with water finally reached the surface, and the group crowded in to relieve their thirst. Several gourds

were attached by wire hooks to the side of the well. Swiftly Sandy grabbed the smallest gourd and dropped it inside his coveralls.

After each had had a drink, including Mrs. Wheeler, who became violently ill when she sipped the water, the guards marched them away from the well. Standing in a group, the guards now waved their hands around an open space. Bob and his friends were at first bewildered, but when they saw John Wheeler starting to walk around the indicated square, they realized that this was the exercise period. As they walked, marching soldiers deliberately crossed their path, so that the prisoners had to stand aside and wait for the Japs to pass.

On one occasion, Mrs. Wheeler did not stop quickly enough and was knocked to the ground. The guard moved forward as though to kick her to her feet. Her husband, on the other side of the column, had not seen what had happened, so Bob, at the risk of a bullet through his back, rushed in front of the guards and helped Mrs. Wheeler to her feet. Instead of firing at Bob, however, the guard broke into uncontrollable laughter. What a joke to see a squadron leader trouble himself over a woman!

The exercise period was brief, and when they had returned to the hut, Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler were pushed roughly through the door; the six airmen entered their side unmolested. Bob could not understand why the airmen were given preferential treatment.

Once inside, with the door closed, Sandy pulled the gourd out of his coveralls.

"What in the world do you want that thing for?" whispered Bob.

"Wait and see, Skipper. I think it will come in very handy."

After examining every corner of the hut for a hiding place, Sandy finally secreted it under the bench. That taken care of, the six airmen gathered in a huddle for a whispered conference.

By pooling the observations of all six, Bob and his companions pieced together a pretty good picture of the camp. With a small stick Bob drew a diagram on the earthen floor, noting the defense arrangements and the contour of the surrounding country. On all sides, except the north where the Stratohawks had landed, the ground fell away. Thus they were on the top of a semi-plateau. The situation still looked hopeless, unless they got an

unexpected break. The only encouraging aspect was the activity of the troops in their full service kits, possibly indicating that many would soon be leaving.

High-pitched Japanese voices cut short any further consideration of the future. The door was pushed open and four armed guards marched in, coming to rigid attention with their now familiar tommy-guns. The next minute the dapper little Commandant strode into the hut.

"Well, gentlemen," he greeted cheerily, "I trust that you enjoyed a good sleep."

"We didn't do badly," replied Bob, "and if you're responsible for sending in our flying togs, I want to thank you."

"That's all right," replied the Commandant airily. It was evident that he was flattered by anything that pointed toward his gentility. "And now I'd like you to do a little favor for me in return. After your arrival last evening, I telephoned Divisional Headquarters and am soon expecting a visit from officers of the Army Air Force. We may require some further information on the characteristics of your airplanes before they are flown away. You will save both us and yourselves much trouble if you do not

attempt to withhold any information because, of course, we would eventually find it out anyway. So I will see you later," said the Commandant, addressing Bob.

"Just a minute," said Bob, "I want to say that you've treated us much better than we ever expected to be treated as prisoners."

"Why, thank you," replied the Jap, preening himself.

"But," added Bob, "there's something else you can do, if you don't mind."

"Yes?" he asked, the "s" hissing through his teeth.

"Yes," echoed Bob. "You can do something for that poor woman next door. She's very ill."

"That is no concern of mine," replied the Jap, "and I would suggest that you do not let it concern you. The missionaries are not only enemies since the war began with America, but before that they were actively assisting Chinese resistance. You are simply prisoners, but they must receive special punishment." With that pronouncement, he marched out the door.

An hour later the sound of an airplane grew loud over the camp. Sedgwick, who was tallest, climbed

up to the south window to see it. The hut shook as the plane flew low over the building.

"Gosh," reported Sedgwick unbelievingly, "that almost sounds like a Lockheed-Hudson."

The noise of the aircraft receded in the distance and then grew in intensity. Again the plane swooped low over the building and Bob could hear the engines throttled back as it glided in for a landing.

"Say, fellows," he said excitedly, "I just thought of something. Do you remember those cut-out switches we discovered back of the instrument panel, at the secret base up in Scotland?" All nodded assent. "That same idea is now used for emergency shorting. All you have to do is slip your hand in there and pull out the switch."

"I think we all know how that works, Bob," said Sedgwick.

"That's fine. Then if anyone gets the opportunity, he's to pull out that switch on either or both planes." The others nodded in solemn assent. "Not that we'll get much chance to do it," said Bob, his enthusiasm dropping a bit, "but if we could, it would certainly slow them up in trying to fly those ships. You remember how it took us several days, back in

Scotland, to locate the trouble when our engines were conking out in the air."

Half an hour later the Commandant again appeared.

"Will you come with me, please," he asked, addressing Bob.

Bob rose at once and the others started to follow.

"Just Squadron Leader Terrell, please."

Bob followed him across the courtyard into his office, where he found two Jap pilots dressed for the air. They were the meanest-looking customers Bob had ever seen. The Commandant spoke rapidly to them in Japanese and without a single word they marched toward the door. Apparently the Commandant did not rate very high with them, or perhaps, thought Bob, they felt superior because they were in the air branch of the army. In any case, Bob could not help feeling a certain sympathy for the little Jap whose ego was considerably deflated.

When they entered the waiting car, Bob was relieved to see that the armed guards had been left behind. He noticed, however, that the Commandant's hip holster was unbuttoned and ready for instant use. When they approached the Stratohawks, the soldiers who had been milling around

the planes came strictly to attention. At the Commandant's order they fell into ranks, flanking the planes on both sides. For a full hour, the Jap pilots subjected Bob to a barrage of questions, the Commandant acting as interpreter. Methodically, they went around the plane, but the contra-rotating propellers aroused their greatest interest. Bob explained that he knew very little about them, since he had flown the plane only a few times. The Jap fliers then climbed up into the interior of the fuselage. Bob followed them and the Commandant brought up the rear.

For almost another hour, Bob was forced to explain the various features of the controls and the functions of the instruments. Although he gave enough information to satisfy them, he knew it was not enough to enable them to take the plane safely off the ground. An argument arose between the two pilots, one wanting to unload all the supplies in the bomb well, and the other wanting to take it all back to their airdrome. The argument was finally settled and the supplies remained aboard.

Next, the Commandant explained that they wanted to fly the plane and would Bob be good enough to start the engines. Shrugging his shoul-

ders, Bob explained that electric batteries would be needed to start the plane's cold engines. If he was going to sweat over inertia starters, it wouldn't be for the Japs, and besides, time might be gained by this evasion. When this information was relayed to the pilots, there was a long consultation. Finally the Commandant bellowed an order to the non-commissioned officer in charge of the guard detachment. Within fifteen minutes a truck rolled up with electric batteries and cables. Bob superintended the hooking up of the cables to the electric starter. One pilot remained on the ground to disconnect them, and Bob was instructed to get back into the cockpit.

The outline of a daring plan began to form in his mind, a plan so audacious that he trembled at the thought of it. One of the Jap fliers slipped into the copilot's seat, motioning Bob into the other. The Commandant took up a position in the narrow passageway behind the pilot's seat, where Sandy had found refuge during the forced landing back at the Indian base.

As the engines warmed up, the Commandant became nervous.

"You are to show him," he said to Bob, indicating the Jap pilot, "how it is flown."

"O.K.," agreed Bob.

When the engines were warmed up, Bob released the brakes and gingerly pivoted around and down the hill on the starboard wheel. There was a light breeze from the south and when he quickly advanced the throttle, the Stratohawk gathered speed and roared over the camp buildings. Bob glanced around at the Commandant who stood behind him, gun in hand. Had fear brought the greenish cast to his yellow skin?

For ten minutes, Bob climbed steadily over the camp in wide lazy circles. At ten thousand feet, the Jap pilot indicated that he wanted to take over the controls, so Bob relinquished them. Bob watched him closely and soon recognized that he had had long experience. The Commandant, however, was growing greener all the time. Fastening his seat belt, the Jap flier indicated that Bob do the same. He motioned to the Commandant to hang on, but at the first series of steep banks, the dapper little man was beyond caring what happened. He had slipped to the floor, and his shoulders were retching violently. For the second time Bob could not help feeling sorry for his captor.

The Jap pilot was really good and flew with pre-

cision. During a vertical bank Bob looked quickly over his shoulder; the Commandant was still out of the running. In the seconds when the pilot's head was turned away, looking down at the starboard wing tip, Bob grabbed the circuit breaker from beneath the instrument panel and dropped the small metal bar inside the leg of his coveralls. The engines coughed to a stop. Bob feigned a look of intense surprise as the Stratohawk fell off clumsily. The pilot pulled her up into a gentle glide, and began shrieking a steady stream of Japanese at the Commandant who managed to stand upright.

"Tell him," said Bob, "to let me have the controls and I'll land her."

The Jap was stubborn as well as suspicious, but finally he relinquished the controls and Bob made a pretense of trying to start the engines. The pilot was now plainly worried; he knew what it meant to try to land a fast airplane on a dead stick. There was scant room left to turn into the wind, but Bob managed to bring her about and in a long low glide swept toward the camp buildings. Fear was written all over the faces of the two Japs as they drew nearer and nearer. Soon the wheels touched and at better than a hundred miles an hour they rolled directly

toward the buildings. Gently jockeying the brakes, Bob managed to bring the Stratohawk to a halt within a few feet of the barbed wire entanglement that surrounded the camp.

First to descend was the Commandant, then Bob, and lastly the Jap pilot. Bob knew that the Commandant was glad to be on the ground once more. His look of fear had now given way to sheer hatred as he turned menacingly toward the flier who had subjected him to this torture. The pilot returned the look of hatred, and an angry torrent of Japanese broke out between them. Bob had no way of knowing that he was the subject of their argument until the Jap pilot suddenly stepped forward and struck him a sharp blow between the eyes.

CHAPTER X

"Where There's a Will"

When Bob came to, fifteen minutes later, he found himself surrounded by anxious friends. A couple of Jap soldiers had dragged him into the hut and dumped him on the floor. Confused by what had happened, he rubbed his hand over his forehead, where the pain was intense. "The dirty coward," he growled. When his head had cleared and the pain had lessened somewhat, he explained to the others what had happened. Suddenly remembering the precious circuit breaker, he felt for it in the leg of his coveralls. Yes, it was still there.

"Now, listen, fellows," said Bob, "and listen closely. There isn't much doubt but what this washes me up so far as having another chance at flying the Stratohawk. I managed to park it close to the fence and when they took me out I noticed that hardly anybody was around the camp. Apparently the only ones left are the guards on the planes, and a few scattered here and there around headquarters. That Jap pilot will want to go up

again, but this time he'll ask for somebody else. And if he does, here's what we must do. There's just one chance in a thousand that we can get away with it, but we've got to try it.

"First of all, don't forget that pilot is plenty smart, and he's tough, as I found out, but like anybody else, he has to have oxygen. Whether or not he hit me because he thought I tricked him, I don't know; I think it was probably because he couldn't figure it all out. In any case, whoever goes with him the next time must insist on wearing a helmet. That will mean that you have your oxygen mask too."

Bob was still lying on the floor, too weak to get up, when the door was again thrust open. The guards beckoned him to come, and when he did not rise, they started to lift him to his feet. At that moment the Commandant entered and at his quick command the guards dropped Bob like a hot brick.

"I am so very sorry," he began, "that this has happened. The man who struck you is one of the most noted pilots in the Japanese Air Force, but he is a very uncouth man. Unfortunately, there is little I can do. He and his friends will fly the planes away. Now, he wants to make one more flight in the other aircraft, but I will tell him that you are in no condi-

tion to fly. You are second in rank," said the Jap, pointing to Sedgwick, who had removed his coveralls. "Will you come, please."

"Yeah, I'll fly him," drawled Sedgwick, "if I can have my helmet."

"He has ear trouble," explained Bob.

The Commandant at once dispatched a guard for the helmet while he and Sedgwick left with the others.

"Well," said Bob, "let's keep our fingers crossed."

Sandy reached under the bench and brought out the gourd in which he was boring a hole with some wire that had been attached to the hook.

"What in the world!" exclaimed Bob.

"When I have it finished, Skipper, this will be a sextant."

Bob politely told Sandy that he was a little "nuts."

"And if tonight is at all clear," went on Sandy, undisturbed, "I'll be able to figure out our exact position."

"What about timetables?" asked Bob.

