

FIGHTERS IN THE SKY!!

AIR ACTION

**APRIL
15¢**

SPAD STAR
by **TOM GROVER**

**FURY OVER
FINLAND**

a thrilling novelet of
the second world war

by **T. W. FORD**





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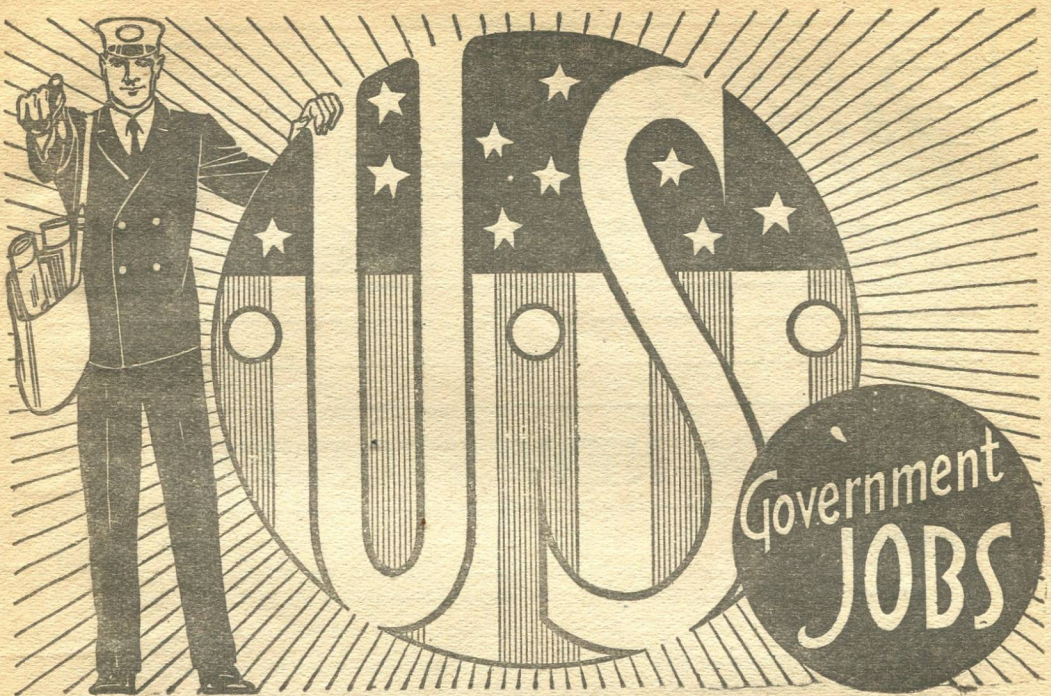
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AIR ACTION

FIGHTERS IN THE SKY!!

Vol. I, No. 1



April, 1940

TEN NEW STORIES

FURY OVER FINLAND.....T. W. Ford 8

Big Biff was a devil-on-wings over Finland, but when Laughing Boy, his top-flight side-kick was captured, Biff used a Blenheim to show his Russian captors a bit of flaming Hell!

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but a valuable, proved device which has been sold successfully by business novices as well as seasoned veterans.

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EARNINGS

One man in California earned over \$1,600 per month for three months—close to \$5,000 in 90 days' time. Another writes from Delaware—"Since I have been operating (just a little less than a month of actual selling) and not the full day at that, because I have been getting organized and had to spend at least half the day in the office; counting what I have sold outright and on trial, I have made just a little in excess of one thousand dollars profit for one month." A man working small city in N. Y. State made \$10,805 in 9 months. Texas man nets over \$300 in less than a week's time. Space does not permit mentioning here more than these few random cases. However, they are sufficient to indicate that the worthwhile future in this business is coupled with immediate earnings for the right kind of man. One man with us has already made over a thousand sales on which his earnings ran from \$5 to \$60 per sale and more. A great deal of this business was repeat business. Yet he had never done anything like this before coming with us. That is the kind of opportunity this business offers. The fact that this business has attracted to it such business men as former bankers, executives of businesses—men who demand only the highest type of opportunity and income—gives a fairly good picture of the kind of business this is. Our door is open, however, to the young man looking for the right field in which to make his start and develop his future.

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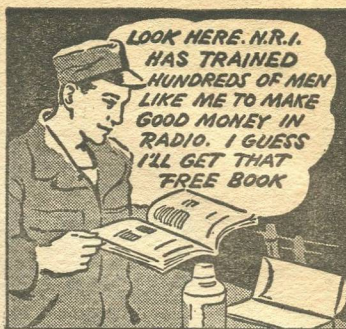
In trying this business out. You can measure the possibilities and not be out a dollar. If you are looking for a business that is not overworked—a business that is just coming into its own—on the upgrade, instead of the downgrade—a business that offers the buyer relief from a burdensome, but unavoidable expense—a business that has a prospect practically in every office, store, or factory into which you can set foot—regardless of size—that is a necessity but does not have any price cutting to contend with as other necessities do—that because you control the sales in exclusive territory is your own business—that pays more on some individual sales than many men make in a week and sometimes in a month's time—if such a business looks as if it is worth investigating, get in touch with us at once for the rights in your territory—don't delay—because the chances are that if you do wait, someone else will have written to us in the meantime—and if it turns out that you were the better man—we'd both be sorry. So for convenience, use the coupon below—but send it right away—or wire if you wish. But do it now. **Admit**

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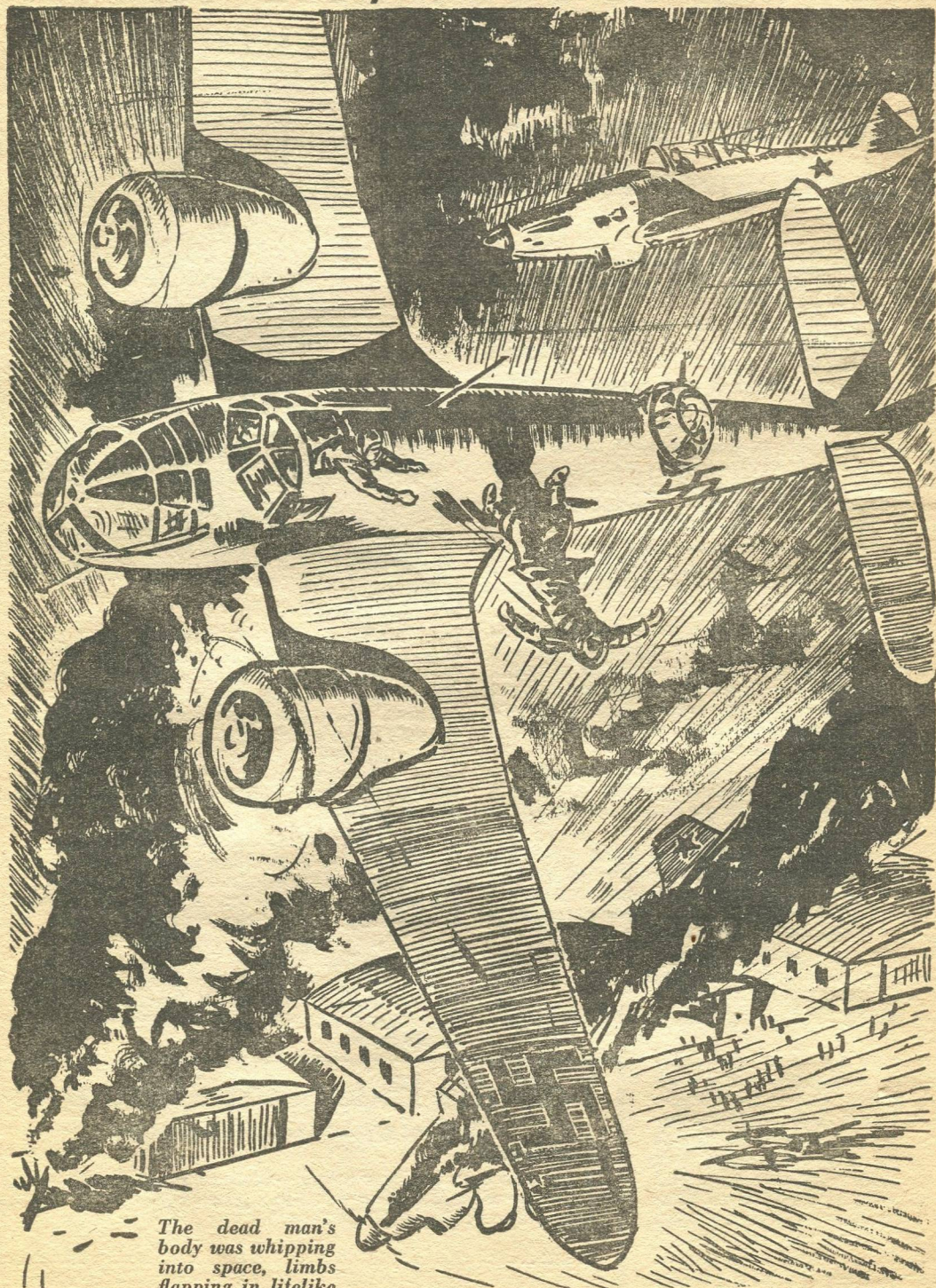
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FURY OVER FINLAND

by T. W. FORD



The dead man's body was whipping into space, limbs flapping in lifelike fashion as he fell.

Big Biff Was a Devil-on-Wings Over Finland, But When Laughing Boy,
His Top-Flight Side-Kick Was Captured, Biff Used a Blenheim to Show
His Russian Captors a Bit of Flaming Hell!



KITELA, at the north end of Lake Ladoga on the east flank of the Mannerheim Line, where according to the reports the Russian 18th was neatly trapped, had already passed behind the port wing. Still further behind lay the Pitkaranta Islands where the Bristol Mercury of his Fokker D. 21 had first started

to choke up. But that had straightened itself out, or seemed to. And in a few more minutes, with the low-wing monoplane breezing along at better than two hundred per, stocky Biff Hart would be dropping down at the drome outside of Liperi. At said drome was a very nice stock of vodka captured from the Russkies. Fine, gut-

A SMASHING NOVELET OF HELL HIGH IN THE HEAVENS

warming stuff, that vodka. Lieutenant Hart was very happy about the whole thing.

He checked his instruments, watched his air-speed indicator needle waver as the strong gusts out of the north bit at the ship, nosed up a little and then waved over at Laughing Boy Simpson on his flank. Laughing Boy just nodded inside the plexiform glass of his cockpit cowl and held up a gloved hand to show that he still had his fingers crossed. Laughing Boy was like that. Always had that fresh-from-a-funeral look about him. The lank kid from New England was the damndest pessimist Biff Hart had ever run into. He could knock a couple of Russian monkeys out of the sky and still look as if he was afraid the sheriff would grab his plane any moment for non-payment of back installments.

Biff gayly thumbed his nose across the intervening space at his American sidekick in the Finnish Volunteers Squadron. But the dour Laughing Boy was gesturing excitedly, pointing over to the northwest. Biff looked. Up from the glassy surface of a string of frozen, smaller lakes a two-seater was coming through the wan sunlight of the early day. Then it banked and Biff recognized it as a Yank Brewster, the swastika of Finland on its wing panel, the blue-and-white banner of the Finns painted on its fuselage side. Biff tripped the firing lever of his m.g.'s as if worried, then laughed over at Laughing Boy again. It gave him a kick to explode the pessimistic one's worries in his face.

Just like this dawn. They'd climbed into their crates, whose motors had been turning up slowly to keep them from freezing in the Arctic night, and pulled off with a reconnoitering flight. But things had been too dull for the cocksure Biff. And he'd cut out on his own when they'd gotten in the clouds north of Ladoga. Laughing Boy Simpson had trailed along with him as a matter of course. And they'd knocked down a Russ ANT 25, a four-engined

bomber lumbering up to have a look around itself.

More than that, probing further southward beyond the naval-gun defenses of Taipale at the east end of the Mannerheim, they'd spotted that almost hidden Russky drome further down the Karelian Isthmus. That explained whence those flights of dive bombers came, those Junker Ju. 86's that seemed to slam out of nowhere in the last week to unload their hell. H. Q. would be very interested in hearing about that. Biff could almost imagine the stern face of their C. O., Colonel J. H. Siilvasmud, cracking a smile. Almost but not quite. The colonel was an iron-faced egg if there ever was one.

Biff's Fokker lurched sickeningly as the Bristol Mercury seemed to clog again. Hot motor fumes streamed back into his cockpit. The Yank who was built like a plump fire hydrant just squeezed out his cigarette butt and goosed the job. It responded at first. Then one hell of a racket and metallic pounding issued from the engine hoods. Below, a thick line of forest shoved up its treetops. And Biff Hart had to nose his Fokker D. 21 downward.

THE Laughing Boy sighted the trouble, whipped around in a tight bank to size up the heavens, then followed his mate down. Full-lipped mouth in a sort of defiant grin now, Biff worked on it, watching his dials, trying to ease the ship out of it. Then blotches of hot, flying oil were staining the plexiglass dome around him.

Biff knew then as the whole fuselage strained with the stress of the laboring Mercury engine. The works were "freezing" up fast. A burst from that ANT job they'd gotten must have located an oil-line connection. And the thing had finally snapped. There was only one thing to do. He cut the ignition switch and dropped the nose still more to gain flying speed.

The earth came up at him and the accompanying Laughing Boy. Looking over,

Biff tried to gesture what the trouble was, then signed the other to go on home. Laughing Boy nodded and kept on right along off Biff's starboard wing.

"The dumb Vermont rube!" Biff spat in the sudden stillness of his cockpit as the freezing wind tore at his ship and forced it further eastward.

They were down to five thousand, then two in what seemed just a long-drawn breath. Biff Hart was training his eyes on a straight stretch of frozen river that he figured he could set his skis down on. Then his ship pitched up on a wingtip sickeningly. Off to the right, he saw the blooming puff of an anti-aircraft battery's shell. Another took form almost in front of the idling prop.

Grimly Hart punched the rudder bar with his foot and dived harder to throw off the calculations of the A. A. crew. He rolled her onto a wing tip as she gathered speed and went into a slide. As he levelled unsteadily, he glanced over to where Laughing Boy's drear mug should be in his cockpit. Laughing Boy wasn't there. He was behind, nose-diving at the A. A. nest to keep them busy to cover his mate's escape.

BIFF HART swore throatily. He saw Simpson flatten and streak after him. The port wing of the other Fokker suddenly jumped like a flapping kite, wavered, then began to bend backward under the strain of the air-speed. Laughing Boy had been hit.

It was barely a matter of seconds then. Laughing Boy tried to ease down as he twisted westward. Biff Hart was a little beneath him now. Then that wing section of Simpson's ship wrenched almost completely free, started to fold back against the fuselage. And he went ploughing into the trees at the far side of a tiny lake that bobbed out of the forested area.

More ashen than if he'd felt the tickle of a fatal bullet himself, Hart backsticked,

slapped his ship down on the lake's ice on its skis. One side of the landing gear crumpled as he bounced and a wing tip caught. But the stocky Yank was already out, scrambling to his feet, and diving toward the trees whose limbs bore decorations of dural from Laughing Boy's ship.

"Simpson! Laughing Boy—for the love Gawd—if you're killed, I'll—I'll—"

Laughing Boy's glum features emerged from a thicket. "No-o—I'm not dead. But when I got to come down out of a tree in a hurry, I prefer to climb it myself first from the ground." He probed a leg gingerly as he limped. "And just what were you going to do if I was dead, pal?"

Biff Hart jerked down his fur-lined coveralls. "Well—uh—well, hell—I was just thinking about that drink you owed me!"

Laughing Boy nodded. "'S what I thought! Let's get out of here! I saw a lumber trail going west just before you came bawling in!"

They found it and started slogging along it. A sledge had been through since the last snowfall and made the going some easier. Not far behind, they realized, were the advanced outposts of a Russian bunch trying to turn the flank of Gus Mannerheim's Line of Iron. It was a nice thought. Their breaths made frosty puddles on the sub-zero atmosphere and the pair were soon wobbly-legged and panting in their hurry.

"Nice idea of yours, that of cutting loose and taking a picnic over Lake Ladoga, lieutenant," Laughing Boy said sourly. "Swell idea. One thing I like is looking at a lot of frozen water, then walking home afterward—if we get there!"

Biff Hart snorted. "What do y' mean—'if we get there'? And it isn't my fault, anyway, dammit! If you hadn't put your big foot in it we'd have been flying that new Blenheim bomber with its two motors. Two motors never wash out as fast as one and—"

"Holy Pete!" Laughing Boy moaned as

they moved at almost a dog-trot. "You told the colonel you could fly one of those big babies! And I happen to know you never got behind the stick of anything bigger than a single seater in your lying life! Why—"

"Who lied?" Biff demanded with hurt expression. "I said I could fly one. Well, who's to prove I can't? I never tried yet, did I?"

Laughing Boy paused as they came to a tiny, side-road and beat at the ice forming on his eyebrows and chin, nodding the while. "Sweet philosophy! Very-y nice. Only I'd have been picked to go up with you. And somehow, pal, I like the way nature put my body together as it is. You only make one mistake in those things. If we ever get back, I—"

BIFF hunched his shoulders belligerently. The Hart guy was one of those kind of eggs who just never got around to thinking of failure. "Who said we won't get back? Joe Stalin and these poor stooges of his can't stop a guy like me!"

Laughing Boy smiled as if he'd just gulped a double-slug of vinegar. "Yeah. But did anybody warn them about you yet? Maybe they don't know."

Biff's jaw went out. "Wanta bet on it—us getting back? I say we do. Even money. Ten bucks!"

"American money?" Laughing Boy asked shrewdly.

"Yeah, American money."