"Well, of course," admitted Sandy, "it's a drawback not to have them and you'll have to give me a little error leeway, but I think I can come reasonably close."

"Here's wishing you luck," said Bob, "but in the meantime I think we'd better keep our minds on Sedgwick and what he's up to. There wasn't time to go into detail, but I wouldn't be surprised if something happened very soon."

Bob went over to the partition and whispered quietly through the crack. "How's your wife, Mr. Wheeler?"

"She's a little better," replied Wheeler.

"Do you think she could walk?" inquired Bob.

"I'm afraid not. Why?"

"I really don't know," said Bob. "Just simply be ready, that's all. Our only chance to get away may come in the next few minutes. I don't want to raise your hopes, but be ready to do anything I tell you."

"You can depend on us, Terrell," assured Wheeler.

It was another twenty minutes before the Stratohawk roared over the hut. Bob wondered whether it was Sedgwick or the Jap pilot at the controls. For fifteen minutes they heard the roar of its engines, then gradually the sound receded. The next fifteen minutes passed uneventfully. When forty-five minutes had gone by, Bob had just about given up hope.

Suddenly he heard the shrieking crescendo of an airplane in a dive and at the same time came the

sound of cannon fire. While the five airmen were in the midst of a concerted whoop, the door was flung open violently and two guards rushed in, brandishing tommy-guns. They had stepped well into the room, forcing the boys back against the south wall, when a voice behind them called out a confused jargon of Japanese and momentarily they turned their heads. During that brief moment the five airmen swung, as one man, on the guards, and in a trice had wrested away their guns and flung the Japs to the floor. There was nothing gentle in the way Don and Walton tapped them into unconsciousness with the gun butts. Bob sprang to the door as two Jap soldiers ran toward the hut, their guns in front of them.

"Quick," yelled Bob. "Drag 'em over here in the corner. Give me that gun, Don; and you, Walton, get over on the other side of the door. I'll stay here behind it. Get back at the end, you others."

Bob's hand tightened on the pistol grip; there was no drawing back now. In a moment the Japs would see the inert bodies of their chums. Their steps sounded on the sill. The door splintered into a thousand pieces above Bob's head as Walton's gun spoke. A Jap body fell through the door, and his

gun, still firing, kicked up the dirt floor. In his surprise the second Jap stumbled and fell forward on the first. Quickly Bob grabbed his gun and knocked him unconscious. The five boys now had four guns.

Bedlam had broken loose in the courtyard, and Bob heard steps running toward the hut. As he knelt to pick off the approaching soldiers, he heard the Stratohawk screeching in, cannon shells spraying the courtyard from end to end. Running figures toppled and fell.

"Get ready, Wheeler," called Bob. "We'll make a run for it."

Swiftly he dashed around the side and slid open the bar on the other door. John Wheeler stepped out, carrying his wife.

"Come on," yelled Bob. "Let's go! We'll head for the other Stratohawk."

Sandy was the only one without a gun and as they dashed across the courtyard, he made a detour by one of the Jap soldiers who had fallen from Sedgwick's fire, grabbed his tommy-gun, and rejoined the others as they neared the gate. The guards on duty there had seen their approach, and Bob felt a stinging

pain in his right hip even before he saw the flash of their fire.

"Down!" he ordered to the others, but John Wheeler had hared off to the left into the shelter of the headquarters building. Two of the guards dropped as the airmen fired, but others were firing from the guardhouse. Bob prayed that Sedgwick had seen them dash across the courtyard; otherwise they might be caught in his fire. As they ran for the comparative shelter of the headquarters enclosure, Bob noted that Sedgwick's cannon was blasting the area where the Stratohawks had previously stood.

Don and Walton had pushed open the door and, flat on their stomachs, were firing down the narrow hallway. Two figures lay on the floor at the far end. Stepping over Walton, Bob walked to the nearest window just inside the door. Out over the plateau, the Stratohawk was racing toward them. Cannon shells were kicking up great clouds of dust behind a truck that was speeding down the narrow path toward the gate. Bob could hear the shells ricocheting above the headquarters building. Then he recognized it as the battery truck which had supplied

the juice to start the Stratohawk that morning. "Good old Sedgwick," thought Bob.

Don and Walton returned from a search of the building, bringing all the flying helmets they could find. Only the two dead Japs were left in the building. Again the Stratohawk roared over, and this time its fire pulverized the road leading to the guardhouse. Like a flash, its shells ate through the brittle wooden structure.

"Come on," called Bob, "if we're ever going to make it, we've got to do it now."

John Wheeler, carrying his wife, ran with the boys around the corner of the building and down the open stretch to the guard gate. Fire broke out behind them as they ran, but the bullets fell short. Sandy was abreast of Bob as they reached the guardhouse. Sedgwick had wiped out all the guards, and Bob quickly exchanged the still partially loaded guns held by the Japs for their own almost empty ones.

Don rushed on over to the other Stratohawk and opened the entry hatch. He climbed inside and pulled Mrs. Wheeler in after him. The battery truck, which had almost reached the gate, ground to a stop as Bob riddled the windshield. At that

moment Bob saw the Commandant rise up; he had been lying flat on his stomach behind the driver's seat.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" he begged, and Bob held his fire.

Sedgwick, meanwhile, had made a complete circle of the camp and was coming in for a landing on the north edge of the plateau.

"Get that battery truck over here, Walton," yelled Bob and handed Don the circuit breaker.

Don dived for the cockpit, but the truck engine had stalled. Relieving the Jap Commandant of his automatic, Bob instructed him to help push the truck. In a moment it was rolling over toward the Stratohawk. Grabbing the wheel, Bob swung it away from the prop tips, then brought it to a halt beneath the nose. He and Walton quickly connected the long cable and in a moment the engines had caught and were firing. Beans was now running toward Sedgwick's Stratohawk.

"Walton," ordered Bob, "get Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler and take them over to your aircraft. Tell Sedgwick to take off immediately and try to cover us as we leave. But first help me push this truck out of the way."

Grudgingly the truck moved, clearing the nose and the wings. The Wheelers had heard Bob's orders and were ready to leave when Walton arrived at the hatch. This time Mrs. Wheeler tried to walk and they disappeared around the tail of Sedgwick's plane.

Unheeding the desultory fire from the camp, Bob had almost forgotten the Commandant. But now as he turned with Sandy to join Don in the plane, he saw the Jap running around the guardhouse. Bob fired above him, but the Jap kept right on running.

"Tell Don to get turned around, Sandy, and I'll be with you in a moment."

The Jap had almost gained the headquarters building when Bob caught up with him.

"Come on," said Bob, grabbing him by the arm, "we're going for a little ride."

Quite obviously the Jap had other ideas and dashed for the door, but before he could enter, Bob grabbed him by the back of his collar, put the tommy-gun in his back, and led him scuffling toward the Stratohawk. Still kicking, he was pushed aboard.

"Watch him, Sandy," called Bob as he climbed for the cockpit.

Intent on the capture of the Jap, Bob had not realized that Sedgwick had again taken to the air. He now came diving back over the field, his cannon shells spattering the camp compound. Bob opened up on the starboard engine, swinging to the left, then taxied swiftly to the high end of the plateau. As he did so, Jap troops came charging around the hill to the left. Quickly he advanced both throttles and, with the tail high, opened up with his four cannon. The advancing soldiers fell apart as though a command had been given, but the converging cannon fire was far more effective than any command. It was not enough to stop all of the Jap fire, however, and Bob knew that all chance of escape would soon be cut off if he did not wheel and get into the air.

Swiftly estimating the amount of space available for the take-off over the camp, Bob used the same tactics he had employed at the Jap airdrome in Burma and swung widely into the southerly wind. The barbed-wire fence, the demolished guardhouse, and the buildings beyond came rocketing toward

them. With only feet to spare, the Stratohawk bored up and away into free air. Bob pointed the Stratohawk's nose at an acute angle. The farther he could get away from the ground, the better he would like it.

CHAPTER XI

Happy Landings

Sedgwick had pulled up to his accustomed position on the port wing and with a thumbs-up gesture indicated that everything was O.K. with him. Bob returned the signal, but suddenly realized that with everything happening at once, they had no flight plan of any kind and, to make matters worse, Walton had gone off with all the oxygen masks. All charts and maps had been left on the ground. Fortunately, the weather was clear and at least he and Sedgwick could keep in sight of each other.

"Don," said Bob, "will you slip down and relieve Sandy for awhile? Have him find out whether they left anything at all to work with."

"Aye, Skipper," called Sandy a moment later. "They left me my air almanac. But everything else is gone."

"Can you give me a course, Sandy?" asked Bob.

"I'm afraid that will have to wait until I finish my gourd. But for the present, I'd suggest a due south

course. Yon Jap," added Sandy, "doesn't seem to take to flying very well; right now he's too sick to cause us any trouble. But just in case, Skipper, I've collected all the guns and have them up here forward with me."

Don was laughing heartily when he returned a few minutes later and confirmed Sandy's estimate of the Jap's harmlessness. "He's the greenest Jap I ever saw," concluded Don.

"I know how he looks," said Bob. "I saw him this morning."

Calling Sedgwick over the R.T., Bob explained his decision to follow a due south course, that Sandy had nothing to navigate by, and that they were completely dependent upon a compass bearing. Sedgwick replied that Beans had also been stripped clean of the tools of his trade. Even though Sedgwick was flying right beside him, the signals came through very weak, and Bob had to shout to make Sedgwick hear.

"I suppose," said Don, when Bob had finished his conversation with Sedgwick, "that some day I'll stop being surprised when the impossible happens."

"How come?" asked Bob.

"Well, for example," began Don, "that escape of

ours just now. Yesterday at this time there didn't seem to be a chance in the world of our getting away. And even this morning, after that Jap knocked you for a loop, we thought there was no chance in a thousand. Half an hour ago, it looked like a hundred-to-one shot; but here we are, sitting pretty."

"Nips to starboard," yelled Sandy.

In the exhilaration of escape, Bob had almost forgotten about the possibility of air attack. What a fool he had been not to realize that somebody would send a message through to the nearest Jap air base to head them off. With two heavily loaded planes, and a sick woman aboard one of them, the last thing Bob wanted was a free-for-all. Without oxygen masks, there was no way of climbing above the enemy, and there wasn't a concealing cloud bank in sight. The Nips were boring in at them above the late afternoon sun from the west. All they could do was try to outspeed them.

With full throttle, Bob shoved the nose down till the air-speed indicator passed the five-hundred mark. The Nips dove after them and seemed to be gaining. Sedgwick remained alongside, steady as a rock.

"They're Zeros, Bob," called Don quietly, "and

they're gaining fast." Then, a moment later, "They're not gaining now. They're dropping behind."

Steadily the space widened between the Stratohawks and the Zeros. At three thousand feet, Bob leveled off, gradually climbing to eight thousand, where the going would be more comfortable for Mrs. Wheeler. Soon the Jap Zeros were completely lost to sight.

Bob knew that they must land before night fell. Without any means of finding their destination, they must pick out a landing field long before dark. By now they were probably two hundred miles south of the Japanese camp, but as long as the light held, Bob wanted to keep on flying. When the ground beneath became more mountainous, he began to regret this decision, but in another fifteen minutes they were above a region of grassy hills.

A few minutes later he saw aircraft ahead, but on their wings was the friendly insignia of the Chinese Air Force. They were flying in the same direction, and the Stratohawks were gradually overtaking them. Suddenly the Chinese dove to right and left out of the path of the Stratos. Of course, reasoned

Bob, they think we're enemy planes. Throttling back, he waited for the Chinese airmen to identify them. In a few moments he could see them reassemble and then gradually overhaul the Stratohawks. Don tried to reach them over the radiotelephone, but without success.

The three planes ranged around them, then one pulled up in front and, dipping his wings as a warning, banked to the right. For another fifteen minutes they flew on, then the Chinese, who were flying old-style Curtiss-Hawks, dove for the ground. Bob and Sedgwick followed suit, Sedgwick taking it a little more easily on account of his passengers.

Up ahead, Bob could distinguish the outlines of a small village and beside it a sorry-looking airdrome, but it was big enough for the Stratohawks. One of the Chinese went in for a landing to show the way, while the other two stood by. Bob landed first, with Sedgwick following closely. Both planes taxied up to the small corrugated iron hangar which housed the Curtiss fighters. They had arrived none too soon, for the light had already faded on the ground. From all along the hangar front, curious eyes were focused on the two Stratohawks. Mechanics work-

ing on aircraft dropped their tools and stared openly. A young man in a leather flying jacket approached Bob's ship.

"Keep an eye on our prisoner, Don, will you, until I find out the score?"

"O.K.," replied Don, and Bob dropped through the door to the ground.

"Hello," said a young Chinese with flashing black eyes.

"Hello," replied Bob. "You speak English?"

"Yes," replied the Chinese proudly.

"Well, that's fine," said Bob, greatly relieved. "Tell me, where are we?"

But the man's only answer was a blank look and another question. "You English?" he asked.

"I'm American," replied Bob.

"Velly good," replied the Chinese.

"Where are we?" Bob repeated his question.

The Chinese merely smiled. Apparently his knowledge of English was limited to a few words. Soon the three Chinese pilots came over and began a conversation with the one who had greeted Bob.

At the same time, Walton came over from Sedgwick's ship. "I'm afraid Mrs. Wheeler needs a doctor, sir," he said to Bob.

"I think the quickest way of getting action around here would be to have Mr. Wheeler carry her out. Then they'll see that she's sick."

Walton returned to the other aircraft and a few minutes later John Wheeler appeared, carrying his sick wife. Instantly, the Chinese showed great concern, though not quite knowing what to do. Wheeler spoke to them haltingly in Chinese, and it was evident that he was understood, for one of them moved off, indicating that the missionary was to follow.

"I'll be seeing you, Bob," Wheeler called back, "as soon as I've taken care of Dorothy."

"Hi, Bob," called Don. "What about his Nibs in here? He's getting impatient."

"Bring him out," replied Bob.

Don's big frame descended from the fuselage door and after him came the diminutive Japanese. Sandy followed. The Commandant had partially regained his composure, but his appearance was far from natty.

"I'm sorry to have caused you any inconvenience," he said to Bob in his most formal manner.

"That's quite all right," Bob assured him, "and sorry I had to be a little rough with you before we

took off. But there wasn't any time to waste. I appreciate the treatment you personally gave us and as our prisoner, you can expect to be treated just as well. But tell me," he added, "why did you put up such a fight when we were leaving? You must have known that you didn't have a chance."

"It wasn't that I didn't know that I was beaten," replied the Jap indignantly, drawing himself up to his five-feet-two, "but I would rather have been shot than take another ride in an airplane."

"Oh, so that was it," replied Bob. "I thought you looked a little seedy in the morning. Maybe you won't have to do any more flying."

After locking the entry hatches on the Stratohawks, Sedgwick, Beans, and Walton joined the group and followed the Chinese pilots to the village.

"Funny," said Bob to Sedgwick. "I had never thought about John Wheeler talking Chinese, but of course, if he's been out here as a missionary he naturally would have learned the language."

"The question is," said Sedgwick, "what kind of Chinese? The dialects are so different that natives of different districts can't even understand each other."

"The Chinese seemed to know what he wanted as soon as he spoke to them," answered Bob.

The sun had completely disappeared by the time they reached the small village a half mile away. Their guides led them through cluttered narrow streets, dirty and crowded. Why were the huts packed so tightly together when there was so much open space around the village? In the half-light, the airmen had to hurry to keep their guides in sight. There were no sidewalks, just the earthen street used alike by pedestrians and caravans of donkeys. There seemed to be almost as many dogs as people, and both were equally curious. Finally their guides entered a long, low thatched building, where soldiers were lying about on the straw-covered floor. The airmen were led to a far corner that was screened off by burlap bags hanging from the rafters. As they passed the partition of bags, the Chinese pilots sprang rigidly to attention.

An officer of the Chinese Nationalist Army sat behind a desk. With a welcoming smile he sprang to his feet as the fliers approached, but the smile left his face when he saw their Jap prisoner.

"We are Royal Air Force officers, and this is our prisoner," said Bob.

The Chinese officer did not understand. Rapidly he spoke to the pilot who had boasted about his English-speaking ability. It was a bad spot for the flier. In any case, he could do little about it now, but by starting to remove his own jacket and then pointing to Bob, he indicated that the officer wanted to see their uniforms. Bob and the others quickly took off their coveralls. Satisfied, the Chinese officer advanced smilingly, holding out his hand to each of the R.A.F. airmen in the best Occidental manner.

Two Chinese soldiers had moved in beside the Jap Commandant at an order from the Chinese officer. Up to now, the Jap had been silent, but this action provoked a torrent of angry speech. Bob guessed that it must be Chinese, for the Chinese officer replied in kind.

"I have told him," explained the Jap, "that I took you prisoners when your airplanes landed near our camp, and that now I am your prisoner."

The Chinese laughed uproariously, and Bob realized that their sense of humor was much like any American's, for the situation was indeed comic. The Jap, humiliated, looked down at the floor.

"Would you ask him," said Bob, feeling that the Jap was now harmless, "where we can find Mr.

Wheeler and his wife, who is ill? And I would like to have full information as to where we are; ask him to show me on a map. But first, if we could be taken to Mr. Wheeler."

From the length of the conversation, Bob decided that the Jap was gathering some information on his own account, but in any event the results were immediate.

"The Captain says," translated the Jap, "that he will keep me here until it is decided what is to be done with me. You are to stay at his house, but first he will take you to Mr. Wheeler."

Again, Bob could not help feeling sorry for his diminutive enemy, for the Jap still looked frightened almost to death.

"We'll be seeing you," said Bob as he and the others followed the Chinese Captain out the door.

CHAPTER XII

Sedgwick's Story

The Chinese Captain took Bob inside a small hut next to a field hospital, while the others waited outside. Dorothy Wheeler was lying on an improvised bed, a very sick woman. Her husband was nearly beside himself with worry. A uniformed Chinese, whom Bob assumed to be a doctor, was bending over the bed. He shook his head as he examined the thermometer he had just taken from her mouth. Wheeler questioned him in Chinese, and the medical officer answered, but the missionary apparently did not fully understand him.

"My Chinese is so inadequate," he said to Bob hopelessly. "I was just beginning to get on to it a bit when the Japs captured us."

The doctor showed them the thermometer, pointing to the silver mark which had risen high in the tube. It meant little to either of the Americans, for it was a centigrade thermometer.

"Just a minute," said Bob. "Sandy may know something about this. He's used to figuring in the metric system."

Before the doctor shook it down, Sandy was called in.

"Aye, Skipper," said the Scotsman after a quick glance, "it's very high, and figures about a hundred and three and a half in our money."

The doctor spoke rapidly in Chinese and then smiled at Wheeler reassuringly, as though trying to indicate that although her condition was bad at the moment, in time she would be all right.

"Cheer up, Mr. Wheeler," said Bob. "I think he knows what he's doing. She's in good hands now and I am sure everything possible will be done for her. If necessary, we can get the Jap to translate for us."

The doctor shooed them out of the room, but before leaving, Wheeler returned to his wife's bedside and spoke to her encouragingly. She made no attempt to reply. As they left the hut, a Chinese nurse passed them carrying a large tray covered with a towel.

"You see, Mr. Wheeler," said Bob. "That ought to cheer you up. A woman will be taking care of her, and they probably have everything here that she'll need."

"I hope so, Terrell," replied Wheeler. "Anyway,

there's one thing I'm sure of. The Chinese are kind and they'll do everything they can for her."

The Captain now led them to his own quarters, small and sparsely furnished, with a roof so low that Don and Sedgwick had to duck their heads as they entered. The Captain shrugged his shoulders, as though he did not know what to do with all of them but would do the best he could. There was a long table in the center of the room, with a bench on either side of it, where the Captain motioned them to be seated.

Sitting down, Bob absent-mindedly shoved his hand in his pocket and was surprised to find it moist and sticky. Then he recalled the twinge of pain he had felt as they escaped from the Jap camp. With the lessening of anxiety and excitement, the pain now gradually returned. Carefully he withdrew his hand and stealthily cleaned it on his handkerchief. He must not add to all their troubles by letting the others know about this.

In a few minutes they were served—individually for a change—with what appeared to be the same kind of food they had eaten at the Jap camp. This time, however, it was hot and steaming and with it came cups of tea. The combination was good, Bob

decided. Delightedly the Captain watched their attempts to use the chopsticks that had been provided. Wheeler demonstrated how to use them, but Don found he could make better progress by holding the two side by side and using them as a spoon. After innumerable cups of tea, the meal was finished.

The Captain spoke in Chinese to Wheeler, bowed ceremoniously to each in turn, and then left the room.

"I believe he said," explained John, "that he had to go back to headquarters but would return later, though I'm not too sure. In any event, he expects us to make ourselves at home."

"I think it's time," began Bob, "that a little explaining was done. We've made good our escape, but the question is how?"

"Yes," agreed the others. "Come on, Sedgwick, let's have the story."

"It seems so long ago, now," replied Sedgwick. "And after all, what difference does it make, so long as we're out of there? What I want to know is how in the world you fellows got out of that hut?"

"Come on, Sedgwick, your story first, then we'll explain our part afterwards."

"O.K.," replied Sedgwick, "here are the gory de-

tails. First of all, when I left the hut I hadn't the faintest notion of what I was going to do. They took me to headquarters, where that rat of a Jap pilot was waiting. It would be my luck that he was wearing his oxygen mask, too. So right then I was sure your plan wouldn't work, Bob. I mean that business of cutting down on his oxygen intake. So out we went to my plane.

"As soon as we climbed aboard I knew what you meant about his being an experienced pilot, and he sure learned fast on the flight you made with him. When we took off, he had his hands and feet on the controls and watched every move I made. As soon as we got aloft, he took over the controls himself. The Commandant didn't go with us but sent a soldier instead. Before we took off, the pilot gave him a long harangue and I guess the general idea was that he was to shoot me through the head if I made a false move. Anyway, there he was, hanging on behind like grim death, with his automatic pointed at the back of my neck. I seemed to be completely hog-tied.

"The pilot began to throw her around quite a bit and once the soldier behind me slipped and lost his balance. I was about to risk everything and make a

grab for the controls, but even while I was thinking about it, he got back on his feet and had that old pistol shoved in the back of my neck again. We had been flying about twenty minutes and were about twelve thousand feet up when the Jap stuck his finger on the altimeter and pointed at twenty thousand feet and then twenty-five. I figured he wanted to know how high she'd climb, so I shook my head both times. Then, more for devilment than anything else, I pointed to forty thousand feet on the dial. He looked at me as though he knew I were an awful liar and then, either to prove it or to see how high she would climb, he shoved the nose up and we kept right on upstairs at three thousand feet a minute. I began to take hope then.

"At twenty thousand feet the soldier was still standing behind me, but I thought he looked a little bit woozy. You see, he didn't have an oxygen mask. Whether the pilot had forgotten it or whether he just didn't care and figured he didn't need him anyway, I don't know. But in any event, he kept right on climbing. At twenty-five thousand feet, my buddy behind me was hanging on to the ropes. I didn't know where the pilot had his own gun, but I hoped it was so far underneath his flying suit that

it would take a while to find. At thirty thousand feet, I saw the soldier's gun hand begin to droop, so I made a dive for his automatic. I knew if I didn't grab it before he dropped it I'd never get it, for of course our belts were fastened.

"Boy, I never felt better in my life," went on Sedgwick. "My first impulse was to bore a hole right through that yellow head over in the copilot's seat, but I restrained myself and motioned to him to get his hands and feet off the controls. He obeyed instantly. When I was taking over with my left hand and covering him with my right, I half turned for a second, but out of the corner of my eye I saw him grabbing for his automatic. So I let him have it."

"Too bad," interjected Beans sadly.

"What do you mean, 'too bad,'?" responded Sedgwick.

"Why, he never will know how high the Stratohawks can fly now," said Beans.

"Well, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted," continued Sedgwick. "I had to plug him. So there I was with one dead Jap and another who was dead to the world."

"And what did you do then, sir?" queried Sandy.

"Listen, you guys," said the irritated Sedgwick,

"if you don't let me tell my story in my own way, I won't tell it at all. And you'll just have to keep on guessing as to what happened. But in answer to your question, McTavish, I set the automatic pilot, undid my safety belt, disconnected my oxygen, cracked the soldier over the head with his own pistol butt, and dropped him back in the well. When I got back to the pilot seat I was weak as water, but I figured I could come down to a lower altitude, so I gulped in some oxygen and set her nose to the ground. At ten thousand feet, I let 'George' take over again while I undid the pilot's safety belt and yanked him back with the soldier. From then on I was worried for fear I hadn't tapped him hard enough and the soldier might come to. And also I was trying to figure out what to do next.