They shook on it.

It was about half an hour later, that the ragged road wound to the edge of the woods and a snowy advance of field lay ahead.

"Want to fork over the ten now?" Laughing Boy asked cheerfully. "There may be some Russky sharpshooters or patrols around here—"

But Biff was pointing into the leaden sky as the drone of high-up engines reached them. Bombers bearing the red star of the Soviet were beating up from the south.

And, abruptly, the sky seemed feathered with gigantic snowflakes drifting earthward.

"Chutes," Laughing Boy husked as if they could be heard. "The Russians are trying to drop parachute troops behind our Finn lines again!"

Biff nodded. Gunfire sounded from the west. A minute or so later, low-flying Soviet dive bombers came blasting past in single-file formation. They vanished. A few moments later, the "whoomph" of bombing drifted on the wind as the Red fliers prepared the way for the attack that was coming. The attack Biff Hart and Laughing Boy were going to be caught right in the middle of.

"Our heroes are now knocking off crippled old men and slapping down some workers' tenement house in a nice, dangerous little village, Biff bit off."

Laughing Boy Simpson nodded. He was watching those descending chute troops. The men swinging from them were plain now, began to darken the air to the southwest.

"Hell, what're we hanging around this dead dump for?" Biff snapped impatiently.

"Know where the service is any better? Look. The wind's got some of those chutes—dragging 'em this way. Watch . . ."

THEY did. Some of the Red soldiers plainly did not know how to maneuver a parachute. They saw one of them get snagged in the topmost limbs of a huge, dead tree and struggle vainly to extricate himself. Then Simpson was following a close-clustered trio with moving finger. For that threesome were being carried right toward the field on whose edge the two Yanks crossed. The chute soldiers got lower so that the pair could see the glitter of the steel of their rifles in the snow glare. They were going to touch earth in that field.

Without a word, Biff and Laughing Boy began to skirt the edge of it, moving stealthily at first, then running hard. Biff

already had his automatic out, had yanked off a flying glove. The first man hit twenty yards away, was dragged on his back as his chute towed him.

Biff leaped toward him, bawling: "Surrender, buddy! Surrender, you—"

But the Soviet infantryman, panicked already by his drop, struggled to get his rifle unslung. The Yank's automatic barked as he dropped to one knee to steady himself. And the Red soldier, struck square in the chest, went limp, dead. One of the other two descending touched and tugged at a side arm as he tried to run with the clogging ropes of the chute around him. He stumbled hard. It was his gun that barked that time. Barked muffledly as its muzzle twisted against his body and sent a fatal bullet through his neck.

The bleak-faced Laughing Boy was on the third man even as he came thudding down hard on his knees. The tall Yank's gun clubbed down and the Soviet soldier stretched unconscious on the snows of Finland.

BIFF HART was yelling as the racket of not-too-distant gunfire increased. And he was already dragging the one he'd shot back toward the cover of the trees. Tearing free the unconscious one's chute, Laughing Boy half hoisted the man and hauled him like a sledge after Biff.

"Collecting souvenirs, huh?" he inquired as they got under the trees and another wave of red-starred bombers flashed by above.

"Collecting uniforms, you dope!" Biff snorted as he whipped off his helmet, then began to yank at the zipper of his coveralls and tear at his uniform hurriedly. "The Red Star is all the style motif in these parts right now. Get that guy's tunic and coat on you—'less you'd rather win your bet!"

They were half numbed by the time they'd completed the swap. Laughing Boy worked his pilot's fur-lined coverall around the unconscious one's body to give him

some slim chance of not freezing to death. Biff straightened the fur cap with the red star of the Soviet on his close-cropped head.

"Know any Russian?" he asked.

Laughing Boy nodded. "Sure. Orlichornya—or however you pronounce it. 'Dark Eyes,' it means. It's a song."

"And I'll just bet one of Joe Stalin's commissars is just aching for you to croon him to sleep!" Biff spat. Big help. Come on. We better mosey along and see if we can promote a drink on the house some place."

They'd barely taken a dozen strides through the brush, as another wave of ANT 25's with the Red Star insignia, passed overhead. And as the rumble of the engines ebbed, a fresh clatter issued from the trees to their left. There was the clang and groan of steel and iron. Both men froze. A tree snapped off like a cannon report. There was the ear-tearing scrape of metal on rock. And shoving a blunt nose ahead, a light Russian tank came wending its way from the south through the woods. Even as they sighted it, one of its light cannon swivelled in a gun-slot to bear on them.

"How about paying off on that bet now, pal?" Laughing Boy grunted as he dived for a tree.

But Biff Hart didn't answer that time. Instead, he had lowered the sub-machine gun he'd taken from one of the chute soldiers. Was walking and waving toward the approaching little, iron-skinned monster. It drew to a creaking halt. In a flash, dropping the m.g., Biff had leaped up on its caterpillar tread, then was scrambling to the top beside the steel turret.

The hatch opened and a grinning Soviet soldier stuck out his bearded face.

"Heil Hitler! Umsbay ushray," roared Biff. And he smacked the poor devil cold with a left hook to the whiskers that smoked.

GRABBING the suddenly limp form, he yanked. Another head and shoulders

started to come up the turret. "Comrade, we are lost," the second Russian began in his native tongue. "The commissar warned us to get through or—"

"Where's your driving license, big boy?" Biff yelled. And let the Russky have it over the ear with the barrel of his automatic.

"Look out, Biff!" Laughing Boy shouted as he charged forward, zigzagging to dodge the stream of fire that abruptly hailed from a forward gun. The third man in the tank had gotten wise somehow. •

Then the Vermont ex-farm kid had his gun through a gun port in the side and crackling. The tank pilot slumped over his controls.

"Thought you'd have to walk home, huh?" Biff taunted sanguinely as they got the dead man's form out of the machine finally. "Just leave it to me! Nothing can stop us in this jalopy! I can drive anything!"

Thrusting his body down the turret, he clambered forward to the driver's seat. Laughing Boy followed him in and closed the hatch. Biff began to tug at levers and gadgets. The machine rocked, slamming Laughing Boy against the steel wall, then started to pivot in its tracks as one caterpillar tread sawed away. Simpson shouted a stream of oaths. Biff confidently shoved a lever the other way. Then his face was slapped smack against the breach of a machine gun in front of him as they went ramming rearward.

"Who the hell wants to go to Lenin-grad?" Laughing Boy bayed. "I've seen all the movies there!"

"Get out and thumb a ride if you don't like it!" Biff stopped cursing to tell him through the engine's diapason. "I'm just demonstrating this tin-can sedan now. In a minute—"

The Soviet light tank bounced down off a fallen tree it had half mounted, careened like a foundering ship in a northeaster, then

began to lumber ahead. Biff gave it more throttle.

"Wonder how much it gets on the gallon? If they give me a good trade-in, maybe I'll buy the damn—"

He grabbed something to swing the monster away from a clump of thick-boled trees that loomed ahead, then was half pitched from the seat as the other side threshed into a strip of bogland. He grabbed at everything then. And the next moment, as the tank skittered like a maddened animal, both of them were smacked half unconscious against the front of the interior. The machine had piled smack into an outcropping boulder that was as immovable as the Mannerheim Line itself. The caterpillar treads churned; the motor howled; hot, choking smoke began to pour into the interior. Then the thing stalled.

Frantically, Biff went to work, trying everything to get it started. "Hey, close the trapdoor!" he called over his shoulder. "The draft will—"

Picking himself off the floor with a gashed chin, Simpson croaked: "We got visitors, pal."

THE hatch had been yanked open. The sky was blotted out as a pair of shoulders bent low over it. And then a hand grenade, pin already drawn, came bouncing down inside. In a flash, Laughing Boy was scrambling after it as it bobbed across the iron floor. He finally trapped it, steadied himself against the dizziness that had his head swirling, and tossed it up out through the turret hatch again.

"Lemme get at one of those side-guns and I'll fix them wise guys!" Biff grunted as he stumbled out of the driving seat.

But Laughing Boy pinned him from behind. "You dope! Try thinking for a change. Russians don't bomb their *own* tanks!"

Biff gasped and got it. "They must be Finns then!"

Dragging out a handkerchief, Simpson

climbed cautiously up and waved it slowly above the open hatch as bullets slapped off the turret side. A voice cried:

"Surrendering, eh? All right, you bloody blokes! Climb out and be quick about it, by gor!"

When the two pilots clambered out into the air atop the tank, they saw a corporal with a handful of men peeping from behind trees. They wore Finnish uniforms with the red rose of England insignia showing beneath their opened, snow-white parkas. They were Limey volunteers in the International Brigade.

The Yank pair had no trouble convincing the corporal of their identity. The rest of the ski patrol crowded around and the corporal gave them the dope. They had decoyed the Russians into a salient and were proceeding to blot out their advance patrols before putting the pinch on the whole works.

"It's a blinking shame," the Englishman said as he offered them cigarettes. "These Red soldiers are as brave as they come. But they're led badly—and sent into slaughter like poor, bloody cattle, the blighters!" A pair of Soviet bombers roared overhead. "There's the ones I'd like to smash. Sooner you chaps get back—the sooner you can get after them. We've got a battalion post a little way back."

He sent back one of his men with the Yank aces. They pushed along a lumber-trail, finally came to a snow-masked dugout, a rude field headquarters. After a scalding cup of tea, they climbed aboard an empty supply sledge making the return trip. A feeble sun was trying to poke through when they came over a rise to a tiny, country village still smoking from a bombing raid. Biff's hands balled into fists when he saw the senseless destruction. And Laughing Boy Simpson looked almost happy as he thought of what he'd do the next time he tangled wings with one of those Soviet bombers.

A LORRY, headed rearward along the Liperi road, gave them a lift. Three times on the trip, they pulled into the ditch and scurried for cover as the low-riding dive-bombers of the Soviet whistled past above. The angry Biff Hart was slamming one gloved hand into the other with impatience to get aloft again when the lorry halted outside a razed town a couple of hours later.

With sign language, the Finn driver explained that the side-path jutting off would be the shortest way to their tarmac. They started trudging off again.

"Boy, what a hot date you are," Laughing Boy grouched. "Go out with you—and walk home! And what a hell of a walk!"

"When this is over, would you want to go back to the States and admit you'd never been to almost the southern end of Lake Ladoga?" Biff asked cheerfully.

Simpson spat into the snow. "If I could only go home and tell 'em I hadn't seen *you*—that'd be something."

It began to snow lightly but in a fine screen. The rumble of bomber engines was behind and further to the south now. Still, they'd gotten so inured to them, they barely looked up any more. Biff had just spotted the little church up on the hillside that was only a couple of kilos from their drome. Then a fleeting shadow, dull gray, ran across the snow over them and beyond them. It was a wing-shaped shadow.

Biff recoiled because of the strange silence of the apparition. He twisted his eyes up into the snow. And a plane, engine muted, wafted by like a spectre a mere hundred feet or so up. It nosed still lower as they stared, then was rubbed out by the tree line. Simultaneously her motor blasted on briefly.

"A two-seater—and a Russky," Laughing Boy said.

They began to run. Through an aisle in the trees, they saw the edge of a little canyon ahead, then a brief glance of the Soviet ship as it went gliding into it at right

angles to them. Almost immediately the motor throb died.

Biff stumbled and went down, tripping Laughing Boy with him. When they reached the lip of the gulch, they could just make out the enemy ship up a ways. Three men had hopped out. One of them took a can and sloshed liquid at the ship. Gasoline, Biff somehow guessed. The next moment, flames were curling rapidly from the port wing and the forward cockpit of the two-seater. Without a backward glance, the three who'd alighted from it moved swiftly toward the mouth of the canyon, in the direction of the drome of the Volunteer Squadron.

"They're headed for our joint!" Biff cried.

Laughing Boy nodded through the snow. "Looking for us maybe, huh? Or just lonely! Yeah."

BIFF led the way as they scrambled down the side of the gulch. But it was slow, treacherous going over the ice-sheathed rocks. Still, the stocky, cocky Yank almost went plunging twice in his frantic hurry. He didn't know why. But somehow, he sensed those Reds were interested in that newly-arrived Blenheim bomber. And Biff Hart intended to fly that Blenheim himself yet . . .

The trio who sneaked in through the snowstorm in the Soviet ship had long since disappeared when the Yank pair reached the bottom of the little canyon. Biff limped from a stiff tumble he'd taken and Laughing Boy Simpson was just discovering he'd snapped a couple of ribs in his crash-up. But, biting off oaths in the film of fine snow, the burly Biff started on a run for the end of the canyon.

Ever-cool Laughing Boy landed on his shoulders and wrestled him back just in time. "Keep away from that burning crate, y' damfool!"

He'd hardly gotten the words out when the petrol tank of the Red plane went up,

exploding dully. The concussion of the blast almost hurled them on their backs. Spraying blobs of flaming petrol stained the snow all around. The wave of heat in the narrow canyon, as the flames ate with redoubled intensity, made it impossible to pass the crate.

Fuming and roaring into the wind in his impatience, Biff strode around as he waited. Laughing Boy simply stood in a grim calm. Precious minutes dragged before there was only a twisted steel skeleton to feed the flames.

"Go on—don't wait for me," Laughing Boy told him as Biff finally lurched off.

THE Reds' footsteps were already obliterated by the snow when the latter got out of the canyon, skidded across the surface of an ice-locked creek, and ploughed through a strip of trees. He had to plough up a long hill to the drome field and a Finn ground guard sentinel stepped from behind a snow-blanketed tree to challenge him, gun ready at the sight of the Soviet outfit. Biff showed his identification tag, bared his head in hopes he might be recognized. But the sentry wanted to call a superior officer. As he turned to do so, Biff gathered himself and charged in a flying football block to mow the man down. Scrambling up, he raced to the top, came out back of a hangar and wobbled around the corner of it.

The first man he ran into as he came out on the Line was Captain Paavo Hjoblom, his own flight leader, a cool, intelligent college graduate who spoke English like a Londoner. He looked as if he was seeing a ghost at the sight of the flier who'd failed to return with his flight.

"Good God—you, Hart! But where is Simpson?" he cried.

"The Bellylaugh Beauty is trailing me," the Yank gasped with his ever-present humor. "What's going on here? Did you see three birds—Russkies, I think—they came in in a Red ship—have they gotten

here yet? Wow! Look! They got the Blenheim out! She sure is a honey of a truck! Did—”

Young Hjoblom's stern mouth curved in a grin. "Did you stop someplace, my friend, and sample some of the enemy vodka? Red fliers coming in here! Hah-hah!" He remembered how Biff and Simpson had slipped out of the flight, and began to steer him toward the barracks. "It would be wise, old boy, for you to keep out of the colonel's sight a while! Come now. As for the Blenheim, I don't know how long we'll have it. A commission has just arrived from Air H.Q. I understand they're to fly it away and—”

"Fly the Blenheim away?" Biff jerked loose. Down at the other end of the Line, they had already hauled the Blenheim out with a tractor and had the engines turning up. "Take her away? Listen, did the H.Q. commission happen to be a three-man bunch? Because if—”

Peering down past bluish-gray Fokker D. 21's, painted to blend into the wintry skies, the Yank could make out the tall, ascetic form of Colonel Siilvasmud, the C.O., beside the big British Blenheim bomber. With him were some other figures. The portable steps were already at the open hatch of the ship.

"Yes, three men exactly," Hjoblom admitted. "Come now, Hart. Forget your Russkies. Perhaps they are mere—shall we say—figments of your imagination that—”

"Figments—nuts!" Biff grunted. There was a yap from behind as some of the ground guard came out from the hangar with Laughing Boy in tow. And Biff was sliding and clumping across the packed-down snow toward the Blenheim.

HE HAD to dive flat on his face as one of the Fokker jobs bucketed forward off the Line at him. Another member of the ground patrol, warned by the shouts from behind, came out of a set-up of anti-aircraft light guns at him. A nice right to

the head sent him rolling and Biff Hart headed on.

But it seemed as if he was too late. Figures were going up the steps to the hatch. The first man turned and saluted the C.O. Then Biff threw himself at the astounded colonel.

"Colonel—those birds there getting into the ship—they—stop 'em—they—they—" Biff panted.

"Lieutenant Hart?" Colonel Siilvasmud's face hardened. "Report to the operations office at once, lieutenant, and wait till I—”

Biff was peering past him at the last two of the trio who were already clambering into the hatch. He was certain he recognized 'em. "They're dirty Russkies, colonel!" Biff howled through the diapason of the bomber's Bristol Mercury engines. "They burned up their ship after landing—”

The C.O. stared as if Biff Hart had gone mad. "They're from H.Q. They had the orders with them to—wait—what's this?"

The ground guard was hustling up from the rear. "Yeah, orders from headquarters in the Kremlin!" Biff snorted and leaped away.

That Blenheim would have got off, too. The man inside at the controls hadn't got the Mercuries synchronized yet. But the wheel brakes had been released. The big ship was already trembling as it started to wheel. But two Fokkers of the Volunteers were coming in, slapping down, riding on their skis right up toward the bomber. It had to wait. And Biff reached the closing hatch just before it slammed, wrenched it wider.

The third man, inside, lashed out at him, protesting. But the Yank had his side-arm free and slapped him one over the eyebrow. Then he piled down the metal ladder inside, balanced himself precariously on the dim catwalk, and sighted at the pilot and navigator up forward as he stumbled past the bombracks of the center section. His automatic spat. A bullet ripped into the

complex instrument panel between the pair. They wrenched around, peering, stunned, then bewildered by the sight of the man in the outfit of a Red infantryman.

"Turn her off!" Biff barked.

Hesitating just a moment, the pilot obeyed. Then the colonel and men of the Finn bunch were piling in. The colonel's first move was to order the Yank under arrest.