"Naturally, no one on the ground knew what had been going on up in the air, so I guess those birds must have been plenty surprised when I came in shooting. Well, I sprayed them a bit and then started to beat up the camp. I was afraid to come too close to your hut, but did manage to clear the courtyard pretty well. Then as I came back to blast it again, I saw you guys beating it across the courtyard and, fortunately, saw you veer off to headquar-

ters. It was darn lucky, for that was going to be my next target. Instead, I shot up the guardhouse.

"Then I went back and took care of what was left of the guards at the north end, where we'd come in for a landing and where they'd been guarding our planes. The hardest thing was to know where you birds were, but finally I saw you make a dash for the Stratohawk. The battery truck was going hell-bent for leather in the direction of the camp, and knowing you'd like a battery to start, I speeded them up a bit. I guess that's about all," concluded Sedgwick. "Now what about you fellows? How did you manage to get out of the hut?"

"Are you sure that's all?" asked Bob. "I was pretty busy but not too busy to see that nice bonfire you'd started."

"Oh, yes," replied Sedgwick, "I forgot. I managed to take care of that transport they'd flown over in."

"Well, Sedge," said Bob, "I'd say you did a good day's work for yourself—and also for us—and it took some pretty fast thinking."

"Just a minute," interjected the practical Sandy, "you didn't say what you'd done with the two Japs."

"Oh, that," replied Sedgwick nonchalantly. "I

dumped them out through the escape hatch when the others came on board. "Now, what about you chaps?" he asked.

Bob told him the whole story and how it dovetailed with the one just related.

"I don't know how good a navigator Beans is," concluded Bob, "but without any question he's tops as a ventriloquist. And you certainly put on your act at the right time, Beans. I didn't know that you knew any Japanese. What was it you said to make those Jap guards look around, back there in the hut?"

"I don't know any Japanese," Beans admitted modestly, "but just said the first thing that came into my head. And that was *suki-yaki*. One time I had some in a Jap restaurant in California and the name of the stuff stuck in my mind."

"There hasn't been any chance to bring this up before," spoke up John Wheeler, "but I want you fellows to know how much I appreciate all the help you've given us. If it hadn't been for you, I'm afraid Dorothy wouldn't be alive."

"Think nothing of it," said Bob. "Let's go over and see how she is. The rest of you had better wait here until the Captain comes back."

The little Chinese nurse put her finger warningly to her lips as the two men entered the small hut. At her reassuring smile some of the anxiety left John Wheeler's face. Bob wanted to see the doctor on his own account, for though he knew his wound was not serious, there was always the danger of infection.

They found the Chinese doctor in the field hospital next door, and his examination showed that a small caliber bullet had creased the flesh. Bob winced involuntarily as the orderly washed it with antiseptic. The doctor shrugged his shoulders to indicate that it was a matter of no further consequence, so Bob and Wheeler returned to the Captain's quarters.

The Captain was busy pointing out to the airmen some position on a large map. It was not much help to Bob, however, for it was a local map, covering only one section of the province.

"Wait a minute, Skipper," said Sandy, noting the former's disappointment. "This is all we need. That is, so far as our present position is concerned. This looks like the northern half of Hunan Province. Do you remember that lake I thought we were flying over? Well, that may be a corner of it up in the north."

"Here's where I can be of some help," spoke up John Wheeler, "for I can at least read Chinese characters. McTavish is right. This town marked in heavy type is the capital of Hunan Province, and in English characters it is Changsha. Further, the map is on a scale of twenty kilometers to the inch."

"That helps a lot, Wheeler. Now," continued Bob, "if we only had a large map of China to get our relative position and distance to Kingsha. You weren't far off, Sandy, in regard to east and west, but you were slightly out to the north and south."

"Yes," agreed Sandy, "by a few hundred miles."

"Never mind, Sandy, what's a few hundred miles between friends?"

"That's just the trouble," retorted Sandy, "if there had been friends up there, it wouldn't have mattered at all. I just can't figure out how we drifted so far north in a northeasterly monsoon."

After some further conversation with John Wheeler, the Captain excused himself again to get some other maps. Bob disliked using the Jap Commandant as interpreter, since he dared not reveal his destination. For that matter, he did not dare reveal it to the Chinese officer either. In the few minutes that the Captain was out of the room, he

explained all this to the assembled airmen. "We'll try to keep the map if we can," he directed, "and don't anyone point out our destination."

When the Captain returned, he brought, of all things, an American school geography! And how pleased he was when Bob told him, through Wheeler, that it was fine. Eagerly Bob leafed through the pages until he found a map of the Chinese Republic and Korea, dated 1921. There, spelled out in good plain English, was their destination. It looked comfortingly close until Bob pointed out the scale of miles: three hundred to the inch. They were still six hundred miles away.

While the airmen examined the geography, the Captain held a lengthy conversation with Wheeler. The missionary was doing his best to understand, and finally he turned to Bob with the information that the Captain had arranged for beds for the night. The village was very crowded and he apologized for the poor accommodations, but they could go to bed whenever they were ready. This seemed like a good idea to everyone, for it had been a long and tiring day.

In a short time they were tearing down to the airdrome in the Captain's car, where, with the help of

the Chinese mechanics on duty, they pegged down the wings and tail of each Stratohawk. During this season of the year, high winds were the rule rather than the exception.

On the way back, Bob stopped for a moment to find out how the little Jap Commandant was coming on. They had given him a bed of straw in one corner of the large barracks. He appeared to be sleeping, but as Bob approached he sat bolt upright.

"So you have kept your word, Squadron Leader Terrell," he exclaimed.

"Yes," said Bob. "I said I'd see you later, and I think you're probably as comfortable as we will be. Your day has been almost as hard as ours," continued Bob, thinking of the Jap's aversion to flying, "so you'll need a good night's sleep if we do any more flying tomorrow."

The Chinese guards looked puzzled at this apparent friendly interchange with the enemy. So long as he could, he would see to it that the little Jap was given fair treatment, for they owed much to his unexpected decency.

Bob and the others were soon deposited at the hospital, where cots had been prepared for them at the far end of the large room.

"This is probably the cleanest place in the whole village," said John Wheeler.

From what he had seen, Bob was inclined to agree. It was not the pleasantest place in the world to sleep, he thought, as they were led between rows of wounded men. There were only six cots; the Captain had placed Wheeler's bed in his wife's room, knowing he would want to be near her. Bob had expected to hear groans from the wounded men, but only Don's snoring broke the stillness of the night.

Hands behind his head, Bob stared up at the thatched roof. At points it was so thin he could see the glimmering of the stars. Where, he wondered, were the others of his squadron? There were still ten planes to be accounted for. Had they been thrown as far off their course as he? The first order of business tomorrow would be to try to locate the other planes. If only he could trust the Jap Commandant as interpreter with the Chinese. Wheeler might possibly get things mixed up. Then, too, would he be able to use the wireless, or would that enable the enemy to pick up the position of the Chinese camp? What were they thinking in Kingsha now, since Bob and the others had not arrived?

And above all, what was Group Captain Seaton thinking, back at the Rawmi base? By now he would know that the mission had failed.

Dismal as these thoughts were, Bob realized that their situation might have been far worse. If they had spent another night in the Jap camp, there would have been no chance of finding his comrades. Under the present circumstances, there was not only a good chance of finding them, but of eventually reaching their destination in safety. With these comforting thoughts, he finally fell into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER XIII

In the Nick of Time

When Bob awoke about seven the next morning, rain was dripping on his face through the thinly thatched roof, but even the rain could not depress him now. He was completely refreshed after his first night of sound sleep since the squadron had taken off from Rawmi. Don White was still snoring heavily, but Sandy was up and the others soon awoke when they heard these two talking.

"Our godfather has been poking his head in here at fifteen-minute intervals for the last hour," said Sandy. "When he saw you were still sleeping, he didn't disturb you. But he grinned at me as if he had good news of some kind."

"I sure hope so," replied Bob eagerly. "I wonder what it can be."

In another ten minutes the Captain appeared again, waving a slip of paper. Excitedly, he took Bob by the arm and led him out the door. John Wheeler came out of the near-by hut at almost the same time and joined them.

"What's up, Terrell?" he asked.

"I don't know, but something must be on the fire, because the Captain seems so excited. I hope he has good news for us."

All Wheeler could learn was that somebody had telephoned. Sandy caught up with them and the three men followed the Captain to headquarters. As soon as they entered the office improvised behind the burlap bags, the Captain sat down at his desk and picked up the telephone. After much furious ringing, he succeeded in raising someone at the other end of the line. There was much talk back and forth in Chinese, much too rapid for Wheeler to understand. Finally the Captain shrugged his shoulders and replaced the phone. Turning to Wheeler he spoke slowly in explanation.

"He says that he'll try again after breakfast," interpreted Wheeler. "It's something about a friend."

"A friend?" exclaimed Bob. "Say, I wonder."

"Wonder what?"

"Why, I'm just wondering if any of the other planes have been rounded up or if this chap has gotten through to some other station. Oh, well, what's the use of guessing? Perhaps I'll know after breakfast."

As they sat around the long table in the Captain's quarters the boys agreed that the Chinese did not go in for particularly well-balanced meals. Breakfast consisted of the same kind of food as dinner on the previous evening. Surprisingly enough, it still tasted good to the hungry airmen. When Bob told the others about the Captain's excitement and the telephone call, there was eager speculation as to what might be behind it.

The village was a beehive of activity when they emerged from the Captain's quarters after breakfast. A battalion of fully equipped Chinese soldiers was moving away as the airmen reached the barracks, probably on their way to the front. They were a smiling, happy-looking lot, apparently pleased at the prospect of tangling with the Japanese. Bob had thought he heard the distant rumble of heavy guns on the previous evening, and now he felt sure that the front was not far away.

Again the Captain tried to put through a connection to Bob's mysterious friend. This time his persistence was rewarded, and with a broad smile he handed the combination receiver and phone piece to Bob.

"Is this Squadron Leader Terrell?" inquired a precise voice at the other end.

Bob was so dumbfounded that he thought the interference must be playing tricks with his ears. "What?" he answered in an incredulous voice.

"I said, 'Is this Squadron Leader Terrell?'" repeated the other firmly.

"Yes, it is," replied the amazed Bob.

"This is General Sun Yen," advised the unseen speaker at the far end of the line. "Captain Wong telephoned me last night. It is important that you leave there as quickly as possible. We are expecting a large-scale Japanese attack and doubt if the village can be held. I am speaking from Changsha and I recommend that you fly here as quickly as possible, bringing your Japanese prisoner with you. I have instructed Captain Wong to assign you a pilot to show you the route. When you arrive, we will help you reach your destination."

"That's fine," replied Bob, "and thank you very much, sir. But we have a very sick American woman with us and I doubt if she can be moved."

"It will be far better," advised the General, "to try to move her, because the Japs may be coming at

any moment. So I urge you to make all speed. Now let me speak to Captain Wong, please."

While the Captain was on the telephone, Bob explained to the others what had happened.

"Things are looking up," said Sedgwick. "At least we'll be in touch with a high officer who speaks English well."

"John," said Bob, turning to Wheeler, "do you think your wife is well enough to be moved?"

"I don't know. She's much better than she was yesterday. And when the nurse took her temperature this morning she seemed pleased, and as I remember the reading of yesterday, today's was lower."

Jumping from the telephone and literally shoving the boys out of the barracks, the Captain shrieked an order to a junior officer, who rushed to the far end of the room where the Jap Commandant was under guard. Their so-called English-speaking guide of the previous evening walked them swiftly through the narrow street to the airdrome. Quickly he instructed the mechanics to remove the stakes that held the Stratohawks. Efficiently they went to work. Then, spreading a map on the wing of a Stratohawk, the guide pointed out their destination.

Marking off the distance with his fingers, he tried to show them the length of the flight. Reaching over, the Chinese pilot tapped the wing in the general direction of the wing tanks, and looking up at Bob, inquired, "Gas?"

Was there enough for the trip? Bob quickly estimated the distance in his mind. "You, Sedgwick, check up on what you have in your Stratohawk, will you? And you, Don, see how much we have in ours."

A minute or two later both called out the amount of fuel on hand, and Bob knew it would be enough, with a slight margin to spare for bad weather. The Chinese pilot now walked around in front of Bob's Stratohawk and, by making clockwise motions with his hands and arms, indicated that the engines should be started up. Mechanics were ready with batteries and in a short time all four engines were ticking over.

The airdrome was filled with activity; apparently the Chinese were preparing to abandon it. Equipment was being loaded onto trucks and the backs of donkeys; even jinrikishas were being stowed high with ammunition. The Captain's car drew up, with the Wheelers inside. Mrs. Wheeler was bundled up

in a blanket, and it seemed to Bob that she looked considerably better than the day before. Soon the Jap, escorted by two guards, arrived. He looked distinctly unhappy.

"Will the flight be long, Squadron Leader Terrell?" he inquired.

"Not very long," answered Bob, and at that the Jap visibly brightened.

Mrs. Wheeler was gently raised into Bob's Stratohawk and made as comfortable as possible in the bomb well. The Jap was loaded into Sedgwick's plane. The sound of heavy guns was rapidly coming nearer, although still many miles away. The Captain, strutting around impatiently and giving orders here and there, was anxious for them to be on their way. Engines now up to temperature, everything was ready for the take-off.

Bob shook hands heartily with the Chinese officer, expressing his thanks in English. Although the Captain could not understand, Bob hoped that his warm handclasp would convey his meaning. Climbing quickly into the pilot's seat, he advanced the throttles and rumbled out on the field.

The Chinese pilot in the Curtiss-Hawk was up ahead, ready to take off at the far end. He slid

back the greenhouse and stood up in the cockpit, waving to Bob. Bob made a wide circle, coming up behind him. The pilot waved them farther back on the field, but Bob knew that no more space was needed, and when the Hawk took off, he followed it closely.

Bob could imagine the Chinese pilot's surprise as he looked up to find the Stratohawks already in the air and to his right side. The fleet little American plane swung swiftly to the south, climbing rapidly. Sedgwick fell in beside Bob and they followed tightly. But the Chinese pilot seemed to want more space and kept waving them back. For the moment Bob had forgotten the tremendously superior speed of the Stratohawks, but now he realized that he had been pressing the Chinese pilot, who wanted to remain well out in front so as to have a clear view all around in case of attack by Jap planes. Watching the pilot ahead, Bob noted that from time to time he turned his head for periodic sweeps of the sky.

In less than five minutes after their departure from the Chinese airdrome, they were flying at five thousand feet. As Bob kept his eye on the rapidly climbing Hawk, he saw the Chinese pilot

suddenly dive swiftly for the ground. Coming up fast were three Japanese Zeros. Bob gave a quick look around. At the same moment Don called out sharply, "Nips at nine o'clock!"

Quickly Bob looked to his left, where he saw a large formation of Jap aircraft above and to the east. Apparently these Jap bombers were headed for the airdrome they had just left. The Stratohawks had gotten away in the nick of time. With relief Bob noticed that there was no sign of other fighters. Taking in the entire situation in a split second, he saw that the Chinese pilot had opened up with his pitifully inadequate fire at the oncoming Zeros. Now he had flashed by and was climbing for another attack, and the next moment Bob saw that one of the Zeros was smoking. He admired the reckless courage of the Chinese fighter but realized that he was hopelessly outgunned.

"Come on, Sedgwick," called Bob over the R.T., "let's give him a little help." For the moment he forgot that Mrs. Wheeler was lying ill in the bomb well.

The Chinese pilot had broken up the Jap formation of three. The two undamaged Zeros had veered away to attack the larger Stratohawk planes and

were boring in from either side. Bob and Sedgwick pulled up the noses of the Stratohawks simultaneously and headed directly for the Zeros. Turning sharply away from each other, the two pilots pressed their solenoid buttons at the same instant. Their targets disintegrated in the air. One moment there had been two formidable Jap war planes; now there were none.

The Chinese pilot had climbed back up to their level and was well out in front again. Banking to the right, he crowded on full power, but even so Bob and Sedgwick, back in formation, had to throttle back to avoid overrunning him. The Chinese was headed for a cloud bank to the southwest, and a few minutes later they were boring through it. Bob advanced the throttles slightly to keep the Chinese plane in sight. Dropping swiftly, the Chinese emerged on the under side. The cloud cover now protected them from the view of any Jap planes that might be above, and Bob fervently hoped there were none underneath. The three planes could be clearly seen by anyone between them and the ground.

Bob had estimated the Changsha airdrome at not more than seventy-five miles away. If this estimate

were correct, they should reach it within the next few minutes. Their guide had now swung over a wide river, which wound through a large city.

A few minutes later the Chinese pilot began to signal by wiggling his wings and waving violently. Off to the right was a large airdrome, with aircraft widely dispersed over the field. Many planes were taking off and landing. The Hawk made a wide circle and for five minutes more they kept flying around in a circuit at three thousand feet. Then, with another signaling wiggle, the Chinese pilot pointed his nose down. Bob followed, and soon all three aircraft were safely on the ground.

CHAPTER XIV

Chinese Hospitality

As he taxied up to the flying line Bob saw that it bore a closer resemblance to a regular military air-drome than any others he had seen since leaving Rawmi. It was evident that they were expected, for a small group of officials was waiting in front of the macadam tarmac. Cutting the engines, Bob descended from the Stratohawk.

"I am General Sun Yen," said a wiry officer, advancing to meet him.

Bob approached to shake hands when an excited voice called, "Hello, Lucky!"

Bringing up the rear was Eric Prentiss. The two boys fell on each other and pounded backs lustily.

"Good old Eric," said Bob, "I've been wondering what had happened to you and the rest. Am I ever glad to see you!"

"And I am glad to see you, Bob. I was worried about you. And it's great to know that you're safe and sound."

Bob then turned back to the Chinese General, apologizing for his seeming rudeness.

"Please do not apologize," he said. "I understand perfectly. Flight Lieutenant Prentiss has told me of his anxiety for the rest of the squadron."

Bob looked at Eric quizzically, wondering how much he had told the General about this secret mission. The General's next remark, however, removed any worries in that direction.

"We have already introduced ourselves over the telephone, but I want you to know that as commander of this corps area I have been advised of your mission and instructed to give any help you might need. Now if you will be good enough to come to headquarters, we will see what can be done. In the meantime you can be sure that the American lady will be well taken care of, for we have a completely equipped hospital and an American trained physician."

"What a relief!" said John Wheeler, who was standing near by.

A few moments later Mrs. Wheeler was tenderly lowered into a litter and carried to the hospital, with John walking behind.

"We'll be seeing you later, Mr. Wheeler," called Bob as he watched his new friend depart. "Where's your Stratohawk, Eric?"

"About fifty miles back in the hills," replied Eric, "with a flat tire, but that's all that's wrong with it. The General has put a guard over the plane, and I'm planning to fly her in this afternoon."

Bob was impressed with the businesslike atmosphere of the General's headquarters. A maze of charts hung on the wall. Everything suggested modern efficiency.

"Let me tell you first of all," began General Sun Yen, "that your prisoner is an important one. We believe he may be particularly valuable to the Chinese cause. He is a cousin of Prince Chichibu, who in turn is a brother to Emperor Hirohito of Japan. We have reliable information that Prince Chichibu has been under arrest for several months on the charge of being unsympathetic with Japanese war aims. We believe that your prisoner shares his sentiment and so his capture is especially interesting."

"Now I'm beginning to understand," replied Bob, "why he was so kind to us, so much so that I be-

came suspicious of him. This may also explain the hostility of the Jap pilots."

"Jap pilots?"

Bob explained briefly how they had escaped from the Jap camp, while the General and Eric listened eagerly.

"And to think," said the latter glumly, "that I had to miss out on all that excitement."

"Cheer up," replied Bob, "there may be plenty more coming up."

"Now," went on the General, "you will be interested in getting through to your destination as quickly as possible. We can provide you with the high octane fuel required by your Stratohawks, and the distance is only five hundred and fifty miles. Incidentally," he added, "you got away from our outpost this morning just in time, for since your departure, the airdrome has been heavily bombed."

"I guessed as much," said Bob.

During this entire conversation, the Chinese pilot who had guided them to the Changsha airdrome had been standing rigidly at attention. Now the General waved him at ease, and he took this opportunity to break into rapid Chinese. After listening intently, the General dismissed him. With a

smart salute, the Chinese pilot turned and strode from the room.

"I see that I have even more thanks to give you," said the General, smiling agreeably. "Lun-Yin tells me that you destroyed two Jap Zeros on your way over this morning."

"Yes," replied Bob, "but not before he dropped another himself."

"He is one of our ace pilots," explained the General. "If only," he added softly, "he and the others had more modern airplanes to fly; then we could do a far better job against the Japs."

"You'll be getting them, sir," said Bob.

"I hope so, but time is running short. Captain Wong was considerably confused last night when you chaps arrived at his outpost," the General went on. "At first he was afraid that you were Germans, because you had the Jap with you. But when he saw your uniforms, he decided that you must be friends. When I told him over the phone that we knew all about you, it straightened matters out all around."

Bob's high praise of the Captain pleased the General.

"Now to get down to business," he went on effi-

ciently. "There are, as I gather, nine Stratohawks still to be accounted for."

"That's correct, sir," replied Bob.

"I think I have some encouraging news for you. We've had reports from one of our outposts, telling of planes similar to yours that have recently landed. But that is all I know, for the Captains of the aircraft refused to give any information."

"That sounds like our men," said Bob with a grin. "I would have attempted to round them up myself, sir, but didn't wish to use the radio for fear I would give away your position to the enemy."

"That was very thoughtful of you, Terrell," replied the General, "but I'm afraid you wouldn't have had much luck anyway, for atmospheric conditions have been so bad that we've been unable to contact any of our outposts by wireless, and our communications with Chungking have been broken."

"Is there any way that I can get in touch with my base, sir?" asked Bob.

"I'm afraid not, unless we can get through to Chungking to relay the message. Right now we are practically isolated from the outside world."

"What a stew Group Captain Seaton will be in," thought Bob.

"We're trying," continued the General, "to re-establish communications with the Corps Area Commandant in Chekiang Province, but the Japs have put on a concerted drive on all fronts and communications there were broken last night during a heavy bombardment. As soon as we can make contact we'll know if any of your aircraft arrived safely at their destination, for it's entirely possible that some of them won through."

Bob decided that if the squadron were ever reorganized, he would enjoy working with the Chinese, particularly if the others turned out to be anything like this kindly, understanding General.

The General pointed out the new dispositions of the Jap army, and how the recent push was endangering their positions to the north, near Lake Tungting and the Yangtze River. "Yours will be a wonderful opportunity when you are established in Chekiang Province, for Tokyo will be within your bombing range."

"I know," replied Bob, "and that's one of the main reasons we're anxious to get there."

"Now how about some lunch?" asked the General, rising abruptly. "You needn't worry about your aircraft, for they will be well taken care of, and we maintain constant fighter patrols over the field."

The General sat at the head of a long table and the Royal Air Force fliers were distributed among the many Chinese officers who lunched with them. Bob was surprised to hear some of them speaking English until the General explained that many, like himself, had attended either American or English universities.

When a large plate of chicken was placed in front of Don, he was unable to restrain himself. "Hi, Bob!" he called. "Look what we've got!"

Don's lack of decorum apparently pleased the General, for he smiled broadly and explained that he thought a good meal might be a novelty for them. The General had reserved a seat on his right for John Wheeler, who now approached the table. "And how is Mrs. Wheeler?" he asked.

"She is much better, thank you, sir. The doctor says she should be completely sound within a few days, but she came very close to having pneumonia.

Would you mind, sir, if I said a few words before we started the meal?"

"Not at all," replied the General courteously.

"You see," he added, and his look turned to Bob, "we have a great deal to be thankful for."

Before the meal started, the young and earnest American missionary gave thanks for their providential escape. Bob noticed that every head at the table —American, English, and Chinese—was bowed in reverence as he spoke.

When the meal was over, Bob went with the General to his office, while the others remained with the Chinese officers at their mess. Now that he had had a chance to wash and brush up, Bob felt like a civilized human being again.

Shortly after their arrival in the office, the Jap Commandant was brought in under heavy guard. The Japanese stood stiffly at attention while the General interrogated him in English, asking questions that were shrewd and to the point. Bob felt keenly for the little Jap, who was torn between racial pride and his hatred for the Jap war clique. The Jap expressed sincere gratitude to Bob for his kindness and timidly asked if he might shake hands. In spite of

Bob's aversion to everything Japanese, he could not help warming to the little man, who seemed to have given up all hope and had taken on the characteristic Jap attitude that capture meant destruction. Bob's handshake seemed to raise his spirits, for he smiled as he was led away.