"Lieutenant," he told him in his studied English, "I am getting very weary of your insane antics! This time—"

Biff himself was a little scared then. The two men up forward and the one he'd flattened with a gun-barrel blow all wore the uniforms of high officers. As they all piled out, the pilot was waving his official papers and raising holy hell in Finnish that might have come right out of Helsinki itself. All the evidence was against Biff. He'd deserted his flight, disappeared over Ladoga, now had bopped one of the ground guard on returning with this cockeyed tale of a Soviet ship landing and being set afire.

Laughing Boy Simpson spoke up calmly outside. "Ought to be a simple matter to check up with Air H. Q. over the phone," he stated. "I didn't get this burn in my coat from the falling ember of a plane we *dreamed* burned, after all."

THERE was something convincing about that. The pilot of the trio, boasting plenty of gold braid, started to stamp around and bellow about interfering with H. Q. and what a hurry they were in. But the colonel gave the sign for his adjutant to check via the phone.

They stood around in the cold with the headman of the strangers ranting more and more wildly. Then an orderly came up from behind, a squad of the ground guard with ready rifles accompanying them.

"Major Hurmi reports, sir, that Air H. Q. knows nothing of any officers bearing instructions to fly off the Blenheim. H. Q., sir, never issued any such orders. It seems

they must be Russian," he said in the native tongue.

The pilot who'd been doing all the raving shrugged and lifted his hands in admission of it. The colonel turned slowly to Biff and Laughing Boy.

"Lieutenants, I must apologize! It seems you were—"

The adjutant himself came running over the packed-down snow. An order had just come through. Russian bombers were striking heavily at the rail lines out of Liperi. Communications would soon be cut with the Front. Every ship into the air at once!

Biff, just priding himself on being a hero, and Laughing Boy were forgotten as the prisoners were marched off and the whole drome leaped into action toward getting wings upstairs. Ships were rushed from the hangers, tuned up, sputtering and backfiring savagely in the stiff cold. One flight was out at the time. Another trio of the precious Fokkers were up on a patrol along the mid-Eastern front. And every last man and plane was needed.

"So those lousy Reds tried to steal our Blenheim, huh," Biff ruminated. "Wait'll I get hold of some of those bombers of theirs!"

He was one of the first, hastily-organized flight to hop off from the snowy field, flying behind Captain Daki, hot to get his Brown-ing fangs into the Red Star ships. But luck was against him. The Red bombers were already fleeing southward when they arrived on the scene. And even as he headed in pursuit, the engine of the ship Biff had that time began to conk out, missing badly.

FINALLY he had to pull out and try to nurse it home. He just cleared the trees at the end of the landing-T and squashed down, taxiing halfway in before the motor gave up the ghost entirely. He was headed for his quarters when Hjoblom emerged from the hospital shack, a bandage

ringing his head. He looked as if he'd been sentenced to face a firing squad.

"Say, I'm sorry as hell," Biff told him. "Are you hit bad or—"

The Finn's mouth worked. "It was just one month ago today that your friend, Simpson, saved my life in that battle over Koivisto . . . I remember it well. It was the day my son was born."

Something went cold inside Biff. "Where is old sourpuss Laughing Boy, by the way?" he tried to be nonchalant.

The young Finn officer—stared hard at the ground. Told it. Simpson had been with his bunch, the second flight off. And due to the emergency and the shortage of ships, helped none by the loss of the two Fokkers Biff and Laughing Boy had failed to return with, Simpson had taken off in an obsolete Spad. It was one of those left-overs from the last war, shipped into Finland when the Russians first hit. They had gotten two bombers, then been hopped in turn by a flight of those new Heinkel He. 112's the Russians had evidently bought from the Germans. And in the ensuing battle, Laughing Boy's guns had jammed.

"He was no match for them in that old ship," Hjoblom finished. "Helpless without his armament. They herded him away as we were forced to pull out and—"

Little Raffali, assistant chief mec at the drome, a grinning-faced Italian volunteer who'd lived in Flatbush in the United States for several years, came up then. "Simpson—he is not coming back? No?"

Hjoblom nodded. "Last I saw of him, the Russkies had as good as taken him prisoner. They were herding him home with them!"

Biff Hart's eyes squeezed up. He stared hard at nothing off into space. Then he coughed an oath. "Holy smoke—him and me—we went up with these Red soldier outfits we borrowed! When he gets down—*Laughing Boy will be treated as a spy!*"

In the messhall, an ashen-faced Biff tossed down drinks fast as the sad Finn

captain sipped coffee. Yeah, Simpson a prisoner. Rated a spy. And in wartime, there was just one fate for an espionage agent. A wall—

HE couldn't stand thinking about it. Striding out, he started to pace down the field. Good, old sour-puss Simpson, who always looked for the first but had a trick of remaining ice-cool when the trouble came. Biff advanced on the *sauna*, a steam-bath shack a good Finn wouldn't be thought of being caught in Hell itself without. The Russian prisoners who'd tried to grab the Blenheim were locked up there until a H. Q. car came to pick them up . . .

Ten minutes later, a guarded-eyed, watchful Biff Hart slid down furtively beside Captain Hjoblom at the messhall table.

"Listen. I've just been down to the *sauna*. One of those Russkies spoke English after a fashion. They figure the ghost is up so he was sort of careless about what he said," Biff began.

Then he told the Finn about that hidden Red drome they'd spotted down on the Karelian Isthmus when he and Laughing Boy went on their little junket over Lake Ladoga.

"These birds took off from there . . . Which means they're expected back there—in the Blenheim. I found out they got new Heinkels at that drome, too. And you said it was Heinkels that got Simpson when—"

The gloomy-faced Finn nodded. "Yes—yes. . . . It was just like kidnapping, the way they took him away!"

"Kidnapping?" Biff whistled through his teeth. "That makes it perfect. Look." He unfolded a map. "Look. We're just about two hundred kilos from that drome we discovered—where they're undoubtedly taking Simpson. See? About an hour's flight for us—or a little more—in the Blenheim . . . if they haven't shot him yet. . . . And those prisoners down there've got Finn uniforms, high-ranking officers' uniforms—the kind

they'll expect to see come out of the Blenheim bomber when it sets down on that secret field."

Hjoblom jerked around, put intense eyes on Biff. He saw it. Then he shook his head. "We could get there—but never get the ship off again—that's the trouble."

Biff emptied his glass. "You gave me the answer to that when you said 'kidnapping.' We'll do some—take some hostages at the field. Simpson—"

He didn't have to say it. The young Finn said it himself. "He saved *my* life once. Yes."

"We can't get official permission. We'll just have to slip that Blenheim out somehow—and soon. And we need a man to work the rear guns. Then—"

The Finn shot a furtive glance around. "Raffali! He told me he was halfway through the gunnery school down in Italy when he came up here to volunteer. And he thinks the world of Simpson because he played that minor league baseball back in your America. Raffali. . . . Yes, I think. If they haven't executed Simpson yet, we—"

"If they have, I'll wing right on into Russia and drop a bomb personal on Joe Stalin's bedroom-and-bath in the Kremlin," Biff muttered.

IT ALL looked innocent enough in the midday light on the field. Assistant Chief Mechanic Raffali conferred with Captain Hjoblom, who'd come down to the big hangar, then ordered the big Blenheim pulled out. It looked as if perhaps they were going to take that bomber some place. Raffali went up a ladder and fussed around making some adjustments on the port motor. When he came down, he signed the mec crew to turn up both engines. The wild American, Lieutenant Hart, sauntered up and stood beside Captain Hjoblom.

Hjoblom seemed to be listening, then nodded. The American walked over and clambered in the ship's hatch. The motors began to roar and the big bus strained

against the wheel brakes as Hart goosed them from the pilot's seat. The Finn captain motioned Raffali over, seemed to say something. Then the mec went aboard. Half a minute passed. From inside the plexiglass nose of the Blenheim, Biff Hart waved. Hjoblom looked around, sighted the adjutant coming along, and made the entrance in three hops. His coat flew open to reveal the high-officer uniform he'd taken from one of the captured Russians. Nobody noticed. Hart and Raffali had the uniforms taken from the other two beneath their coveralls, too.

The hatch door slammed. The wheel brakes were released. The adjutant started to run toward the ship. Biff Hart's hands trembled, not with fear of the consequences but with fear of failure, over the double throttle bars on the quarter-segment control wheel. Then he was giving the two now synchronized engines the gun and the Blenheim cruised out onto the field.

Halfway down it, he twisted her around to get her nose into the wind, then threw in the spurs hard. The Bristol Mercurys ranted and snarled. In the aft section, on the platform back of the two, gas-operated Browning m.g.'s, little Joe Raffali made the Sign of the Cross, then covered his eyes. When he opened them a few seconds later, the Blenheim had stopped bumping and was climbing steadily.

BIFF got her on the course for Lake Ladoga that Hjoblom had carefully charted, then managed to shrug out of his coveralls to reveal the Finnish staff general's uniform he sported. Off to the east, two American Brewsters bearing the swastika insignia of Finland dipped wings as they passed in the other direction.

"So far, very good," Hjoblom said calmly. "Now, remember, when we get there, I do the talking. I hope my Russky isn't too rusty. If—"

"A pun that lousy would make even old

Laughing Boy crack a smile," the irrepressible Biff put in.

The Finn looked puzzled. "All right. But remember, you and Raffali don't talk. I'll give all the answers. If they get you off by yourself, just say '*nitchavo*' when they ask questions. It's Russian for—well—nothing. It means nothing!"

"Which is exactly what I think of those damn Reds! I say nothing!"

"You say '*nitchavo*.' It means 'nothing' or—or your American 'so what?' or 'what the hell!' See? Like a shrug of the shoulders. Nothing impresses you at all! Get it?"

"But I intend to impress them monkeys before I'm finished," Biff began. "And if—"

"*Nitchavo*—hell!" bellowed Raffali from the rear. Then the grating of his gun gear vibrated through the fuselage. The next moment, Biff saw his air-speed indicator fall and guessed Raffali had jacked up his gun turret above the fuselage curve to go in action. And—those Brownings back there began to yammer in curt, savage bursts, lighting the dim interior of the bomber with their muzzle light glare.

The other two went into action automatically. In a flash, Biff had the Blenheim climbing, then went into a half roll. Hjoblom was out of his seat and scrambling back along the catwalk, calling to the Italian. The Finn passed the info forward to Biff. Four ANT Russky bombers had detached themselves from a returning flight and were hopping on the Blenheim from behind.

Abruptly, Biff kicked the bomber over on a wingtip as he slapped it in a bank as if it were a single-seater fighter job. Hjoblom was flung flat amidships. Then Biff was kicking the ship right into two of those ANT's, holding down the fire-control lever that unleashed the eight machine guns built into the wings. Lead slashed into the cabin, ripping off strips of dural. More lead was playing a drum-fire on the bomber's belly from below.

One of those red-starred ships suddenly up-nosed, hung. Black smoke gushed from the entrails. Then the thing was sliding crazily across the sky to its doom like a great, wounded bird cut down by a bolt in mid-flight. And the crazed Biff Hart was winding the Blenheim over and out of a loop to slash down at the Red pilot trying to cut out his entrails from below. The latter ran for it as the Blenheim's armament spewed its withering blast.

There was a yelp from Raffali in the rear as a slug nicked his shoulder. Then he was cursing merrily in Italian.

Hjoblom crept up beside Biff, edging into the forward cockpit sideward. Biff was racing the Blenheim west in a long slant to get after another of the ANT's. No more lead racked the bomber.

"It's all right, Biff," the Finn announced calmly. "Raffali got another of them—and they're pulling out. We've got business to do."

Biff remembered. Pulling into a climb, he swung the ship back on its course as the corpse-dotted, frozen expanse of Lake Ladoga hove into sight. They picked up Taipale at the east terminus of the Mannerheim Line. The Finn pointed out the Pitkaranta Island batteries.

A new tension gripped the ship. They were getting close now. Perhaps Biff would be unable to ferret out the new, hidden drome he'd spotted with Laughing Boy that early morning. Perhaps they'd be discovered when they got down. Or, perhaps Laughing Boy Simpson—

MINUTES inched by to the monotonous "rhum-m-m" of the Bristol Mercurys. Biff's eyes strained and peered along the west coast of the lake. Ack-ack from a Russian battery flowered ahead and a little below them once. Biff started to edge the Blenheim down. Then he lifted it again. That wasn't the field. The Finn captain's lips were a couple of white lines seaming his face as he shifted his gaze from

the snow-filmed vista to Biff and back again.

"No—it wasn't this far," Biff said, half to himself, putting the Blenheim around to swing back.

Then he and Hjoblom galvanized. Two, three Heinkels, those vicious little fighters, horsed up with that 670 Juno engine, were corkscrewing up to meet them. Biff's heavy lips clamped on that long-cold cigaret butt. Three top-class fighters like that was a tough assignment to—

"Look, my friend!" the Finn cried.

One of the zooming Heinkels had flattened and the pilot was saluting gayly. Biff stared. Another, the red stars on its wings like blood stains on the snowy sky, was wagging wings and gesturing downward. The third had swung in off the port side, not attacking.

"Raffali!" Hjoblom bellowed as he headed for the aft cockpit. "Hold fire! Hold fire, Raffali!"

Biff didn't reach for his gun-fire control lever either. He understood. Those Heinkels were from the new, secret field, had spotted the expected Blenheim as it cruised low seeking the place. They were up to escort the Blenheim in. Grim-eyed, Biff gave them a responding wave and sent the Blenheim down on the track of the first Heinkel that had already turned homeward.

It was a cinch, then. They dropped low over a shelled piece of forest, crossed a frozen river. Ahead, half-sunken, snow-shrouded hangars took form. Figures began to emerge from the living quarters burrowed in the side of a low hill. The lead Heinkel swerved to indicate a big, shoveled-off runway, then cut clear. And Biff Hart set the Blenheim down after one wobbling bounce on the Russian drome. He taxied it in, goosing the engines in roaring blasts to warn away the Russians. An officer gestured toward one of the bigger hangars. But Biff played dumb as the man grew apoplectic with rage and skidded the Blen-

heim's tail around, slewing her to face up the runway again.

CAPTAIN HJOBLOM was at the hatch door, yanking it open even as they drew to a trembling halt. He began to speak in Russian. That first moment was a crucial one. And then Hjoblom was aware the three Russkies who'd tried to steal the Blenheim in the first place had been sent up for the special job because they could speak Finnish. They were not regular members of this squadron here. Hence, he and Biff and Raffali had a good chance of not being recognized for a few minutes.

Hjoblom dropped down after signing Biff to follow. Raffali remained behind, pretending to be fixing something inside. But he was camped near the hatch to prevent the excited Reds from swarming aboard their new prize.

The C.O. of the Russian squadron stepped forward to congratulate Hjoblom, a "most brave comrade to so outwit those stupid Finns," as he added in Russky. Hjoblom's face was a mask as he answered in Russian too.

Biff Hart swung down onto a bomb box a grease monkey held by the entrance near the aft cockpit and tried to keep his hate from his eyes. More officers and pilots clustered around him, gabbling.

Biff shrugged. "*Nitchavo*," he laughed. "*Nitchavo—nitchavo—nitchavo—and will I bust you punks wide open if Laughing Boy isn't okay*," he added to himself.

Very pale, Captain Hjoblom was trying to get in a few words, adroitly seeking for information. He said the Finns back at that field had reported one of their pilots captured by a Russian flight. A pilot in an old Spad.

"That Spad! Yes," a Russian pilot took him up. "Yes. He might as well have been in a baby carriage. Those Finns—against the might of the great Soviet—" Then he shifted to another tack, interested only in the Blenheim prize.

Desperate behind the faint smile on his good-looking face, the young Finn captain finally moved off a little with the commander. He had to find where they'd locked up Simpson. With the loose discipline of the Reds, all of them babbling, it was hard to get anything straight.

"*Nitchavo!*" Biff said again around the cigaret butt in his lips in response to another long speech in Russian. Then he had the arm of one of the admiring pilots and was leading him to the hatch. He gave the wink to Raffali and helped the Red pilot in for a look. This was Biff's own, personal idea of the plan.

A little man in very plain uniform, with sharp, bird-like eyes, said something to Biff as he turned. The latter sensed that it was a question, caught the stern, cold tone. But he just grinned broadly.

"*Nitchavo!*"

Then he was back and leading a bird with a major's insignia up into the ship. That made two for the house, he told himself. The little cuss was at his elbow, questioning some more. Biff spat out his cigaret butt and gave him the old quick brush-off with "*Nitchavo*" again. And he was inviting with gestures, then escorting the squadron operations officer himself up and into the Blenheim.

THE little ferreting one pulled at Biff's sleeve. He said, in Russian: "That prisoner we brought in, he is American. He says he has a friend. One Biff Hart! He says this Biff will come kicking the place down to drag him out safe yet."

Biff recognized his own name, all right. For a moment, he wavered in his role as he stared down at the little man he didn't know was a People's Commissar assigned to the squadron to keep an eye on the military, a sort of an inside spy.

The commissar stole a glance at the cigaret Biff had discarded, that he now held in the palm of his hand. He chuckled. "Ha-ha! This Biff Hart—he would not

dare come here to rescue his friend! He would be afraid, the stupid swine! Ha-ha!" And he spoke in English.

Biff's temper answered for him as he was caught completely off guard in his surprise. "You wouldn't like to bet a few bucks on that, would you, punk?" he snapped in English himself.

THE commissar stepped back. Then he wheeled and was shouting at the Russians as he held up the butt of the English cigaret Biff had been smoking. Quickly, the commissar started to tell them this pilot was a Finn volunteer, not one of their men.