"Now comes the question of what to do with this prisoner of yours," said the General after the Jap's departure. "Technically, he belongs to you, for you were responsible for his capture. Frankly," he went on, "I would like to keep him here, for I think that he can be of greater value to us than to you. I am hopeful that he may break down and give us some information of very special interest."

"He's yours," said Bob, glad to transfer the responsibility and knowing that the Jap would receive decent treatment. "As a matter of fact, I must admit to a sneaking liking for the little chap. I don't think his heart was in his work at all."

"You are quite right, and we have reason to believe that he would very soon have been eliminated by his own peopde. If we should receive any information from him that will be of value to you, it will be passed on to you at once."

The rest of the day was spent in trying to contact the other ships of the squadron. By midafternoon, Bob had spoken directly with Malcolm, Dawson, and Colburn, who had been forced down together about a hundred miles to the northwest. Their aircraft were undamaged and they were patiently waiting to be found. Bob told them to stand by and he would get in touch with them later. He was beaming as he hung up the receiver.

"At least half the squadron is accounted for now," he said delightedly to the General. "If you don't mind, sir, I'd like to fly over there at once."

"Right you are," responded Sun Yen, "and if you don't mind, I'd like to accompany you. That is," he added, "if you have room."

"Of course there's room," replied Bob happily. "I'll leave Don and Sandy behind. I won't need them. But I think, sir," he added, "we'll unload the Stratohawk, just in case we should run into any trouble on the way. As it is, we're a little heavily loaded for combat."

Before going to the airdrome, Bob returned to the officers' mess and told the others the good news. Don and Sandy were disappointed that they were

not going along. Under Bob's direction the Stratohawk was quickly unloaded, and a guard placed over the supplies. Fifteen minutes later the Stratohawk was fueled up and soon they were high aloft, heading into the northwest.

CHAPTER XV

The Gathering of the Clan

Bob dared not hope that the whole squadron might again be gathered together, although at the moment the outlook was promising. While talking to the General through the intercom, he kept a weather eye on the landscape beneath. The General explained that ever since the Stratohawks' arrival at his airdrome, all pilots had been instructed to keep a close watch for distressed planes. So far, the only reports had come from the outpost toward which they were now headed. Bob knew, however, that if any other Stratohawk pilots had been forced down, they would use every means to camouflage their aircraft against attacks from Jap bombers. Familiar with these methods of camouflage, he continued to watch closely.

The General was delighted with the plane's performance.

"If only we could have a quantity of aircraft like these," he said, "the story would be completely different. Most of our pilots have been well trained,

but we have had to get along with planes that were out of date many years ago."

Bob told him of the great strides being made in manufacturing in America and England. The General had heard these reports himself; what he was most interested in was the actual arrival of the airplanes.

"They'll be coming," said Bob. "You wait and see."

Fifteen minutes later, the General pointed out the small Chinese outpost. There was no airdrome, but the ground was smooth and rolling. Off to one side, Bob could see the three Stratohawks grouped together on the ground, but if he had not known they were there, he would probably have missed them, so cleverly had their contours been disguised by the trees.

Both pilots and ground crews were lined up and cheering when Bob let the wheels down. In a few moments he had shaken hands all around. Malcolm, acting as spokesman, told briefly of their experiences. They had drifted to the south instead of the north and, finding a hole in the weather, had settled down in this very spot and had remained there ever since. Last night the Commandant of the outpost had succeeded in getting through to Changsha,

just as Captain Wong had done. The General, meanwhile, had ordered them to remain where they were, pending Terrell's arrival. Although they had been in the air even longer than Bob, they had been lucky enough to avoid the icing strata. There was still plenty of fuel in their tanks, so Bob did not need to transfer any from his own. Within a few minutes after Bob's arrival, all four Stratohawks were in the air and on their way back to the Changsha base.

"I have a hunch," Bob remarked to the General when they were in the air, "that some of our boys may have been blown off their course even farther to the south. I wonder if we couldn't go back to Changsha in a roundabout way?"

"Of course," replied the General.

At better than four miles a minute cruising speed, the Stratohawks swung lazily on. It was just as the General suggested a leg to the east that Bob's interest was quickened by some peculiar markings on the ground. They looked like the tracks of wagon wheels, but there was no sign of a road in this barren territory. With difficulty he succeeded in contacting the others by radio; he had to shout to make them hear, just as he had with Sedgwick on the previous day. Finally they acknowledged his instruc-

tions to remain at their altitude and to keep circling until he rejoined them.

Swinging low, Bob followed the tracks. They ended in a clump of trees—and sure enough, a Stratohawk was secreted there. As he came nearer a figure ran out and waved wildly. Swooping to within a few feet of the ground, Bob made out the shouting face of Pat Flannigan. There was no sign of the others. The marks on the ground had been made by the wheels of the Stratohawk as it bumped in for a perilous landing. Bob did not dare risk one himself on the rough terrain, and he was amazed that even Flannigan had been able to get out of the plane alive.

Pat ran swiftly back to his plane and Bob knew he was trying to make contact by radio. Flying back and forth, Bob strained his ears, but not a sound came through.

"Do you think we could find this spot again, General?"

"Yes, there's no question that we can find it. Not over ten miles from here to the southeast is one of our divisional posts. As soon as we return to Changsha, I'll instruct them to send out a rescue party immediately."

Bob was loath to leave the damaged Stratohawk, even though help would be arriving soon. Climbing up again, he rejoined the other planes and in a few minutes their wheels were rolling along the ground at the Changsha airdrome. The General telephoned immediately and advised that a searching party was being dispatched.

"They will be there within two hours," he told Bob confidently, "and a doctor will accompany the group in case he's needed."

It was a happy reunion when Malcolm, Colburn, and Dawson joined the others. The General was somewhat at a loss as to where to put them all, but finally decided to turn over one of the new barracks that had just been completed for his own men.

"This will still leave you plenty of room when the others show up," he told Bob, showing him the large room with its double-deck beds.

"I just hope we'll need it," replied Bob, "and if things keep on the way they're going now, we may be able to use it all."

From Malcolm's supply plane, Eric Prentiss secured the materials he needed to fix his blown-out tire and, with his copilot and navigator and some

of the recently arrived aircraftmen, he started out for the fifty-mile drive to his stranded plane.

"We'll either be flying back or driving back before dinnertime," he told Bob as he left.

For the rest of the afternoon, Bob literally haunted the General's office, waiting for word of the rescue party that had gone to pick up Flannigan and his air crew. It was three hours before word came through. As Bob had feared, both the second pilot and navigator were badly injured. Flannigan was injured, too, though not so seriously.

"Could they be flown back?" inquired Bob.

"Yes, they could."

"Right," said Bob. "We'll be down to fetch them right away."

Bob felt confident that he would find the outpost where the men had been taken, but the General insisted that a Chinese pilot be sent along to guide him. Since the supplies had been unloaded from Bob's Stratohawk, there was plenty of room for the three of them in the bomb well, so Don went along too. Twenty minutes later they landed at the small Chinese garrison. Flannigan, along with the others, was flat on his back on a cot.

"Boy, am I glad to see you!" he greeted Bob, for-

getting that Bob was now his commanding officer, and that this was hardly the correct form of address. Neither one noticed the omission, for Bob was equally happy to see Flannigan.

"How come you were able to run out and wave to us?"

"Oh, there's nothing much the matter with me," replied Flannigan. "But this Chinese doctor seems to think I should be taking care of myself. I was simply knocked about a little bit when we ran into the tree."

Flannigan, his second pilot, and navigator were loaded gently into Bob's Stratohawk and were soon on their way back to the Changsha base. Flannigan insisted on sitting in the copilot's seat beside Bob, and this appeared to be a good arrangement in view of the injuries of the other two men. Therefore Don remained in the rear to look after them.

Flannigan thought that his ship could be flown out. The nose had been badly mashed in when they struck a tree before coming to a stop, but by some miracle the props had not been injured. How much structural damage might have been done to the aircraft he could not tell, but believed it would be serviceable once the nose was repaired.

This was good news to Bob, who decided that if the weather held they would get the Stratohawk out on the morrow.

When they reached the tarmac, Sedgwick was waiting, eager to report that the General had received word that other R.A.F. planes had been reported flying way east over Kiangsi Province.

"Hoot, mon," said Sandy, who had been listening eagerly, "looks like the gathering of the clan. Only you'll remember that the McTavishes were in at the first."

"Yes, and I remember, Sandy," said Bob, "when the McTavishes navigated us into a Jap prison."

"Now, Skipper," Sandy remonstrated. "I hope you're not going to hold that against me. After all, I don't make the weather, I just try to use it."

It began to look now as though Bob would again have a full squadron to command if the detected R.A.F. planes turned out to be Stratohawks. The General informed him that the storm in which they had been caught was widespread, causing great damage over almost the entire eastern section of China. He encouraged Bob by pointing out that since so many of the planes had landed, the others were probably safe, too.

Further conversation was cut short by the deafening sound of heavy explosions. Changsha was being raided by the Japs, and the bombs were falling dangerously near.

CHAPTER XVI

Repaying a Debt

Air-raid sirens were shrilling intermittently, but above them Bob could hear the General barking orders into the telephone.

"Roy," called Bob to Sedgwick, who had superintended the unloading of the Stratohawks when he and Don had gone to pick up Flannigan and his injured air crew, "how many Stratos are ready for the air?"

"Five."

"Good enough," said Bob. "We'll lend a hand on this raid. Start warming them up; check on the fuel and ammunition, and be prepared to take off as quickly as possible." Then, when the General had finished at the telephone, Bob began, "So far, sir, we've only been a lot of trouble to you, but now I think we have a chance to pay back some of our debt to you. With your permission, five of us are going to take off in our Stratohawks and I'm hoping we can make it interesting for the enemy."

"With my permission," responded the General,

"go right ahead. Our fighters are so thinly spread, the Japs can do just about what they want over the city. We've had to keep most of our fighters in reserve to try to save the airdrome."

"That's all I want to know," Bob said. Turning swiftly, he left the office.

When Bob arrived on the tarmac, the engines of all five Stratohawks were ticking over evenly, but it would be several minutes before they could take off. Looking toward the large city, he realized it was a field day for the Japanese bombers. Huge spouts of black smoke rose in the air where their bombs were striking. At other points, flames crackled in the sky. High above, there was a continuous stream of planes, with fighters twisting in and out among them. It was impossible to judge how many were Chinese and how many were Japanese.

The thinly spread anti-aircraft fire was having little effect on the Jap attack. Impatiently, Bob waited for the engines to reach the proper temperature. Would they be able to get aloft in time to do any effective damage?

Don appeared, fully clothed and ready for the air, as did Sandy.

"Sorry, fellows," said Bob, "but this is my own

little party. And while I'd like to have you along, I won't need you, and there's no particular point in exposing you to any unnecessary risks."

Regretfully, the two dropped out of the Stratohawk, looking as if they'd just been fired by their best friend from well-paying jobs. In spite of his anxiety and impatience to get aloft, Bob could not help laughing at their comical appearance. "Cheer up, there'll be plenty of other chances."

Quickly he climbed into the plane. A mechanic closed the hatch after him. Malcolm, Colburn, Sedgwick, and Dawson waved that they were ready. Taxiing swiftly to the far end of the field, the five took off in V-formation.

Up ahead in the leading notch of the V, Bob shouted into his mike, "We'll stick together until we get up there and estimate the fighter opposition. If it's thin, we'll break up and do just as much damage as we can individually. Now keep a sharp lookout all around for Zeros."

Bob sympathized with the defenseless people down in the city of Changsha. Among their fragile dwellings one bomb would do the work of many dropped on a strongly built American or European city. Higher and higher the Stratos climbed.

At twelve thousand feet, the Jap bombers still seemed to be a few thousand feet above them and to the north. One dropped in flames as Bob banked widely to the left to come in on their tails. It was the first enemy casualty he had seen during the raid, and Bob knew now that they were in time—not to stop the bombs from dropping on Changsha, for many already had fallen, but to destroy some of the enemy raiders before they returned home.

A closely packed formation of possibly twenty-five bombers was coming in from the northeast, with no fighter protection of any kind that Bob could see. Apparently sure that they would meet with little opposition, they sailed serenely on.

"O.K., fellows," Bob yelled into his mike, "we'll break up and go right down the line. But keep your eyes open and be ready to re-form the instant you spot any fighters."