Hjoblom, with his knowledge of the Russian language, was wise in a split second. He had his automatic out and was leaping for the bomber. "Come on, Biff! The game's up, old man!" His gun spat once.

Biff Hart lashed out with a paw and sent that little commissar kicking in the snow. Then he stood a long moment, blazing-eyed, hands knotted, ready to fight to the last drop of blood if he could only have cut a way to wherever Laughing Boy was. The Finn grabbed his arm. Biff wheeled and hoisted himself up into the hatchway.

Inside, Raffali stood covering the trio of Russians who had been decoyed in, automatic steady as a rock. Biff went diving past them to get at the controls and send the Bristol Mercurys blasting. The deadly cool Finn was the last man to scramble in. Lead rattled against the fuselage wall as he made it. The next instant, he'd dragged the Rusky adjutant up beside him on the ladder so that he could put his automatic against the man's head in plain sight of those outside. The squadron bunch stood transfixed as the Blenheim quivered, then began to lumber off. . . .

Down in the little hut built half into the side of the hill where they'd locked him up, Laughing Boy Simpson heard the Blenheim come in. The Soviet infantryman jabbered gloating in the open window about it. The

shivering Simpson gathered the Russkies had somehow stolen the Blenheim off a Finn field. He saw it touch and roll up toward the hangars.

The Soviet sentry went childish in his glee. After all, this was something of a victory over those tough Finns against whom they were defending Leningrad. He danced. He shouted and pointed. Finally, he unbarred the door and opened it so the prisoner could have a proper view of the great ship.

Laughing Boy disconsolately walked over to the door. The Red soldier's gun was stacked against a tree out front. The man had moved some ten feet away, remembering not to give the prisoner a chance to grab him. And he held his unholstered automatic in his hand.

Laughing Boy Simpson always looked at the darkest side of a thing. The Red undoubtedly had thought to snap off the automatic's safety catch, would do so immediately if he had to use the gun. There was just the slimmest chance that he hadn't and wouldn't. But that chance was like a burst of sunlight toward the firing squad to which he'd been made to understand he was sentenced as a spy.

UNHURRIEDLY, very casually, Laughing Boy stepped out the door and walked toward the soldier. Prattling away like a child, the man told him to stand back. Laughing Boy kept coming with a kind of fateful look on his face. The sentry jerked around, saw what was coming, and flung up his gun. In his clumsy mittens, he tried to trigger—once—twice. He had the safety latch on and never thought to take it off. Then, Laughing Boy was on him.

Less than three minutes later, in the long, astrakhan overcoat and wool cap of the sentry, who lay unconsciously behind the now barred door, Laughing Boy marched down toward the hangar line. He sized up the small mob of pilots and mecs clustered around the Blenheim job, wished he could

take that back with him. Then he was whipping himself over into the cockpit of one of those still revving Heinkels that had escorted the bomber in. Nobody even gave him a look as he gunned it, slewed it around, then sent it bucketing for the other end of the runway to come back into the wind. . . .

Biff had the Blenheim hammering like a charger out of Hell as he headed for the other side of the field. Bitter tears of failure stung his slitted eyes. This wasn't one of those gags you could pull twice—and make stick. And it was his own fault that the thing had blown up. He moved the double throttles up further on the quadrant.

"Bad luck," the Finn captain crouched beside him said as he took his eyes from the huddled trio of bewildered Russky prisoners a second. And he pointed to the Heinkel already turning at the other side of the drome apron.

Biff nodded. It looked as if one of the Soviet pilots had somehow beaten them to the takeoff. The Heinkel flipped around and came blasting at them, hornet-like. And immediately its machine guns began to slobber fire froth as it hailed lead at the bomber. Biff tried to answer with his eight Brownings. But the racing Heinkel suddenly lifted, climbed. But the next moment, barely yards off the earth, it was tipping down to lash at the Blenheim.

"Holy Pete—" Biff started. No Soviet pilot he'd seen had ever been good enough to do that stuff. Then he twisted involuntarily as a slug sliced the flesh of his left arm. Still ground-locked as he was, he couldn't get his own wing-guns on the target.

DURAL ripped from the wing beside the port motor bank. Slugs caromed off the nose, slashed the plexiglass of the cockpit. The Heinkel swooped up and past. The Finn captain grabbed Biff's shoulder.

"That was Simpson, Biff! Simpson! . . . He hadn't closed his glass cowling over

his head! I recognized him," Hjoblom cried.

Biff Hart let out a yell as if his team had scored a touchdown instead of being in a very tough spot on an enemy drome. He roared and forgot that wounded arm and almost knocked the Blenheim up on a wing end as he made the turn at the end of the runway. The Finn moved back along the catwalk to cry over the huddled prisoners to warn Raffali to hold his fire on that Heinkel.

"It's got a big 97 on the side," he identified it. "It—" Then he was grabbing at a bombrack to keep himself from being pitched off the catwalk with its feeble lights as the crazy Biff Hart yanked the heavy Blenheim up on its tail.

The great ship staggered as its leading edges gripped and the engines struggled under the strain of the sharp climb. For a breathless moment, it seemed as if it would surely settle back on its tail. It began to wobble and the starboard wing drooped dangerously. And slowly at first, it mounted heavenward.

Heinkels were hurtling angrily down to come around for the takeoff and get that escaping Blenheim. Looking down, Biff saw two of the bucketing red-starred ships lock wings, then crash together as they taxied.

"Come on, some of you guys! Get off the earth—I wanta bat your brains out before I go home!" he snorted.

Machine gun lead ripped into the roof of the bomber. Raffali howled from the rear in the uproar. Biff rolled the Blenheim, then caught a glimpse of darting Heinkel wings flashing past above as it zoomed. Heinkel wings with a red "97" on the fuselage. Laughing Boy!

Simpson, believing the Soviets had stolen that bomber, was calmly, fatefully going about destroying it even if it meant his own death or recapture. He was like a guy who'd been given a second life out of the blue. He'd felt as good as dead once. Zoom-

ing, he rolled over into a loop, righted at the top of it, and came twisting down at the Blenheim again.

Biff went frantic at the controls, unable to fire himself, gesticulating furiously as he tried to tip off Laughing Boy.

"What a pal—what a guy to call for!" Biff grated as he was forced to slide the Blenheim into a diving bank to escape.

"Well, let us hope Simpson gets away alive anyway. Then we can feel we have accomplished our mission," the Finn captain stated. For he'd already seen the quartet of Heinkels ripping up from the field.

S PITTING cotton, Biff tried to reel the Blenheim away for the "97" Heinkel and get some altitude. But Laughing Boy sent the Heinkel out of an Immelmann and head-on at the clumsier Blenheim, the synchronized m.g.'s licking away through the prop arc, the wing guns spearing frame outside it. Big Biff was sweating blood as he was forced to nose the bomber down to avoid a headlong smash if nothing else. And the Heinkels from below seethed at him.

Raffali's guns blasted into action then. Fish-tailing desperately, rolling, Biff sent the Blenheim stabbing around as it vibrated with the leaden hail. He got a Heinkel in his ring sight, cut the juice to the engines to attempt a whipstall, then pounded on with his eight Brownings as the Heinkel *chandelled* up. Abruptly, it seemed to disintegrate in mid-air, smoke bursting from it, the tail assembly breaking clean and falling away. Then Biff was trying to climb again himself.

But an ANT 25 that had been slapped off the field came banking in from below to hammer at his belly section. Dural was slashed loose inside the bomber cabin. One engine started to miss. A whole section of the dial-board was chopped away as a Heinkel axed in from above at a tangent.

Swabbing blood out of his eyes from a forehead gash, Biff saw the Heinkel pilot

jerk half up in his cockpit, then slump from sight as Raffali's guns chopped him apart. Then the Blenheim was moaning in a twisting dive. Biff tugged at the quarter-segment control wheel, wrenching the ship, and got his forward guns on that ANT. Two of the three engines were suddenly propellorless. A curl of flame licked up in front of the control cockpit, branching from the center engine's hoods. It started to tip over.

There was a screech cut short by death inside the Blenheim. Biff yelled back. The Finn captain answered:

"One of your hostages—a Russky pilot here! Slug got him right through the brain!"

Biff was fighting to nurse the mighty Blenheim from its dive. The top of a half-buried hangar rushed at him. A Heinkel was dropping to flash in from the flank. The whole ship seemed to groan in anguish. Then its nose was lifting slowly and it was coming out of the power dive.

And Biff spoke again. "Hjoblom! Tell Raffali to chuck that dead Russky out the hatch! Go ahead," he shrieked as the Finn started to protest. "It's our only chance. Throw him out!"

SECONDS fled. The Heinkel blasted in, lead-hewed away at the Blenheim, then was gone. His mates waited above as the belabored winged giant started to climb. Wind tore into the cabin as Raffali got the hatch door open. Then the dead man's body was whipping out into space, limbs flapping in lifelike fashion as he fell.

There was no way of those Russky pilots knowing the man flung from the Blenheim was not dead. Moreover, there was no commissar up there to flay them on, either.

They knew their adjutant, an old-timer from the Tsar's army, was in that ship. And they loved that withered adjutant who tried to make things a little better for them in this bloody shambles on the Karelian Isthmus. A down-winged Heinkel veered off and the rest hesitated. The adjutant might be the next to be flung out, they knew.

The hesitation finished them. From above, an arrowing torpedo behind the red stars on his wings, came Laughing Boy Simpson in the stolen Heinkel. When he'd seen the other Heinkels gang up on that Blenheim, he'd realized it must be enemies of the Reds in the bomber. Now, he struck.

It was just a matter of instants as he blurred down at better than four hundred per in a power dive, the four guns yapping. Two of the Heinkels went plunging from the sky. Flame was licking from the nose of another. It routed them.

Biff was able to get the Blenheim screwing up at the leaden sky dome again. He swung out over Lake Ladoga as the "97" Heinkel came alongside.

"He'll probably claim he saved us now," Biff spat. . . .

When they sat down back at the home Finn field outside of Liperi, Biff was the first to reel from the ship. Jumping from the Heinkel, Laughing Boy ran toward him.

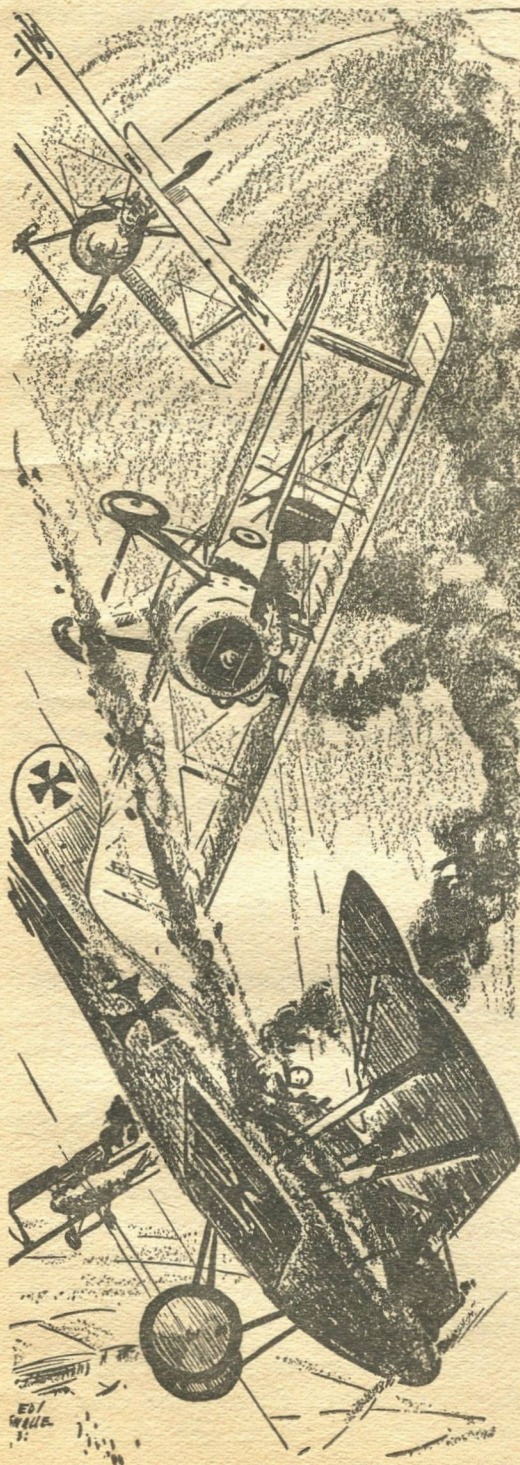
"We almost didn't make it," he began in typically pessimistic manner. "I'll never be able to thank you for—"

Biff scowled. "Hell, you thought we came to save you? Remember that bet we made for ten bucks back in the woods this morning about coming back safe? Okay! Pay up, pal!"



SPECTER WINGS

by JACK STRALEY



TEXAS TRACY tooled the Bristol Fighter nearer to the Huns he could see coming down out of the red afternoon sun. A short burst warmed his Vickers. Behind him, in the observer's pit, Flying Fat Green swung his twin Lewis guns on the Scarff mounting and got ready to swap lead with the Heinie gang.

Texas ruddered out from the formation in which their ship was number three. When the Boche killers struck, he wanted to have plenty of room. The four other Yank ships spread across the sky in a grim battle line. There were seven Pfalz single

What unholy ghost from hell's dark reaches was it that sought vengeance for each Hun pilot that was shot down by the men of the 54th?

seaters coming down—plenty of Jerries to give the Bristol outfit all the scrapping it could handle.

The lanky pilot glanced at the khaki-colored U. S. planes about him. Reed Morrison, the air-wise flight commander of the Yank formation, was waving his hand above his head—the fist thrusting toward the Huns.

Every ship for itself.

Texas saw that the Bristol flown by Scrappy King was out ahead. As he watched, King's bus opened fire. The Vickers above the Sunbeam engine spit sharp gray puffs of smoke mingled with yellow and white flashes of cordite. The range was too long for anything outside of a lucky shot, but the chance paid off. One of the Pfalz began to drop down the sky with black smoke pouring from the housing of its Mercedes.

Then it began to rain Huns.

Texas gunned the Bristol full out and charged into the scrap. In the rear office he could hear the *racka-tack-tack* of the Lewis twins as Flying Fat went into action. Before him, the Jerries seemed to melt away as the speed of the charge swept them past.

He came back in a tight immelmann. His thumb tightened on his Bowden grip as one of the Boche ships—a silver bodied job with blue wings—filled his ring sight. But it faded out of line before his lead lashed its cockpit.

As the Pfalz flashed away, Texas saw that it must belong to a Boche *staffel* strange to that sector of the front. On the side of its fuselage was a large black square, and on the dark background was painted in white what looked like a ghost, rising from an open grave.

He spun the Bristol on a wingtip, trying to turn inside of the Jerry bus and get another crack at its pilot. But the fellow evaded him in a snap roll and went ramming down the sky toward another Yank ship.

Suddenly a red flare burst from the cockpit of the Kraut leader. The Pfalz outfit dropped their offensive and began heading for Hunland, noses down and Mercedes full out as they hightailed off. Looking around for the answer, Texas saw a flock of Clerget camels from the United States 17th Pursuit dropping down out of the blue above.

The flight commander waved the Bristols home. Texas fell into formation and followed Morrison's bus back through the darkening sky across the lines to the home tarmac of the 54th. He set the ship aground in a neat three pointer, climbed down and turned it over to the ack emmas.

Flying Fat clambered out of the observer's office and the two started across the wheat stubble toward the operations tent.

"New outfit, those Heinies," the stock observer said.

Texas shifted his quid of tobacco and

looked thoughtful. "Funny that ghost brand. Wonder what's the idea, paintin' the ships up thataway?"

Flying Fat shook his head. They reached the operations tent, where Texas repeated his question to Major Albright, the alert and efficient C. O. of the 54th.

"The ghost?" Albright replied. "You must have met *Nachtreiter's staffel*. They call themselves the Poltergeists, and that's their marking, so Intelligence tells me. A poltergeist is a sort of a Jerry ghoul—goes around at night playing tricks on people. Sometimes one of them gets mad, and breaks the neck of its victim."

Flying Fat scratched his head. "Wonder if it made the poltergeists mad today, when Scrappy King knocked down one of their ships?"

The C. O. grinned. "Probably. But I wouldn't take any stock in the yarn. Just a good buildup for the *staffel*."

The two flyers left the tent. It was dark, now. Parking their flying kits in the Metal Nisson hut which served them as sleeping quarters they went over to the renovated French farmhouse used as general assembly hall and mess for the officers of the 54th. Here they joined a group which was chatting at the bar.

"Where's King?" Texas asked during a pause in the talk.

"Scrappy?" answered Ray Dolan, King's observer. "He's over in our cubby, making out his combat report for this afternoon. Ought to be here any minute. I promised to buy him a drink on account of him getting his fourth Hun, and—"

A white faced ack emma burst through the open door of the squadron mess. "Lootenant King's dead," he gasped. "Fell outta his ship—and busted his neck on the hangar floor."

Pilots and observers started. Then as one man they rushed through the door and pounded across the tarmac toward the B Flight hangar.

TEXAS TRACY was first to enter. On the floor he saw the body of Scrappy King. It lay as if the pilot had tried to climb out of his cockpit and pitched forward, striking full upon his head. The forehead and one side of the scalp were beginning to turn dark, as if bruised when the body struck. His head was hunched over on his right shoulder, twisted around in an unnatural position like an owl's.

Other flyers began to crowd into the big shed. With them came Captain Welles, Medical Officer of the 54th, and Major Albright. Clearing the hangar, the C. O. and his medico began examining the body of the dead flyer.

"How do you suppose it happened?" Flying Fat asked as they stood outside waiting for the M. O. to reappear. "What was it the major said those poltergeists did when they got mad? Broke people's necks, wasn't it?"

Texas nodded.

"Well, how would King get his neck broken? No man in his right mind, and cold sober, would fall out of a ship onto a hangar floor."

The lean pilot shrugged his shoulders. "'Pears to me you're right. Let's keep quiet about this ghost yarn an' see what we kin turn up."

But when the flyers sat down in the mess at dinner there was apparently no one present who did not know the legend of the poltergeist and its weird habit of breaking the necks of those who incurred its hatred. Conversation around the table consisted mainly of speculation as to the possibility of there being such a thing, and whether King had been killed by the ghostly visitant or fell while working on his ship.

Across the table from Texas and Flying Fat sat Doc Welles and Lieutenant Blake, the squadron adjutant. Welles was a heavy set, partly bald blonde fellow in his forties. Blake was younger, a dark haired, military looking figure with deepset black eyes and a reserved manner.

"I see no reason to admit the existence of any ghost," the M. O. declared for perhaps the fortieth time since he had seen King's body. "His neck was broken by a fall—no question about it."

"If there's no such thing," put in Alex Wood, the light haired, slender C Flight skipper who sat nearby, "who swiped my alarm clock this afternoon? It was in my cubby when we went over the lines. When I came back, it was gone."

A general laugh at the idea of a ghost taking an alarm clock followed, and the subject seemed to be dropped for the moment. The mess sank into silence, only the intermittent rumbling of the front drifting through the room.

Then, as if it had been waiting, through the stillness came the sound of an unearthly wailing—a sort of ghostly shriek ending in what seemed like a choking sob.

The officers of the 54th glanced at each other around the table. No man wanted to be the first to admit he had heard the sound, but each looked curiously at his neighbors.

"A banshee," Ray Dolan broke the silence, his voice lowered in superstitious awe. "I've heard my dad tell about them in the Old Country. They wail like that when somebody's been murdered, or is going to be."

WHEN dinner was through, the spell of the spectral cry still seemed to hang over the men. Most of them gathered around the bar. Others tried to start a new phonograph which had been brought up by one of the K. C. outfits. But the machine obstinately refused to work.

"Hell," growled one of the half-wingers, "the old can was better. Where did it go, anyway?"

"Tossed it out," another answered. "Probably by this time some Frog family is giving their friends a concert."

Blake, the martinet adjutant of the squadron, stepped over to the balky music

box. Drawing from his pocket one of those knives which contain a dozen or more tools he turned the machine on its side. Reaching into the works he made a few adjustments. There was a sharp click followed by a whirring sound and he set the cabinet back on its base. "All right now," he said.

Texas Tracy grinned at Flying Fat. "Kiwi's good for something, anyhow."

The rotund observer nodded in agreement. Then he drew the lanky Texan into a corner of the mess. Flying Fat's usually good natured face was grave, and he seemed loath to admit what was on his mind.

"Suppose there is something to the poltergeist story?" he remarked slowly. "If Nachtreiter's *staffel* is going to stay in this sector, it means that—"

Texas laughed. "Not a chance," he declared.

Flying Fat gestured toward where Ray Dolan, the Irish American observer, was regaling a group of the other flyers with weird legends of Irish wraiths and leprechaunes. "Might be. Plenty of the fellows believe that—"

Texas raised a hand as if to dismiss the idea. "Fergit it. If there's a killin' on the spread, you kin bet your last stack of chips somebody human done it."

The observed shrugged his shoulders and walked off, far from convinced that a poltergeist had not come down to the drome of the 54th. Funny, that King should have had his fall just after he had shot down the Jerry ship with its sinister marking. Well, tomorrow would be another day. If someone else in the squadron got one of the ghost-marked Pfalz, then had his neck broken—

It was afternoon of the next day before the B Flight Bristols again took to the air. Rising through the cloudless Hunland sky they swept back and forth, patrolling the sector from La Chausse to Romagne. Sun at their backs, they passed a couple of British De Havilands down below doing an

artillery shoot for some of the Limey heavy guns. The D. H.'s were coasting in a wide oval, sending back their corrections as the men at the guns miles behind the lines ranged on some troublesome Boche position. Give them time to set their points, and one good salvo would blow the Heinies right out of *der Vaterland*.

Suddenly the flying Yanks saw Morri-son's wingtips waggle as he swung the stick of his Bristol in a signal. "Enemy sighted." He was waving back toward the sun, and at the same time climbing in a stiff zoom. As soon as he saw the others had the warning he flashed over in a tight immelmann and headed back toward where, lower in the sky, the De Havilands were still circling.

Flying Fat pounded his shoulder, pointing farther into Hunland. "And more coming," he howled against the roar of the Sun-beam, indicating half a dozen silhouettes in the German sky. "Where's the Limey protection flight? Don't they—"

The speed of the Bristol's dive whipped his words back into nothingness as Texas dove the ship toward a spot a thousand feet above the two D. H.'s. The Pfalz outfit was heading down for the Limey ships, intent on blasting the art. obs. busses from the sky. Calm as if they had been back in Piccadilly, the two R. A. F. observers kept pounding brass, sending back clock code markings that would give their guns the data needed.

Texas threw enough shots to make sure his Vickers were ready. In the back office, Flying Fat flicked the pawls of the Lewis guns and jammed home two full drums of ammo. Now the Pfalz ships, the ghost insignia plain upon their sides, were almost within firing range of the Limeys. The Yank buses, just a bit farther off, were coming down the chute at a speed that seemed to bend their leading spars like bowstaves.

The first Jerry opened fire. Spandau death-blasts hurtled toward the D. H.'s. The R. A. F. observers grabbed their guns

and swung them toward the charging Boche.

Once more Flying Fat pounded Texas' shoulder. "There's the Limeys," he yelled.

TEXAS looked up above the Huns. Coming down right out of the sun was a full squadron of the fast diving British Dolphins. And rising from behind the Yank lines he saw the Camels of the United States 148th Pursuit. Evidently the two D. H.'s had been well placed bait, and the Boche had fallen for the ambush.

Realizing that his men were trapped, the Jerry leader turned to fight his way out. Just as the Bristols of the 54th came down, the Hun armada wheeled in screaming banks, Spandaus knifing the blue with their leaden hate. The Pfalz ships bored into the U. S. two-seaters, intent on blasting their way through to safety.

The Dolphins would be too late, Texas could see. Even the fastest diving ships on the Western front couldn't catch the terrorized Jerries in a level race for the *staffel* nest. He rapped a stabbing burst at the nearest Hun and saw blue fabric stream from its center section. But it kept on in its mad rush.

One of the Bristols had banked over to cut it off. Darby Hughes, the pilot, was flying almost alongside the Pfalz, the force of his dive carrying him past it before his Vickers could train upon its pit. But from the back of the ship Len Scribner, the observer, coolly sighted his Lewis guns and sewed lead from prop to empenage of the Kraut craft.

The Pfalz seemed to open up as if a knife had been run lengthways through a sausage. Great chunks of linen and longeron came whipping back as its Mercedes labored wildly against the crankshaft no longer weighted by a balanced club. The poltergeist device on the fuselage ripped loose and dropped away, turning over and over as it seemed to be deserting the stricken ship.

The Pfalz buckled. *Wooshing* into a flat spin it turned completely over, then started down as the engine dragged the nose toward the earth. The body of the Hun pilot, arms frantically outstretched as if trying to seize something which would stop his two-mile fall, tumbled from the pit and jerked grotesquely through the heavens like a battered doll.

Texas Tracy eased his Bristol out of its long dive and pulled it back up the sky. The Dolphins were nosing up, he could see. But the Jerries had too big a start. All but the one Pfalz which Scribner had downed were well away toward the back reaches of Hunland.

Morrison waved his assembly signal. The khaki Bristols drew together and swept back across the sector. Petrol was running low, and it was time to hit the tarmac.

As they returned, Flying Fat wondered about the poltergeist. Now that another Yank had knocked down one of the spectre ships, would the legend hold? Would Len Scribner be the ghost's next victim? Or were Texas and the major right, and was the whole weird story just something cooked up by Nachtreiter to give his *staffel* some publicity on both sides of the front?

On the ground back at the 54th he slapped Scribner on the shoulder. "Better watch yourself tonight," he said, half kidding and half serious as he looked into the eyes of the man who had downed the Jerry ship. "Remember Scrappy King—and don't stick your neck out."

Scribner put his fists on his hips and a look of supreme contempt spread across his face. He scowled, spit into the wheat stubble and shrugged his shoulders. "I say Nuts," he averred in a disgusted tone. "Nuts to them all. Ghosts, banshees—the whole bunch of them."

Flying Fat looked back curiously as he walked away. "Hope you're right."

Evening patrol brought no more scrap-ping, and once more that night the flyers of the 54th gathered in the mess. And once

more, as silence hung heavy for a moment, the weird, sobbing cry chilled their blood. Several leaped to their feet, intent on taking guns and sweeping the woods beside the drome for some sign of the nocturnal creature. But Major Albright and Welles, the M. O., talked them out of it.

"Crazy stunt," the C. O. remarked in ridicule, while the medico added, "Probably what we heard is just some tree limbs, rubbing together in the wind when it's from the right direction."

Only Dolan, the Irish-American observer, and Blake, the adjutant, seemed to hold any belief in the story of the spectre.

"'Tis a banshee, sure," Dolan said, crossing himself as he turned back to the bar. Blake seemed reluctant to admit it, but was apparently convinced that there was something supernatural about the strange cry from the darkness.

TEXAS and Flying Fat left the mess for their Nisson hut. B Flight was on the board for dawn patrol, and they wanted to catch up on sleep. Almost before they had hit the blankets, it seemed, the greaseball who acted as their striker was waking them. Downing the steaming coffee he had placed on the table in their cubby they threw on their flying clothes and walked out to the tarmac.

Already the five khaki Bristols were on the line, motors warming. Morrison was in his bus, his observer behind him. All the other flyers were in their places except—

Where was Len Scribner, Flying Fat wondered. The half winger who had shot down the poltergeist plane the afternoon before had been one of the crowd in the mess during the evening. He had seemed all right then. But now, what could be keeping him?

As if in answer to his question an ack-emma came rushing toward the ships from the hut where Scribner slept. The greaseball's jaw was working as if he were trying

to say something, but his face was pale beneath its tan and he seemed to be having a hard time finding words. Finally, "He's dead," he croaked. "There on his cot. His neck's broken—just like Lootenant King's."

The flyers crowded around him, intent on learning details of this new murder. But Morrison waved them back to their ships. Life or death mattered little. In spite of ghosts, or anything else, the war must go on and the United States 54th would do its part. One by one the pilots of the Bristols waved away their chocks and sent their ships in graceful *chandelles* toward the lines.

"What did I tell you?" Flying Fat shouted into Texas' ear as their bus climbed toward the front. "It's the poltergeist, all right. Next thing you know—"

Texas shook his head. "Ghost nothing," he roared back. "Somebody human killed those two men. The same fellow fixed up that shrieking we heard, coming from the woods."

"Who did it?" Flying Fat bellowed against the rush of air.

"Don't know." Texas pointed to where the black balls of archie were bursting in their path. "When we git back, I'll try to figger it out." He silently hunched over the stick, giving his full attention to the grim business of warfare.

Once more the sky seemed free of Huns. An old Taube near the carpet hightailed away as their shadows swept across it. Three Fokkers appeared at a distance but would not attack. The patrol ended and the pilots once more set the Bristols down on the drome.

Texas and Flying Fat made for their cubby. There was plenty on the rotund observer's mind. If his lean wingmate had an idea who had murdered the flyers of the 54th—making it look like the work of the ghostly spectre—

"Who do you figure killed King and Scribner?" he asked Texas as they sat down on the two cots the hut contained.

"Take your choice," the Texan drawled. "First, there's Doc Welles. I'm supposin' that these fellers' necks was busted after they was killed."

Flying Fat's eyes widened. "After?"

"Sure. Suppose somebody wanted to make it look like this ghost done the job. He knows the men, and they wouldn't suspect him if he came up. He could shove a rag with chloroform or ether over their faces, then twist their necks and put the bodies where it would—"

"But why suspect Doc Welles?"

"He's the only feller on the spread that's got the stuff. Likewise, he keeps persistin' there's nothin' to this here ghost yarn. That might mean he's right, or it might mean he's tryin' to blanket his own trail."

The rotund observer nodded. "I see. But what about the shrieks from the woods?"

"Feller could do that with a megaphone, or from inside a hollow tree." Texas paused and chuckled. "Heard a coyote beller up a hollow cottonwood one time, an' it sure sounded like the biggest wolf ever howled."

Flying Fat shook his head. "Sounds all right. But Doc was in the mess both times, when we heard the screeching."

Texas scratched his head, and his features took on a puzzled air. "That's right. Maybe the feller's got some kind of mechanical jigger—makes it go off whenever he wants. All he'd need would be an alarm clock—an' a phonograph."

The observer rubbed his jaw. "I get it. Question is, where'd he get the clock?"

"Woods said his was gone, remember? Maybe that was just a scheme to alibi himself—wanted to make it sound sure he didn't have no clock."

THE Texan's face hardened and he leaned forward upon the cot. "Another thing—that neck bustin' business. That's a trick they taught the infantry boys at Plattsburg—sort of a last chance, when you'd got your bayonet in a Hun's guts

and couldn't free it. Woods went to the first Plattsburg camp."

Flying Fat shook his head. "Sure. But anybody might know how to do it. All German soldiers learn some jiu jitsu. Any Jerry could—"

Texas rose from the cot. "A Jerry. That's him, all right. All we got to do is find out who it is—who's been doin' these killin's. I'm going to have a look round in them woods out back. Stay around, an' if you learn anything new, let me know."

The observer said he would, and Texas vanished through the doorway. Flying Fat sat lost in thought. Except for *alerte* duty, B Flight was off for the remainder of the day, and his lanky partner would have plenty of time to nose around the woods near the 54th. But what would Texas learn? Was the amiable, soft-spoken Doc Welles the sinister killer, drowning the outcries of his victims in some soporific drug and then wrenching their necks as they lay unconscious? And what about Woods? It would have to be someone on the drome—someone the murdered man had known and trusted.

The observer rose from his cot and went over to the B Flight hangar. As he tested the rigging of their Bristol, and calibrated ammo for the Lewis guns which guarded the tail of the fighter, he kept turning over in his mind the events of the past two days. But when he left the hangar he was no nearer to a solution of the killings.

Texas Tracy did not appear in the squadron mess at lunch time, nor was there any sign of the lanky pilot at dinner. Night had settled thick over the drome before he came into the general quarters where Flying Fat was sitting with a group of others listening to the new phonograph. Texas jerked his head toward the doorway and the observer rose and joined him outside.

"Find out anything?" he asked.

Texas said nothing. He drew back farther into the darkness, apparently watching the entrance of the operations

tent. Inside, they could see Major Albright sitting at the table which served him as a desk, swapping yarns with Doc Welles, and Blake, the squadron adjutant. An orderly left the tent, returning shortly with Woods, the C Flight skipper, and tall, lantern-jawed Rod Hayward, the commander of A Flight.

"All set," the observer heard Texas say as the pilot started forward. The two entered the tent. Flying Fat looked at the faces of the men seated around him, but learned nothing from their features or from their casual greetings as he and Texas came in. From any signs he could see, this might be just another fanning bee such as was probably taking place in a thousand spots along the front.

TEXAS sat down in a canvas chair by the major's table and pulled out a pencil. For a moment he wrote steadily, then snapped his point and looked around as if wondering what to do. "Let's have your knife, will you?" he addressed Blake.

The adjutant reached into his pocket, then smiled and shook his head. "Sorry. Haven't it with me. I left it—"

Texas waved a hand to indicate that it didn't matter. He put the pencil and paper away and looked inquiringly at Major Albright. Flying Fat saw the C. O. give him an almost imperceptible nod. Then the squadron commandant straightened in his chair and rapped sharply on the table before him.

"Lieutenant Tracy," he said as every man in the tent focused his gaze upon him, "asked me to call you here. He has information which he believes will lead to the capture of the fiend who has been killing our officers, under the guise of this German poltergeist."

The observer looked at the men around him. If the guilty one was in the tent no one could have told it from his expression, he was sure. On the faces of the officers

was respectful attention to the C. O. That was all.

Albright motioned to Texas Tracy, who took up the story.

"Outside in the woods," Texas began, "I finds this afternoon a most interesting jigger. It's a phonograph with an alarm clock attachment—so any time the clock is set for the machine'll play a record that's already on. I takes the horn off the phonograph and plays the record real soft like. What I hears is th' screechin' sound that's been comin' across th' 54th spread these last two evenin's—th' yowlin' of this here poltergeist."

Not a man in the tent moved. Every one sat as if rooted to his chair, their faces tense in the shadows as the one electric bulb swayed upon its cord.

"Somebody in this outfit," Texas went on, "was killin' our men. They knew him, so he didn't have no trouble gettin' near. With a jiu jitsu hold he busted their necks, after spreadin' around this talk about how the ghost did that when it got someone."

He drew a sixgun from his belt and laid it on the table before him.

"Anybody might have put the stuff in the hollow tree," he said as his eyes narrowed and he scrutinized the faces of his listeners. "I'd still be wonderin' who done it—if it wasn't for one thing."

The major rapped on the table again. "Tell us, Tracy," he ordered. "Who was it? I give my word—the traitor will die the death of a dog."

Tracy pointed the sixgun at Blake, the adjutant.