By the time the boys broke away from each other, the bombers had passed well to port. Having chosen his attack angle well, Bob doubted if they had been seen flying out of the sun, which was now low to the ground. The silhouettes of the enemy aircraft, however, stood out sharply against the sky—type 98 Mikado heavy bombers. Although he had never

seen them in the air before, Bob knew they were a formidable aircraft, with a speed of nearly three hundred miles an hour. A top turret midway along the fuselage had to be reckoned with, and in their present tight formation the concentration of their defensive fire would be dangerous. In the split second following the breakaway, Bob had appraised the situation and now with full throttle he dove deeply to pull up beneath the squadron.

The city of Changsha was many miles ahead, and it would be at least two or three minutes before the Japs would release their bombs. If he were wrong, though, it would be too late to protect the city. Swiftly he passed beneath the squadron, then climbed almost vertically, his sights leading the head Jap bomber. Five hundred, four hundred, three hundred, two hundred and fifty yards. At two hundred he pressed the button, and the Strato-hawk seemed to stop dead on its tail as the shells poured forth. The lead Mikado's nose sheared off as though cut by a knife, and the remaining shells tore through the length of the fuselage.

Swiftly Bob plummeted to the right, then climbed in a steep spiral out of range of the enemy turret guns. Far below he could see the stricken bomber

tumbling crazily to the ground, but the balance of the formation had tightened in closely. Soon two other Jap bombers were slithering out of formation, and although Bob could not see the cause, he knew that the other Stratos had attacked almost simultaneously.

The remaining bombers were fast approaching their target. Was there time for another belly attack before they released their bombs? Even while considering it, he dove and again zoomed up beneath the formation. This time his raking fire started at the rear and he carried it through, holding the button while getting clear in a climbing turn to the left. So tightly were the bombers flying, there was no possibility of missing all of them.

Again climbing for altitude, Bob heard the drumming of bullets against his plane and could see the incendiaries curving toward him from the top turrets of the bombers. The next moment he was beyond their range and could safely observe the damage done by the Stratohawks' guns. At least ten of the bombers were now missing, but the remainder had closed in tightly, forming a compact unit.

As Bob prepared for another attack, he saw three Stratohawks flash by, their guns creating havoc with

the Jap bombers. Two bombers were smoking fiercely, and even as he jubilantly watched, they dropped in a tangled mass of smoke and flames.

In a frenzy of confusion, the bomber formation now scattered in all directions. One passed almost beneath Bob, its guns firing away at him, but the distance was too great and the fire ineffectual. Apparently heading for cloud cover to the south, the Jap pilot was abandoning his bombing target altogether. Bob dove in chase and the space between them swiftly narrowed. At first the Jap guns seemed to be winking at him like baleful lights, but they went out quickly when he squeezed firmly at four hundred yards.

This time his tracers ate gradually forward toward the nose, but as they reached a point midway between the gunner's turret and the greenhouse, a streak of yellow flame enveloped the Mikado. At the same time Bob felt the thud of cannon fire strike the Stratohawk. Ruddering sharply, he pulled out of the line of fire as two Zeros shot by in their dive. From Bob's experience with Zeros, he knew there was no chance of outmaneuvering them. The Stratohawk was larger and faster, more heavily armored, and far more heavily gunned, but in

close fighting the Zeros had all the advantages.

Bob climbed swiftly to widen the space between them. Sweeping the sky, he saw no other aircraft, and with full throttles kept on climbing. After assuring himself that he had no other enemies to contend with, his attention returned to the agile Zeros, which had pulled out of their dive and were hurtling back toward him. Applying full boost, Bob tried to widen the space, but the lighter, armorless Jap planes had a distinct advantage over the heavy Stratohawk. Bob swerved about to meet them. At an approach speed of well over seven hundred miles an hour, the battle sequence was a flash of action.

Seemingly while still in the turn, Bob opened fire and his incendiaries crisscrossed the Zeros, climbing almost wing to wing. As though a giant hand had stopped their progress, their hurtling climb was slowed. Then falling away, like the open pages of a book, they fell flaming to the earth.

Although his ammunition was now almost expended, Bob searched for more enemy planes. Clouds had been rapidly gathering, and he judged that any Jap survivors had found security in their fleecy depth. Relieved to find that the two aircraft

taking shape in the rear-vision mirror were Stratohawks, he called over the R.T., but received no answer. A few moments later Sedgwick and Malcolm ranged alongside. For several minutes the three flew around in ever-widening circles, but there was no sign of the other two Stratos. Bob headed back for the airdrome.

Fires were raging toward the north, in the city of Changsha, and while his heart welled with pity for the helpless inhabitants, it gave Bob deep satisfaction to realize that the five Stratohawks had saved the people from even worse destruction and misery. It was also a great relief to find the other two Stratohawks on the ground when he came in for a landing.

Mixing in on the Jap bombing raid was not a part of his planned program. As Squadron Leader, he would have enough to account for without further loss. Nevertheless, this was exactly what Seaton himself would have done, Bob knew. Both air and ground crews, accompanied by many Chinese pilots, greeted Bob as he descended from the plane.

"That was great stuff," called Eric Prentiss, "but I think it was a dirty trick to take off before I got

back here. I flew in from the south and didn't know a thing about it until it was all over."

"Sorry, Eric," replied Bob, "but we couldn't wait. And I'm glad that you got back here all right. Glad that you could fly in. As Sandy said, the clan's beginning to gather."

The Chinese pilots gathered around Bob in awe, amazed at the unsuspected fighting capabilities of the Stratohawks. Bob's ship had received some damage, for the Zero cannon shells had torn through the wings, but examination proved that the cross members had not suffered and that repairs could be made rather quickly.

"Gosh," said Don, "it was better than a ringside seat at a boxing match. And while I wanted to be up there with you, it was really something to be able to take it all in down here on the ground. I didn't know who was who up there, but you certainly made a mess of that Jap squadron."

By cross checking, the boys decided that they had eliminated at least fourteen of the twenty-five bombers. Everyone was happy about the results, especially the Chinese General, who was the most voluble of all. There was no longer any question about Royal Air Force indebtedness to the Chinese.

"Not only did you break the heaviest part of the raid," said the General, "but you have probably scared off any further bombing attempts for some time to come. I only wish you chaps were going to be based at this airdrome. If you were, my major trouble would be over."

Bob was equally happy over the outcome of the raid, but he knew that it had no bearing on his immediate problem—the re-forming of his squadron and their safe arrival at their destination. It was a happy reunion, however, for those who were gathered together that evening. Seven Stratohawks had been accounted for, and the crews of all but one were uninjured.

Flannigan and his air crew were getting along well when Bob visited them in the hospital after dinner. John Wheeler was beside himself with joy at his wife's progress, and insisted that Bob go over and visit her. Sitting up in bed, she smiled radiantly when Bob and John entered the tiny room.

"You've been wonderful to us, Squadron Leader Terrell, and I don't know how John and I can ever thank you."

The easily embarrassed Bob was somewhat nonplussed by this praise.

"Some day," she continued, "when this awful war is over, we may have a chance to repay you."

"Oh, that's all right," Bob managed to reply. "Your husband has been a lot of help to me."

"Yes," Dorothy Wheeler laughed, "he's been telling me about his attempts at interpreting. It's a wonder to me he didn't get you into still more trouble."

"The question is what to do now," said Bob. "There's been so little time to discuss plans that I'm afraid I don't know anything about yours. We can take you right along with us, if you care to come. As you know, it won't be very comfortable and you'll never be too sure of what will happen next."

"Thank you," said John Wheeler slowly, "but we've decided to stay here. I've talked it over with the General. We came out to China to help, and we're going to stick. Dorothy will be well in a few days, and we'll find plenty to keep us busy."

"We're not ready to leave yet," replied Bob, "so if you should change your minds, just let me know,

and we'll certainly be glad to have you come along with us."

"When do you propose to leave, Bob?"

"I've been thinking about it all day and have decided that if we get no further word from the rest of the squadron, and if we can make Flannigan's plane serviceable, we'll take off tomorrow."

Flannigan had given Bob an accurate account of the damage to his Stratohawk, and at five the next morning a repair crew and equipment left by truck for the scene of the forced landing. Bob himself double-checked the contents of the truck in order to make sure that no vital repair item had been left behind. With four of the Stratohawk ground crew aboard, the truck started out across the rolling country. By air, the journey would have taken ten minutes; by ground, it took almost five hours. The sun was high by the time they forded the last stream and rolled up the hill to the grove of trees into which the Stratohawk had plunged.

Everything was exactly as Flannigan had described it. The nose had hit fair and square on a heavy tree trunk and was bashed in, but this had saved the wings and props from being damaged. It

was another two hours before the ground crew had patched up the battered bomber's nest. The job had to be thorough, or the force of the air stream aloft would literally blast the ship apart. Hitching the truck to the tail, the men gradually eased the Stratohawk out into the open. The take-off would be tricky and difficult. Fortunately, the wind had shifted and was now blowing into the trees, so that the take-off into the wind meant flying away from them.

Stiff from several days of disuse, the engines started reluctantly. Slowly the temperature rose. Bob would have liked to take the ground crews back with him in the plane but was afraid of the added weight. Instead, he unloaded some of the supplies from the plane into the truck. With a far shorter run than he imagined might be necessary, the Stratohawk rose into the air. Circling twice, he watched the ground crew climb aboard the truck, which started back toward the base. Ten minutes later his wheels touched in the landing.

Eric Prentiss and the others were down on the tarmac, awaiting his return. Bob instructed Eric to get everything loaded aboard and be prepared to

take off as soon as the truck returned. Meanwhile, he consulted with General Sun Yen. Ever since his arrival at the Changsha airdrome, Bob had been hoping against hope that reports would come through from the missing Stratohawks, but again he was disappointed. Nothing had been heard beyond the vague report from Kiangsi.

"I wouldn't be too discouraged, Terrell," said the General, "because we've been unable to establish communications with many of the outposts. There are wide districts still to be heard from, and when you get to Kingsha, you may find that the others have already arrived. We've had no luck at all in getting through there and still can't pick up the powerful wireless station at Chungking. Frankly, we can't explain these atmospheric conditions that have blotted out radio reception. Although we have experienced similar conditions from time to time, it has never been as bad as this. The Japs have taken good advantage of it, though, and much of their recent success can be attributed to it."

Now that Bob had decided to push on, he was in a fever of anxiety to start. It was almost four

o'clock before the ground crew returned, and another half-hour before the supplies from Flannigan's plane had been reloaded. Flannigan and his copilot and navigator were brought down to the tarmac by car. Pat protested volubly at being forced to stay on a stretcher, when he was quite capable, or so he claimed, of walking anywhere he wanted by himself.

"If I can fly," he said testily, "I ought to be able to walk."

"But you're not going to fly," replied Bob.

"Not going to fly?"

"Not as a pilot, anyway," directed Bob. "You're going to come along with me as a passenger."

"To think that I should live to see this day," said Flannigan. "Well, who's going to fly my Stratohawk?" he asked belligerently.

"Don White," replied Bob.

"I'll bet he cracks it up before we're halfway there," returned Pat morosely.

"Well, anyway," said Bob, "you won't be in it, so that ought to cheer you up some."

Pat grinned at this. "O.K., Lucky, you win. And I guess I could feel a lot spryer."

It seemed that everyone at the airdrome dropped what they were doing to stand around for the take-off. Bob had already said good-by to the General, and was therefore surprised to see him appear just before he climbed into the plane. And why had a military guard lined up behind him? Although the Chinese soldiers were well disciplined, there had been no previous evidence of this kind of formality.

Standing erectly at attention, General Sun Yen spoke in a loud voice in Chinese, and when he finished there was an approving response from the Chinese gathered there. Then he spoke directly to Bob in English, "I have just been authorized to present you with the Chinese Air Cross."

Before the bewildered Bob could take in all the proceedings, the General had pinned the medal on his breast just below his wings. This was too much for Bob. Quickly shaking the General's hand, he thanked him, saluted, and wheeled abruptly toward his waiting plane. Sandy had been an interested witness from the cockpit window.

"What's that, Skipper?" he inquired, looking at the medal.

"That," said Bob, "is just a present from a great man. But it reminds me more than ever of how much we're indebted to our Chinese allies and what a mess I've made of my own job."

CHAPTER XVII

Reunion at Kingsha

One by one the heavily loaded Stratohawks lumbered down the runway and into the air. Bob was becoming impatient for the squadron to get rid of its cargo and return to its normal fighter-bomber status. Under present conditions, combat would be both difficult and dangerous. The General had provided them with complete charts and the weather forecast was good, so Bob anticipated little difficulty in finding their objective.