"THERE he is," he charged. "On the ground, inside the tree, I found a bit of steel broken from his knife blade when he fixed the old phonograph to make it sound like the ghost was screechin'. I have it here. Look in his pockets. You'll find that—"

Blake rose to his feet. The back of his right hand rose to his mouth and his eyes

protruded as if in terror. "No. No," he almost shrieked. "Let me get the knife. I'll show you that it—"

He took a step forward as if to go to his own quarters. As he passed Tracy he lashed out at the Texan's gun arm, then as the lanky pilot tried to recover his balance he bolted from the entrance of the tent and pounded across the drome.

The others followed. Far ahead they could see Blake fleeing with almost super-human speed as guilt and the certainty of death at the hands of the men he had betrayed gave wings to his feet. As Tracy and Major Albright watched he disappeared into the woods.

"The hollow tree," Albright gasped. "Follow him."

Texas seized the arm of the C. O. and hurled him to the earth as there sounded from the forest an explosion which shook the whole field. "Mined," the lanky pilot said as he picked himself up. "I was afraid he had some contraption like that, and—"

Flying Fat and Doc Welles came up, followed by other flyers from the 54th and

a crowd of curious ack emmas. Rapidly the major explained what had taken place. A searching party was organized, but the hollow tree in which the apparatus had been was gone—blasted to pieces by the explosion. Bits of the renegade adjutant's body, and a few parts of the ingenious device by which he had produced the ghostly wailing, were the only tokens that remained.

"How did you know it was Blake?" Flying Fat asked as they started back toward their quarters.

"Didn't," Texas drawled. "But I figured a feller who could fix a phonograph like he did in the mess could easy rig up something like he had. Then it was just a case of trackin'—findin' out where his trail led, when he left his quarters."

"And the bit of steel from his knife?" the C. O. put in.

Texas grinned. "Sure glad Blake didn't ask for it. I knowed his knife blade was busted—saw it when he fixed the music that time. The busted piece itself—well—it just shows what a feller's conscience kin do, when it gets workin'."

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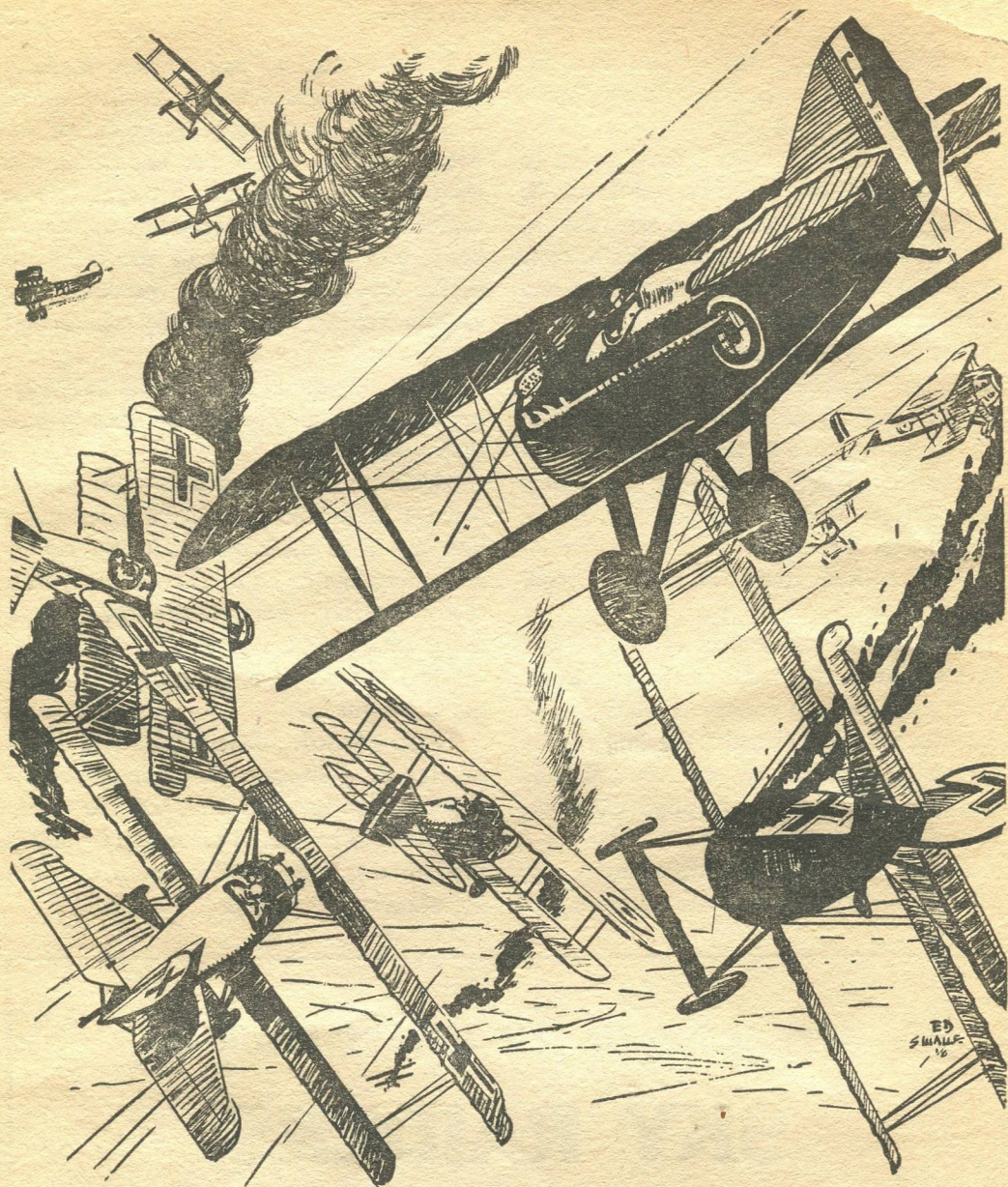
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PITCHFORK PILOT

by JAMES ROURKE

Rex Martin hurls his Spad through the tracer crossed sky to break up the winning combination of Ein, Zwei and Drei, a trio of Heinie devils, with their own kind of pitchfork!

REX MARTIN unrolled the contour map fastened beneath the instrument board of his Spad.

He looked down to where, thousands of feet below, the blood-spattered canvas that was France seemed no larger than its replica on the map he carried. The hawk-like eyes beneath his goggles traced the course of the River Oise. There it was, and the fork where the River Aisne joined it.

His eyes followed the Aisne into the territory held by the Boche. Ahead, below his right leading edge, was the city of Soissons. That dark blur, further back and to his left, would be Laon.

Martin nodded with satisfaction. Orienting his map, he spotted the location of the United States 64th Pursuit Squadron. Down there, it must be; near where a flashing bit of silver, like a bright mirror reddened by the descending sun, showed the location of Lake La Chausse.

Martin noted the glimmer of the lake, then raised his eyes to the Hunland heavens. So far away as to be only specks in the late afternoon sun he saw a group of black dots dancing in the blue. Five of the shadowy midges were moving in a formation which seemed to be crawling up the sky. From above, five others were descending to meet them. Above the upper five, three more black specks hovered.

Martin's thumb closed instinctively on his Bowden grip. Far off as they were, his trained eye could read the story. The black specks beneath the others were Spads—ships like his own. The silhouettes in the upper air were thicker, heavier.

Fokkers.

He cursed softly into the slipstream. Even had he been near enough to join in the scrap, his guns were not loaded. A replacement, fresh from the pilots' pool, no belts of ammo lay ready to feed his twin Vickers.

Once more he studied the black dots.

As he watched, the two lower formations tangled together and began milling about the sky. The three Fokkers up above the

scrap were not taking any part in it, he saw. Like huge scavenger birds, they seemed waiting to pounce upon the weaklings—to thrust fiery talons into a disabled prey which could not strike back.

One of the Spads had drifted away from the dogfight, he noticed. Evidently the Yank pilot who flew it had picked himself one of the toughest hombres in the staffel. Now, it looked as if his guns were jammed.

But the Yank was smart, Martin saw. Twisting back in a tight immelman he seemed about to rejoin his wingmates. Left flatfooted, the Boche pilot lost valuable time throwing his own ship about to follow. For a few seconds, the Spad was out of range.

Then it happened.

Swooping down the sky in a step echelon came the three Fokkers which had been circling above the fight. With the precision of a cold, inhuman machine they plummeted toward the lone Spad. Smoke whisked from the muzzles of their guns as ready Spandaus bared gleaming death fangs.

The Spad reeled like a boxer who has received a perfectly timed knockout blow. It seemed to shudder. Then, as if a giant torch had swept it from prop to empenage, it burst into angry flames.

As if at a signal, all of the Fokkers left their opponents and high-tailed for the back reaches of Hunland.

Rex Martin's eyes blazed behind his goggles as he watched. Three German ships, waiting for easy meat to fatten the score in their staffel board. Three ships flying as one—ships which made their boast this sinister triple coup-de-grace.

That was what he was looking for.

His hand went down beneath the bucket seat. He drew out a long, funnel-like contrivance. Made to his plans by an expert in the Chemical Warfare Corps back at Rouen, it would do the job he wanted. He unscrewed a safety device on the side of the funnel, then touched off a percussion cap which ignited its contents. A thick,

heavy cloud of black smoke poured from the muzzle of the tube and trailed behind the Spad.

Martin shoved the stick forward and cut the Hisso. The ship screamed downward, the black plume following in its wake. Half a mile below he leveled out, pouring juice to the motor and zooming back up the sky so that the smoke hung in the form of a gigantic U.

He kicked out of the zoom. The smoke stopped. Half a mile behind the U he again cut the gun and nosed over toward the earth. Once more he released the thick smoke. A vertical black bar appeared to cross the U, so that together they formed what seemed to be a huge, three-tined pitchfork.

A pitchfork in the sky.

Martin peered overside as he again leveled the Spad. Heading directly away from the lake which showed the location of the United States 64th he tossed the smoke machine overboard above a small patch of woods. Then he turned back and made for the drome. Grounding his Spad, he rolled to a stop before the camouflaged canvas hangars half concealed by a small strip of woods which lay between the drome and the front.

He asked for the operations office. A corporal pointed it out—a large khaki tent between the hangars and the shell-battered French farmhouse which Martin took to be the squadron mess. He turned the ship over to the noncom and strode off toward the tent.

In the operations office he saw two men. One, an older chap, with hair and close-clipped moustache iron-grey in color, was seated behind a pine table and wore the oak leaves of a major upon his shoulders. Dark eyes, piercing but friendly enough, looked out from his firm, even features as he studied the newcomer and beckoned him into the tent.

Martin stepped inside. He saluted and handed over his log book and other creden-

tials. This chap behind the table would be Major Banks, the alert and efficient C. O. who had won command of the 64th by his record as a scrapper above the lines.

The major looked over the papers in silence. Martin glanced at the other officer in the tent. Taller than himself, this blonde fellow with the shiny JMA wings and the captain's bars on his shoulders looked like an ad from the London "Tattler" or "Sketch" showing what the well-dressed officer would wear. Spotless Dach boots, with a polish that must have cost his batman half a day's work, glowed below a pair of creamy Bedford cord breeches pressed to a knife edge. Above the breeches was an extremely well-tailored tunic, with the bellows pockets and open type neck adopted by some of the Yank flyers from the RAF.

The major laid down the papers, smiled and stretched out his hand. "Glad to have you with us, Lieutenant Martin," he said warmly. He nodded toward the tall blonde officer, who stood looking the new man over, a disappointed expression upon his features. "Meet Captain Ryder. You'll be with him—in B Flight."

Martin turned, stretching out his hand. The captain hesitated, as if surprised. Must be waiting for a salute, the new man thought. Well, what the hell! If that was the kind of a guy his new skipper was—. He raised his arm in recognition of the other's rank.

Ryder returned the salute. Then he extended his hand, almost reluctantly, Martin thought.

They shook hands, then Ryder turned to the major. "Thought they were sending up Freddie Welsh," he said. He leaned over to the table, picked up Martin's log book and began thumbing through the pages. "Only a few hours on Spads." He shrugged his shoulders and threw the book back on the table.

The major picked it up. "A good rec-

ord in gunnery," he remarked, thumbing the book open. "Look here."

Ryder studied the page, which showed the number of rounds fired at various types of targets and gave Martin's combat record at Turnbury. But he shrugged his well-tailored shoulders as if only slightly impressed and said, "Yes, but Welsh—"

Rex Martin stepped forward. "I'm here to fight Huns," he said, looking his flight commander squarely in the eye, then appraising the blonde captain with a glance which ran rapidly over the immaculate uniform and polished boots. "If you're looking for fashion plates—"

RYDER'S blue eyes flashed and his lip curled. "You'll get plenty of scrap-
ping," he replied, as if holding lightly the ability of the pilot before him. Then, seeming to make an effort to control himself, he smiled and said, "When you've stowed your kit in your quarters, come over to the mess and meet the rest of the outfit."

An orderly called by the major showed Martin his quarters in a sheet-iron Nisson hut back of the squadron mess. On one side of the small room was a cot which the orderly told him was empty and he tossed his flying kit onto it.

Then they went back to the hangar into which the corporal had rolled the new Spad. Reaching into the cockpit of the ship, Martin drew out a long, flannel package, his musette bag and what extra clothing he had brought with him to the front.

The orderly eyed the long package curiously. "What's that, Lootenant? New kind of gun?"

Martin said nothing. He untied the wrappings and drew back the flannel. The three sharp tines of a shiny pitchfork protruded.

The orderly gingerly placed a finger on one of the points, drew it back hurriedly and nodded as if content. Following Martin out of the hangar he shook his head dubiously, as if repeating to himself the

ack emma's credo that all new ninety-day wonders sent up from the pool must be slightly cracked.

Martin let the fellow go. He went back to the Nisson hut and put the pitchfork under his bunk. No use sounding off to the orderly about it, he was thinking. Plenty of flyers in any squadron at the front had lucky pieces of one kind or another. As far as anyone at the United States 64th was concerned, the pitchfork was his.

He went over to the mess.

The general quarters in the battered farmhouse was a cheerful spot, he saw as he entered. One room, farthest from the door and containing a long table, was evidently the dining hall. The room in which he found himself had a number of chairs and small tables at which some of the officers of the outfit were seated, carrying on a running fire of conversation, reading or writing letters.

The walls of the room had been brightened by pictures cut from *La Vie Parisienne* and other magazines popular with the flyers. In one corner stood an ancient looking piano, somewhat the worse for wear, and opposite was a small homemade bar at which a number of the pilots were standing.

Spotting Ryder at the bar, Martin went over and joined the group. In rapid succession the blonde captain introduced him to the other B Flight men. Tommy Kelly, a dark complexioned second lieutenant from Brooklyn, was a short, good-natured chap. Another shavetail was Lee Jones, a soft spoken tow-head with an accent from well below the Mason-Dixon line.

The B Flight cover man, Red Simmonds, wore single silver bars on his shoulders. He was a powerfully built, heavy muscled fellow with a mop of dark auburn hair above his yellow-greenish eyes.

"You'll fly Number Two," Ryder told Martin. "We lost a man today—Ted Powers." He nodded toward the red haired veteran. "Lieutenant Simmonds, here, will

take you over the lines tomorrow, for a look around."

"Tough about Powers," Kelly broke in. "A dirty Hun trick, ganging up on him that way."

Rex Martin nodded. A dirty trick was right, he was saying to himself, if it was the kill he had seen on his way up to the lines. Confident he already knew the answer he looked at Kelly and asked, "Who did it?"

The Brooklyn pilot pounded his fist on the bar. "Ein, Zwei and Drei," he exclaimed. "Ever hear of them?"

Martin shook his head.

"IT'S a publicity buildup for the Kaiser's air force," Kelly explained. "Propaganda, for the Heinies and Gretchens back home. These three Boche have rolled up a big score and gotten themselves a lot of easy meat by picking off single ships, or pilots whose ships have been disabled in a fight."

"Who are they?"

"Their names," Red Simmonds growled, "are Kettlemann, Staube and Heinker. According to a chap I know in G-2, Kettlemann is a little, polite guy with a bald head. He's the fellow they call Ein—carries a big number One on a silver shield on his fuselage."

"A good pilot?" Martin asked.

Red nodded, his face serious. "Damn good—all three of them. Some of our fellows have met them flying alone. So far, it's always been the American who didn't come back.

"Who are the others?"

"Zwei—number Two—is a tough bird named Staube. A regular gorilla, my friend tells me. Drei—number Three—is Heinker, a tall, very polished looking gent. But he must have ice water instead of blood in his veins. Once when the R. A. F. 219th was going to bomb their drome, Heinker staked out some Limey prisoners he had—right on the tarmac."

"How about an ambush?" Martin put in. "Couldn't you send out a couple of two-seaters as bait, and—"

The veteran shook his head. "They're too smart. When they attack, they make sure the odds are in their favor."

Kelly grinned broadly as he signaled the bartender to do his duty. "Maybe," he said to the new pilot, "you'll get a crack at them, when Red takes you over the lines tomorrow."

The new pilot's eyes smouldered and narrowed. He scanned the faces of the others at the bar. Most of them seemed amused at what they evidently considered simply a joke on Kelly's part, and the smiles on their faces were friendly. But Ryder's expression, it seemed to him, was nearer to a sneer.

Martin's spine straightened and his jaw came out. "I'm ready," he said.

All but Ryder nodded in approval. The tall blonde captain walked away as if he had heard enough, and began talking to a group of flyers across the mess.

Martin looked around the room. On the wall opposite the door was a score board carrying the squadron roster. He walked over and read the list. Ryder, his new skipper, was in the lead, with twelve enemy planes downed. He looked over to where the blonde captain was standing and shook his head. Maybe the skipper had what it took, but—

He felt Red Simmonds' hand on his arm. The veteran led the way to one of the small tables and produced a map of the sector. Motioning Martin to a seat, he took a chair himself and began to explain the position of the 64th and the tactics the outfit had found most successful.

After dinner in the mess, Martin went to the B Flight hangar and spent most of the evening calibrating shells for the two Vickers guns on his ship. Then he inspected the guns themselves, taking down the locks and making sure that they were in prime working order.

Next morning he spent some time firing on the ground silhouettes behind the drome. When the B Flight ships came back from their first patrol, Red Simmonds would take him along the lines. He watched the sky. When the four Spads returned he went back to his Nisson hut and drew the pitchfork from beneath his bunk.

Taking off the wrappings he started back to his ship, which was checked and waiting, with belts reloaded, before the hangar.

The B Flight Spads had landed. As Martin went along the side of the hangar he saw Red Simmonds waiting on the tarmac. Increasing his pace, he hurried toward the veteran flyer.

As he did so, the dapper figure of Captain Ryder came around a corner of the hangar. Before Martin could stop, the tall, blonde skipper had run smack into the sharp tines of the pitchfork.

RYDER'S dignity dropped from him. Wrenching the sharp tines from the spotless whipcord of his fawn-colored breeches he made as if he would hurl the pitchfork to the ground. Martin kept his grip on the handle. Stung by the chuckles of the other pilots and the greaseballs who were servicing the ships, Ryder turned on Martin with a brusque, "What's the idea? This is a military pursuit squadron—not a farm."

Martin grounded the pitchfork. "Sorry you got stuck. I didn't see you. I was looking at—"

"Ought to look where you're going," the skipper snapped. "What do you expect to do with the thing, anyway?"

Martin kept his face a mask. "Carry it for luck."

Ryder seemed about to say something else, but a group of officers and ack emmas was forming about the two men. He remained silent, striding away toward the operations tent with a cold look of utter disgust upon his finely chiseled features. Martin grinned, shouldered the pitchfork

and went over to where Red Simmonds was waiting beside his Spad.

Red chuckled as he came up. "That's a new one," the veteran flyer ejaculated. "What's the angle? Fight the Boche off, if you land behind their lines?"

Martin shook his head. He patted the Smith & Wesson six-gun holstered on his right hip. "This would be better."

Red pointed to a line of cumulus clouds drifting lazily along the front. "Follow me pretty close, when we go up for this look-see. If you get lost—" He waved a hand as if to indicate anything might happen.

Martin climbed into his Spad. One of the greaseballs swung the prop and he followed Red in a long chandelle toward the lines.

Red climbed until they were well above the shell-torn French village of Voie du Chattelle. This was the north-west end of the sector guarded by the United States 64th, Martin knew. South-east, at the other end, would be Romage. He followed the veteran along the lines, watching with admiration as Red rolled his stick, sideslipped, and gained or lost height to upset the intricate calculations of the methodical minded Jerry gunners heaving black bursts of archie from below.

The clouds which Martin had seen grew thicker. At times it was hard to keep the other Spad in view. White wisps of vapor clouded his goggles. A stream of drops began to whip back into the cockpit from the upper wings.

Suddenly he came out of the cloud bank into a clear space. The Spad flown by Red Simmonds was gone, as if the Hunland heavens had swallowed it. Martin studied the earth below, trying to find some landmark which he knew. On the ground he saw what seemed to be endless miles of trenches, with here and there a burst of smoke and a huge cloud of dark debris rising as it cleared. At one spot, he noticed that a box barrage was hemming in part

of the Hun sector, the square of steel and fire battering the Boche position and holding the Jerrys underground.

Martin shook his head. Nothing that he saw gave him the slightest hint of where he was. Chancing the vicious ground fire, he'd have to get below the clouds—see where he was and set a course back to the 64th.

He cut the Hisso to half throttle and eased the stick forward.

As he did so he tensed, his eyes fixed upon the cloud bank straight before him. Hurtling from the mist had come three Jerry ships. Fokkers, with the black crosses of the Kaiser's Imperial Air Service plain upon their sides and wings.

Martin fed juice to the Hisso. A short burst warmed his guns. The three Jerrys had seen him and were looking him over, he could tell. The blunt noses of the Fokkers went up as they climbed for the advantage that height would give.

Once they got above him, the Yank pilot realized, he would be trapped—boxed in a ring of Spandau lead from which there would be no escape. Tooling the stick over, he kicked right rudder. The Spad wheeled in a sharp vertical. Shoving the throttle of the Hisso against the post he put the ship into a climb parallel to the direction taken by the Jerrys. As he did so, he could see the devices upon the flanks of their Fokkers.

Thumb tensed upon his Bowden grip, he cursed softly into the slipstream.

TWO of the Hun ships, light blue in color, were unmarked except for the black crosses. But the other, painted a bright green from tip to tail, bore on its side a silver shield. And on the shield was a number. A huge black One—the number which told him the pilot of the ship was Max Kettlemann, the "Ein" of the three flying Jerry musketeers.

His eyes grim slits behind his goggles, Martin reached for the pitchfork which he

had tied to a longeron inside the cockpit. As he zoomed to meet the Hun attack he pulled at the lashings with his free hand. The tines of the pitchfork clattered upon the floorboards of the cockpit. For an instant they fouled his rudder bar. The Spad yawed in a wide skid and began to slice down the sky.

Martin saw the wingtips of Kettlemann's Fokker waggle a signal. The two blue Hun ships banked away, spreading out on either side of the green Fokker as if warned to leave the scrap to the Boche whose craft bore the telltale One.

Martin fought the Spad back onto an even keel. Rudder into the sideslip he nosed down, losing precious height but gaining speed enough to flipper away as Kettlemann thumbed his Spandau trips and came plunging downward for what the Jerry evidently considered an easy kill.

What was Kettlemann's idea, Martin wondered, in waving the other Fokkers off. The Yank pilot's teeth bared in a grim smile. Easy meat, that was what the Boche thought he had. When the tines of the pitchfork had fouled his rudder, and the Spad had tumbled through the sky, the Jerry must have figured him for a green man, frantically hurling his ship away from the certain death that loomed in the Spandaus of the Boche.

The Hun pilot came zooming up out of his dive. Martin saw him bank away, so that for a moment the two ships flew in the same direction. Kettlemann was watching him, he noticed. Evidently the Jerry figured on playing with his victim, before he rammed home the merciless Spandau burst which would make the Spad one more Yank coffin.

Martin reached down beside him. He raised the pitchfork. As Kettlemann watched, he brandished it in the bright morning sun.

An expression of startled horror twisted the German's features. The Fokker hovered clumsily in the air as if some powerful

hand, stronger than his own, were at the stick. From the dark reaches of the past, the sinister wraith of conscience laid a cold hand upon his heart. Only for an instant, but in that instant the green ship drifted through the sky like a battle charger which no longer feels the strong hand of a master upon his reins. Like a derelict—a lost ghost ship doomed to eternal wandering through uncharted seas.

Then Death, swooping from the Hunland skies, passed cold fingers across the cockpit of the Fokker. Yank lead seared the silver shield—tarnished its vaunting brightness with a rending of ripping linen and shattered longeron.

The flashing *renversement* the Hun's flying skill had planned began too late. Before his maneuver was more than started, Yank lead erased the huge black One and found its mark.

Kettlemann's mouth and eyes opened wide. Horror, mingled with surprise, contorted his features. As his dying hand slipped from the stick the Fokker held the bank he had started. But now there was no skilled foot holding top rudder. The Hun ship began to hurtle toward the earth, the weight of the Mercedes pulling it faster and faster in a wingbending power dive.

Martin circled above it. As the Fokker started down he followed for a short distance, but this time the plummeting death dive was no Jerry trick.

The Yank pilot looked around the sky. The two other Huns seemed to have disappeared. He watched Kettlemann's power dive end in a rending tangle of shattered wreckage as the stricken Fokker crashed into the earth. Martin's eyes narrowed and grim lines formed about his mouth. He raised a gauntleted fist, shaking it toward Hunland.

"One," he muttered.

ON the home tarmac, Red Simmonds was waiting. As Martin climbed down from his cockpit the veteran stepped for-

ward, a relieved look upon his face.

"Glad to see you back," Red congratulated. "Figured you were gone, when you got lost, upstairs. What happened?"

Martin jerked his head toward the Spad. "Met some Boche."

The veteran grinned and rubbed his jaw. "Lucky you got here. Maybe that pitchfork is strong medicine, after all. First time over the lines, and you—"

"How do you get credit for a Hun?" Martin asked.

"Somebody has to see it, and vouch for you. Might be a fellow in your own flight, or on the ground. The achie batteries, maybe. They phone Wing, when they see a Jerry brought down."

Red paused. He grinned again and put a hand on the new pilot's arm. "Don't tell me you're putting in for Huns, already?"

Martin started to reply. As he did so Captain Ryder came out of the operations tent and started for them, beckoning to the veteran and calling out, "Good news." Red went over toward the flight commander and Martin followed.

"Kettlemann's down," Ryder exclaimed as they came over. "Must have gotten knocked off above the clouds. One of the advance posts phoned Wing they saw him crack up—back of the Jerry lines, near Don-Two. No question about it. They knew his green Fokker."

"Nice work, by somebody," Red ejaculated. "Must have been a darn good scrapper. Wonder who it was."

"The report didn't say," Ryder explained. "All they saw was Kettlemann's Fokker—coming down in a power dive that carried him right in. Whoever got him was the other side of the clouds. They said an unmarked plane followed the Fokker part way down—but didn't do any shooting."

Red Simmonds turned to Martin. "You must have passed over Don-Two. See any Fokkers?"

Ryder looked at the new pilot and said.

"Did you meet Kettlemann, or see him shot down?"

Martin looked him in the eyes. "I saw Kettlemann, and I shot him down myself," he said quietly.

Red Simmonds started. Then, apparently taking the statement as a joke, he began to laugh loudly, pounding Martin on the shoulder. Ryder stood silently staring at the new pilot, an incredulous expression of disbelief and contempt stamped upon his features.

"You did what?" he sneered. "A green man—without a bullet hole in his ship—downing one of the highest ranking Hun aces."

Martin's jaw came forward and he nodded grimly. Struggling to control himself, he turned and walked over toward his Spad, which the mechanics were wheeling into the B Flight hangar. There was nothing he could say. If it had been his hard luck the gun crew hadn't seen him knock Kettlemann down, that was that. Another time, he'd make sure his plane could be identified.

The pitchfork, that was it. With it painted on the Spad, he'd have a mark of identification easy to see and recognize. He went into the hangar, picked up a thick leaded carpenter's pencil from a workbench and began to sketch on the side of the ship a rough outline of what he wanted.

Calling a rigging corporal over, Martin gave him instructions. The non-com produced paint and brushes and began to fill in a dark background on the fuselage. As he daubed on the blue paint, Ryder came into the hangar. He strolled over to the Spad, watched for a moment, then turned to Martin and snapped out, "What's this?"

Martin explained his idea.

Ryder eyed him keenly, staring as if he did not know whether to be amused or angry. At last he said: "We have no rules about personal markings on the ships. But get this. Before a new man puts up his own device, he might at least wait until

he's proved his right to be with the outfit."

Martin shrugged his shoulders, but gave no order to stop the painting. Ryder turned and left the hangar.

That afternoon, when the B Flight ships took off to patrol the sector, Martin flew Number Two. Once more Red Simmonds had cautioned him about sticking close to the other Yanks. And Ryder, the blonde B Flight skipper, had been even more positive in his instructions.

"Stay with our ships, no matter what happens," Ryder ordered before they left the ground. "If you go barging off, you'll either get yourself knocked down or risk the lives of the whole flight."

Martin held his Spad in the tight V as the ships crossed the lines. A few hundred feet above, a formation of Bristol fighters passed by. The RAF 219th, he noticed from the markings on the compactly built two-seaters. The Limey skipper waved as they passed, and Martin saw Ryder dip his own wings as he returned the greeting.

Now the Yank ships had passed through the black balls of Hun archie. Evidently Ryder was intent on some mission known only to himself—something that would take the five Spads well into Boche terrain.

BUT the defenders of the *Vaterland* were busy. Scarcely had the Yank V nosed into the support area than the Kaiser's airmen began stirring in their staffel nests. Reinforcements would soon be at hand for the Jerry ships now awing.

Suddenly Martin saw Red Simmonds' ship pass by him and fire a burst that sent tracers cuddling past Ryder's wingtips. Red was waving an arm above his head, then pointing back and up into the sky behind the Yank formation.

Ryder caught the signal. He began to climb. Simmonds fell back into his regular position in the hot-spot and the five Spads rushed upward.

Looking back, Martin saw seven Fokkers

diving toward him. Five of them were spread out like the half-circle of a fan. The others were higher. The Yank tensed, and warmed his guns with a short burst.

He could see that Ryder was also looking back. Evidently the skipper was judging how far the ships of the 64th could climb before wheeling to meet the Hun attack. Already far into German sky, Martin noticed that a strong wind was carrying the Spads further and further from the Allied lines.

He saw Ryder's fist move up and down in the attack signal. Now it would be every man for himself. With the others, the new pilot reversed in a tight Immelmann which carried the Yank V back toward the charging Boche.

The defenders of German sky had spread out, their battle line dotted by white and yellow flashes as alert Spandaus snarled their challenge. Slightly above the Allied ships, the Fokkers came down with guns blasting and Mercedes howling shrill defiance.

Martin saw the Yank skipper half roll and fire from his inverted position. The burst ripped through the undercarriage of the nearest Fokker, which seemed to bound upward as a frantic zoom carried it out of line. From his position at Number Three, Lee Jones threw his Spad into a vertical and began to chase tails with a Fokker marked by a white band. On the other flank, Kelly had swept past the charging Hun line and swung back, half rolling out of a loop and plunging into the scrap once more.

Red Simmonds was throwing his ship around in the center of the Fokkers as if riding herd on the bunch of them single-handed. As Martin watched, the veteran rammed lead through the black cross on the rudder of a Hun ship, but before he could slap a "*das ist alles*" sign across its cockpit one of the other Jerrys was shaving the veteran's helmet with Spandau lather, forcing him off.

Martin found himself trapped.

Plunging into the fight, he had missed a Jerry by an eyelash and whipped back to complete the job. But two Fokkers which had poised above the melee came plummeting downward.

Zwei and Drei!

At the same time, one of the other Hun ships cut Martin off. Wheeling to avoid the deadly cross-fire from three sets of guns, he found himself forced further into Hunland. Now the Boche ships were almost above him.

The third Fokker came down, like a dog which flushes game but will not harm it. The other two, their silver shields with the numbers Two and Three flashing in the bright afternoon sun, followed close behind.

Martin threw his Spad into a spin. The third Fokker passed without firing, but Zwei and Drei followed him down, their guns blazing.

As the Spad corkscrewed, Martin looked about the sky. The Yank ships, headed by Captain Ryder, were charging to his rescue. But as he looked behind them his heart sank.

From above the Spads, half a dozen Pfalz were diving, while from a nearby Jerry drome rose a formation of Fokker tripes.

BUT the Spads were getting nearer. The blonde B Flight skipper was hurling his ship through the sky like a khaki meteor, while Red Simmonds came ramming down the chute at a speed which bowed his spars. Behind them, Jones and Kelly had thrown their Spads about in dime turns and followed.

Zwei and Drei ceased firing. As the pursuit streaked out behind them, they headed further into Hunland, each of the Jerrys looking back as if judging the speed of the Yank ships and the fighting skill of their pilots.

Martin pulled out of the spin. Seizing the pitchfork from its lashings beside him,

he brandished it toward the retreating Huns. Eyes glued to his ringsight, and thumb ready on the Bowden, he kept on.

The Yank skipper fired a burst that crossed his path. Martin saw Ryder frantically shake his head—wave an arm first at the oncoming Boche reinforcements, then back toward the Allied lines.

Martin ignored the signal. Years of stored up hatred seethed in his mind as he gunned the Spad forward, the throttle of the Hisso against the post. Years in which, night and day, there had beat in his brain the vengeful cadence of an unrighted wrong. Kettleman—Staube—Heinker—the names dinned through his consciousness like a malignant chorus of pounding hammers from the red-hot forges of hell itself.

For this moment he had lived.

The Hun retreat was a trap—that he could see. Knowing their wingmates were close at hand, the wily Jerrys were trying to lead the whole Yank flight into an ambush. Once in the back reaches of Hunland, their patrol low and the strong wind against them, the Spad pilots could be slaughtered by the rising hordes of the Kaiser's airmen.

Zwei and Drei turned back toward the Yanks. Evidently the Jerrys figured their plan was working. The Fokker which bore the black Two upon its silver shield snapped a vicious Spandau burst at Martin's plane. The other Huns, spread through the sky behind the Yank ships, began to pour their deadly fire into the Spads.

Regardless of odds, the Yanks turned upon them, Vickers pounding as they hurled back the snarling challenge of the Spandaus. A Fokker went down as Red Simmonds' guns found its cockpit. Another, wings riddled by Yank lead, began to flutter toward the earth. Only Captain Ryder, watching Martin's Spad as if trying to protect the new pilot, held his fire as the strange battle swept through the sky.

Zwei zoomed as his guns raked Martin's wings. As the Fokker bearing the black number Two roared upward, Martin fol-

lowed. Heedless of the Jerry lead lashing about his cockpit he sighted grimly through the rings. His thumb tightened on the Bowden.

The Spandau stream crept closer to the Yank. Behind him he could hear a rending of fabric and wood as bullets tore at his Crashpad—ripped bits of cowling from behind his head.