"Too bad, Sandy," called out Bob, "that you've never had a chance to try out that improvised sextant you made from the gourd."

"Aye, Skipper," responded Sandy, "but it may come in handy another time. Meanwhile, I've tied it up here on the bomb sight as a good-luck charm."

"You might as well come up here and keep me company, Sandy, and maybe there'll be time for that flying lesson you've been talking about for the last year."

Sandy slid into the copilot's seat usually occupied

by Don White. There was a pleased smile on his face as he tightened his seat belt. The seven aircraft were flying in a loose V-formation, three stepped back in echelon to port, and three to starboard. Sandy's opportunities to try his hand at the controls had been few and far between, but he had already demonstrated an ability that had surprised Bob.

"Any time you want me to take over, Skipper," said Sandy confidently, "I'll be glad to oblige."

"O.K., Sandy," replied Bob, "just call me if anything turns up."

"C-c-call you," stuttered Sandy. "Now wait a minute, Skipper. I may be good, but I'm not that good. It's a lucky thing," he added, grinning, "that Flannigan back there can't hear this conversation. He'd have a fit."

"He sure would," agreed Bob.

For the next fifteen minutes Sandy flew the Strato and did an excellent job of it. Patiently Bob showed him the uses of the various instruments and how, without watching the horizon, the plane could be flown on an even keel. Sandy had spent so much time flying, though not piloting, that he took to the job like a veteran. Bob noticed, how-

ever, that despite his very real interest in the instructions, his eyes constantly roved over the horizon. Nothing could ever keep Sandy from being on the alert for enemy aircraft.

General Sun Yen's instructions had been simple: they were to fly due east, keeping a range of mountains on their right, until they reached Lake Payang, their first check point. Bob had estimated the lake to be one hour's flight away, and was now watching for it closely. As usual, Sandy's sharp eyes spotted it first. Much as Bob wanted to see the lake and the deep gorges of the Yangtze River which lay just to the north, he had no desire to come within sight of Japanese-occupied territory, and so far, the river had held the Japs to the north.

"We'll ease off a bit to the south, Sandy, and take no chances," decided Bob. "With luck, we should be in Kingsha in another hour."

The sky was clouding over above them, forming a cover that might be useful in case of attack. Minute by minute, the hour passed.

"Another fifteen," called Sandy, "and we ought to be there."

Ahead and to starboard, Bob could make out the tops of the Tayuling Mountains, their only formi-

dable obstacle on the way to the base. According to the charts, however, the highest peaks were not over six thousand feet. The land beneath was intensely cultivated, and Bob could see that rice fields accounted for the intricate pattern.

"I hope, Skipper," remarked Sandy, "that the country around Kingsha is just as interesting as it is here."

"So do I," replied Bob, "and I think it will be."

Further views of the landscape were cut off by the mist which swirled around the Stratohawks as Bob climbed for altitude over the mountain range. Ten minutes later they descended through the clouds to find the foothills of the mountains falling away to the north and east.

As the other Stratohawks emerged from the cloud cover, Bob quickly checked with each, adding, "We'll be coming in any minute now, so if you spot anything that resembles an airdrome, let me know."

"That looks like it, Sandy," said Bob a few moments later.

"Aye, Skipper," responded Sandy, "and there are some planes taking off."

Bob's satisfaction at finding their objective was rudely changed by Colburn's voice calling over the

R.T. "Nips coming up fast at six o'clock," he warned. "Nips coming up fast at six o'clock."

"O.K.," acknowledged Bob immediately, advancing the throttles. His Stratohawk seemed to leap away, and the others followed tightly. Bob's eyes kept searching the rear-vision mirror, and as he nosed up slightly toward the protective cloud layer, he saw the Japs boring in fast. It was a new type of aircraft to him; at least there was nothing familiar about the head-on silhouette at this distance. The gap, however, was rapidly narrowing, and Bob doubted if they could make the clouds after all. Nosing down, he streaked along in level flight, but still the enemy aircraft closed imperceptibly.

"Stand by for a tail gun broadside," called Bob.

Six acknowledgments followed swiftly. This was the first chance to use the new tail cannon, and Bob prayed that the Jap formation would hang together until within range. Just to make sure, he inched back slowly on the throttles. Now the gap closed more swiftly. Thumb on button, and eye glued to the tail sighting ring, he waited until the size of the planes within the sighting ring showed them well in range. All the other pilots, he knew, were watching too.

"Now!" called Bob sharply into the mike, and pressed the button.

The seven tail cannon spewed their shells into the oncoming Japs. Even as the thumb of one hand pressed the buttton, the other advanced the throttle. The Jap squadron was thrown into confusion by this unexpected rear attack. Two of the Jap planes were hit and fell out of sight; the others scattered in confusion.

With full throttle the Stratos were now speeding rapidly away. Switching his glance to the rear-vision mirror, Bob saw that some of the Japs were headed for the ground. Now for those clouds, thought Bob, pulling back on the control. As he fought ahead for concealment in the clouds, his eyes were still on the rear-vision mirror. Jubilantly he yelled into the mike as he saw two avenging shadows dive past his tail. In a flash they were gone, but there was no mistaking that familiar silhouette. Checking, he found that the other six Stratohawks were still in formation. Yes, he could believe his eyes; two more lost Stratohawks were now accounted for.

Leveling off slightly, Bob stayed beneath the overhanging clouds. Two smoking pyres marked the

tumbling passage of their tail cannon handiwork. But what most gladdened his heart was the diving and twisting fighter-bombers attacking the now completely demoralized Jap squadron. While he watched elatedly, two more flamers fell toward the ground.

"Skipper," yelled Sandy, "there's another one."

There was no need for Sandy to call Bob's attention to the third Stratohawk, which dove across their course and set them bobbing like leaves in the wake of its powerful prop wash. If there were three, there might be four or even five. Ready for instant climb into the protective clouds, Bob watched the battle developing below. It was difficult to count the number of friends in the twisting melee of aircraft.

"Hurrah," shouted Bob delighted, "there *are* five of them. And five and seven makes twelve. The Lost Squadron has found itself!"

"Look at them go, Skipper!" called Sandy.

Five Jap planes were climbing rapidly to the north, with three Stratohawks on their tails; to the west, three others were struggling desperately to get away from the two following Stratos. Bob wanted to throw caution to the winds and join in the chase with his heavily loaded aircraft, but as

Squadron Leader he knew he must resist this impulse.

"What a sight!" said a voice over Bob's shoulder. It was Pat Flannigan, peering ahead through the windscreen. "Sorry, Bob, but I couldn't hold out any longer. As soon as that tail cannon started to thump, I knew that something was up. Look at that!" he whooped joyfully.

Bob needed no urging, for he was following every detail of the battle in progress. After a swift sweep of the surrounding air, he turned the nose of his Stratohawk after the fleeing Japs and their pursuers. In tight formation, the rest followed, and all had a clear view of what was going on. One by one the Japs were knocked off, until the sky was cleared. Each of the five "missing" Stratohawks climbed swiftly for victory rolls high above. Then diving, they swooped down to take their places on the trailing edges of the V.

"Hi-ya, Skipper," called Tom Nelson over the R.T., "welcome to Kingsha."

"And what a welcome!" returned Bob. "You'll never know."

With joy and thankfulness Bob pointed in for the airdrome.

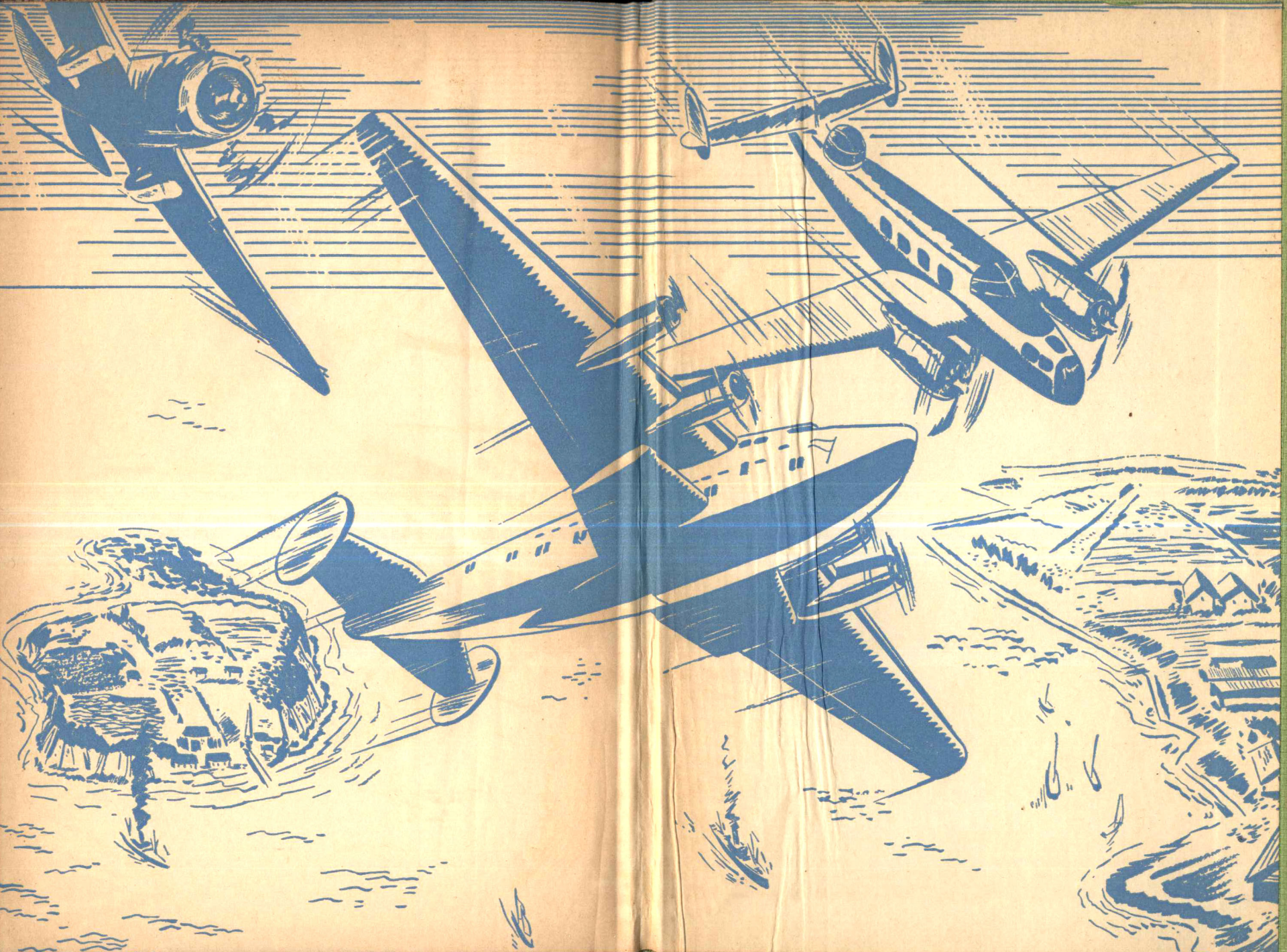
"Skipper," queried Sandy, even before the Strato-

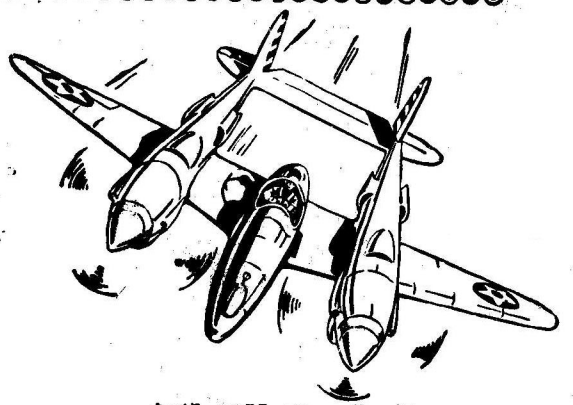
hawk's wheels had touched the ground, "what's next on the program? Bombing Tokyo?"

"Sandy," replied Bob, "I'm surprised that anyone with your service experience would ask such a question."

"Oh, I get it," replied Sandy. "You can't reveal any military information. All right then, Skipper, let me put it another way. When do we start picking those Japanese cherry blossoms?"

THE END





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