His teeth bared in a grim, sinister smile. Now his tracers were rising into the silver shield. One more burst—

The Fokker bearing the black Two kept climbing. But its pilot, suddenly wrenching in his seat, flung both arms upward. His head jerked back and his mouth opened, as if a stark cry of horror mingled with the laboring of his Mercedes. The Fokker stalled, wooshed over on its right wing and began to spin. The body of the Hun pilot flung across the cowling, its arms tossing grotesquely as the spin tightened.

Suddenly a sheet of flame burst from the housing of the Mercedes. In an instant the pilot's form had vanished, as angry flames rolled back across his cockpit like a relentless sea.

Lead tore at Martin's wings. Kicking out of the death stream he looked about him. Above, Ryder was pouring ammo into a Jerry. The other Yanks were scattered about the sky. Why weren't there more Jerry ships, Martin wondered. By this time the Pfalz gang should be right on the necks of the Spads, and the Fokker tripes should be knifing into the scrap.

Then he saw the answer.

THE seven Bristol Fighters of the RAF outfit were barging in. Pilots and observers thirsty for Hun blood, the Limeys were sluicing lead front and rear. The five Pfalz scouts were climbing, but away from the dogfight, while the Hun triplanes were not as yet within range.

Ryder raised a Very pistol. A red flare arched from his cockpit and the Yank ships formed up behind him. With the Bristols

overhead, the battered Spad V turned homeward.

It was almost dark when they landed. Mighty white of Ryder to follow him into Hunland, Martin was thinking as he set his ship down. He climbed from the cockpit and walked over to where the blonde skipper was standing beside his Spad.

The new pilot shoved out his hand. "Thanks—for what you did up there. I might have—"

Ryder shrugged his shoulders. "Part of the job. If you hadn't disobeyed orders, you wouldn't have risked the lives of the whole flight for your glory grabbing play. Just luck—those Limeys pulling us out."

An orderly came trotting out onto the tarmac and saluted. "Major Banks wants you and Lieutenant Martin in the operations tent, right away," he told Ryder.

The two pilots walked over to the tent. As they entered, the C. O. looked from his table and motioned them to chairs. "I'll take your flight report later," he told the skipper. "Something has come up—something so serious I wanted to see both of you at once."

The major rose. He thrust a paper into Martin's hand. "Here is a message dropped on our drome by a German ship while you were across the lines," he said sternly. "What can you tell me about it?"

Rex Martin read the message. As he did so his face whitened beneath his tan and his shoulders sagged. Five words on the paper before him seemed to be burning into his brain.

"This ex-convict—calling himself Martin—"

Major Banks leaned forward, a searching look upon his features and his eyes grim. "Is this true?" he asked. "An ex-convict?"

Chin in hand, Martin silently studied the board flooring of the tent. Then his head came up and his eyes met those of the C.O. From the darkness outside, shadows of the years seemed mocking him—clutching with spectre hands at his name—

his honor. "It's true," he admitted.

He rose and his jaw came forward. "Before the war began," he said slowly, "three Germans wanted to buy my ranch in Nevada. They were Kettlemann, Staube and Heinker—the men called Ein, Zwei and Drei. When I wouldn't sell, a neighbor of mine was killed. Through the three Huns, suspicion was thrown on me. I was convicted on their evidence, and—"

He paused. Ryder and the major leaned forward, listening with expressions of intense interest upon their faces.

"I went to jail. They bought my ranch, at a sheriff's sale. On it, unknown to me, they had discovered a rich vein of silver. When they left the States, to join the German colors, a sheep-herder who's silence they had bought confessed the truth. At the second trial I was acquitted, and—"

As he spoke, the screaming of the alert siren on the tarmac shattered the night stillness. An ack emma burst into the tent, shouting a warning.

"Hun raid—coming this way. We're getting the ships revved."

Ryder sprang up, dashing from the tent. The C. O. turned to Martin. "But why the pitchfork? What's that got to do with—"

But Rex Martin was already pounding across the tarmac toward the line of Spads.

THE alert siren was still shrieking as Martin ran up to the apron. Before him he could see mechanics rolling out ships from the hangars and swinging the props of those already on the line. He saw Ryder gun his Spad and blast down the field for a take-off, while the greaseballs who had pulled the skipper's chocks stood pointing toward the Hunland sky and shouting above the grim cacaphony that was the voice of war.

"Here they come."

Martin vaulted his own pit. Shoving the throttle forward, he waved the wheel blocks out. The Spad leaped ahead, lumbering clumsily at first, then gaining speed. He

eased the stick back and it rose into the air.

Now he could see the charging Huns. Bent on a surprise *straff*, they had attacked as soon as darkness screened their movements. Cherry red and white, the flashes of their exhausts outlined the grim hulks against the night sky. Spandau flickered above their motors as they warmed their guns.

Most of the Spads of the 64th were still aground, Martin noted. As the Huns swooped down, a long range burst lashed across one of the Yank ships. A blinding sheet of flame seared the night as Spandau lead pierced its tank. Around it, flyers and mechanics bolted for safety.

The ship blazed fiercely for a moment. Then, with a roar that echoed above the clamor of the Hun attack, its tanks exploded. Burning petrol showered about it. Spars and framework showed skeleton-like through the hungry flames.

Now the Boche were within effective range. Another Spad, bouncing across the field as its pilot tried frantically to lift it into the air, yawned into a skid. Slapping a wing-tip against the earth it cartwheeled, crumbling into a mass of wreckage. A second Spad, barely off the ground, began to belch flame from its engine housing. Its pilot nosed down, holding the ship to earth. As it struck he leaped forward, the force of the impact hurling his body free across the shattered wings.

Martin turned back toward the drome.

With the outfit the 64th had fought that afternoon were two other flights of Jerry ships. In the lead, he saw the scarlet Fokker bearing upon its side the silver shield with the black Three. The Jerry pilot made straight for the B Flight hangar, dropping a load of bombs as he passed over it and blasting a merciless Spandau fire across the tarmac. The other Fokkers followed, strafing the hangars, then turning their guns upon the drome.

Now the Yank ground crews were at

their defense posts. Lewis guns, mounted on revolving turrets in cement emplacements opposite the hangars, ranged a stream of fire on the attacking ships. One of the Lewis marksmen smacked a burst into the full bomb rack of a Fokker. The Hun ship seemed to disappear in mid-air as its load exploded. Two of the other Fokkers wheeled and began to hose lead across the Yank emplacement.

Martin caught one of them squarely in his sights. His thumb tripped the Bowden. The Fokker started a frantic loop, arching in a half circle above the drome. Then, without room to complete the loop, it nosed straight into the earth upon the tarmac.

Martin turned away. Heinker—the Hun called *Drei*—was the one he wanted. Throwing his ship about to avoid the other Boche he looked for the last of the three Jerry musketeers.

Suddenly he saw Heinker circling above the drome. One of the hangars was in flames, and in the flickering red glare the silver shield stood out plainly upon the side of the scarlet Fokker. Evidently Heinker was still playing his waiting game. Once the comparative safety of the first surprise attack was over, he had resumed his post of command and was ready to withdraw his men should Yank reinforcements appear to turn the battle against the Jerrys.

¶Martin climbed.

Spandau lead tore at his wings as he sought to reach the Boche leader. Flinging themselves away from their opponents, two other Fokkers trailed the Yank pilot up the sky. A burst stripped fabric from the center section above his head. Another shredded his left wing tips.

Martin pulled his stick back into the corner and kicked right rudder. The Spad rolled. As it straightened he saw Heinker start down toward him, guns pounding above the Mercedes as the Jerry swooped in to take advantage of what looked like a sitting shot.

FROM behind the Spad, Hun ammo poured into its wings. Whispy fingers of death clutched at spar and strut—reached toward the cockpit. Martin saw his instrument board shatter as if struck asunder by a giant hand. His right side jerked from waist to shoulder. Piercing agony, like a white flame, ran down his right arm and wrist.

From another angle, Spandau lead pounded across the Vickers guns before him, leaving their barrels twisted masses of useless metal. • Martin groaned inwardly. No guns. His right hand closed on the Smith & Wesson in his holster and again the white hot pain flashed through his wrist and arm. As Heinker zoomed above him he emptied the six chambers. But the Hun kept on, untouched as if he bore a charmed life.

The Fokker cartwheeled. Again it roared down. Martin kicked aside in a skid, almost ramming another of the Jerry ships. Now Heinker had come up behind him. The beat of its Mercedes shrilling through the heavens like the mocking laughter of a thousand fiends, the Fokker with the silver shield poised for the kill. •

Martin called upon all of his pilot's skill. Now, he was flying for his life. Around the two ships, Yank and Hun alike seemed to be poised in mid-air—poised waiting in a breathless eternity for the Spandau burst that would finish the defenseless Spad.

Heinker dove, guns blazing.

Martin set his teeth as he juggled stick and rudder. Through the relentless storm of Spandau lead he rolled and twisted. Gaping holes riddled his wings. Part of his center section fabric—slashed away by a Hun burst—whipped back in the slipstream.

His face white with pain, the Yank pilot reached down into his cockpit.

Now Heinker was directly behind his tail, the force of the Jerry's dive carrying him past the Spad as if he would pass just below it. Judging the speed of the scarlet

Fokker, Martin raised his right arm. There was one chance—only one—

As the Fokker sped below him, the Yank pilot pulled into a half roll. If he failed, Spad and Fokker would crash to earth together. Yank and Hun alike would die—crushed in a tangled welter of spar and fabric. Cursing the pain that seared his arm and shoulder, Martin thrust his right arm toward the Jerry ship.

Heinker, a gloating look upon his face, was staring upward at the shattered Spad. Hanging from his belt, Martin could see the triumphant sneer upon the Jerry's face.

The Yank struck.

Sure as death itself, the pitchfork in his right hand knifed downward. Heinker jerked head and shoulders forward, striving to avoid the well-timed thrust. But the sharp tines found his neck—pierced jugular vein and spinal cord.

Blood gushed from the Hun's mouth. His body shuddered forward, as if even in death itself he sought to escape the hand of vengeance. Nosed down by the pressure of the corpse against the stick, the Fokker hurtled toward the tarmac of the 64th, the whrone-whrone of its Mercedes wailing a macabre dirge.

Martin came over in a half loop. In the glare of the burning hangar he saw another Jerry ship go down. As their leader fell, the Huns started to leave the scrap. Once the surprise of their raid was over, there would be phones buzzing all along the sector. From French, Yank and British outfits, Allied ships would pour into the sky.

MARTIN saw the last of the Jerrys vanish toward the lines. Racked by the pain which tore at his right arm, he brought the Spad to earth. Pulling himself from his cockpit with his left arm he started toward the operations tent.

As he reached it, Simmonds came up from the B Flight hangar. A moment later, Ryder landed before the tent and vaulted from his pit.

This time it was the blonde B Flight skipper who shoved out his hand. Martin tried to raise his own, but his right arm dangled limply at his side. He winced, grinned ruefully and offered his left instead.

"You win," Ryder exclaimed as the two shook hands. "Fight any way you please. After this scrap, I'm convinced you knocked down Ein this morning, and I'll see you get credit."

An ack emma approached the group. "Pulled this out of the red Fokker you crashed, Lootenant," he told Martin, as he thrust the pitchfork into the flyer's hand. "Thought you might want it."

Martin thanked him. As the greaseball made off the Yank pilot turned to the C. O.

"What about the pitchfork," Major Banks was asking. "You were just getting to that, when—"

"I told you I was framed by these three Jerrys when my neighbor in Nevada was killed," Martin explained. "He was killed with a pitchfork—like this one—and it was introduced as evidence when I was being

tried. During the trial I snatched it from the lawyers and almost finished the three Boche then and there. As the guards dragged me off, I swore I'd get them. They knew the pitchfork. That's why I carried it—and wanted to paint it on my ship."

As he spoke, his face whitened, his knees seeming to buckle with the pain that swept through his arm and shoulder.

"You need the Doc," Simmonds exclaimed, catching him as he swayed. "Come with me." He put his right arm through Martin's left, leading him off toward where the squadron M. O. was working on the wounded.

Major Banks and the B Flight skipper watched them go. "Crazy devil," Ryder muttered admiringly. "He—"

"And with a pitchfork," the C. O. added. "What a weapon."

Martin and Red Simmonds kept on toward the M. O. "You know, Rex," Red was saying, "if the rest of us could use pitchforks like you, Wing ought to make them standard equipment on all the ships."

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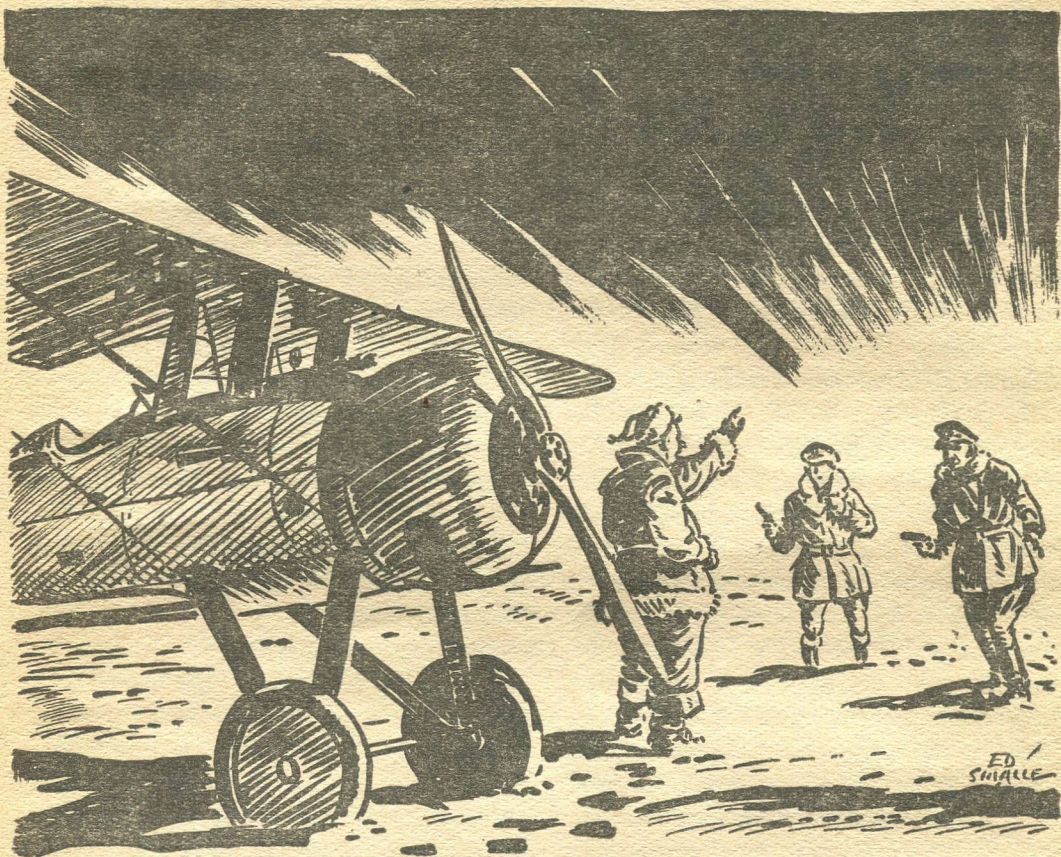
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JERRY CHRISTMAS

by CLIFF CAMPBELL



If Tom Weatherby Came Back Alive from the Lair of That Boche Mystery Squadron the Stigma of Yellow Would Forever Be Removed from His Name—But a Hundred Men Had Flown That Same Route Before . . . and a Hundred Men Had Gone Screaming to Hell—in Winged, Fiery Coffins!

TWO thousand metres above the Western front was an odd place for a Yank pilot to be chuckling. Usually, there was nothing to laugh about. But big Tom Weatherby, hot-spot man for C Flight of the United States 28th Pursuit Squadron, had something besides Huns on his mind.

A broad grin of anticipation slitted his bronzed features, and he nodded as if looking forward to something really out of the usual. Christmas Eve, and the

First Pursuit Group staging a binge that was apt to make history at the front. That was enough to bring a smile to the face of even a veteran flyer like himself. Everything was arranged, and the pilots of the 27th, whose guest he would be, were all set to—

Weatherby never allowed his thoughts to get far from the grim business of warfare. Right now, up behind those cumulus clouds that topped the Nieuport flight by another thousand metres, might be anything

from a Fokker tripe to a whole Jerry circus.

And Tom Weatherby had not been given the protection spot for nothing. Warwise afoot or awing, he was known to his wingmates of the 28th as fully deserving the coveted ace rating. Eyes like a hawk, neck like an owl, a Hun in your sights and a finger on the trigger—that was his code.

Twisting in his pit, he surveyed the clouds above the Yank flight. For a moment they told him nothing, then, as he studied their formation, he saw shadows reaching along the edge of one of the fleecy banks. Shadows that seemed to be gathering as if waiting a command.

He eased back on the stick, and the Nieuport continued in a steady climb away from the cloud bank. Not toward the shadows. Tom Weatherby was far too smart for that. Plunging into the middle of a Hun flight would mean that, while he might add to his own score in a surprise attack, it would leave his wingmates unguarded. And his job was to warn them, should the rear of the Yank V be threatened.

Now he was high enough to see into the clouds. As he looked, he shook his head as if puzzled, and whistled softly to himself. What in the devil was another five-ship Nieuport flight doing in that sector, and what was the objective of their patrol?

He studied the round fuselages and curved tails. Nieuports, they must be—but were they? Tom Weatherby knew every silhouette on the front, and while these stranger ships appeared at first glance like his own, something about them seemed unfamiliar. Stagger, dihedral, cowling? Then he nodded as if satisfied. Longer bodies. That was it.

He warmed his guns with a brief burst. Now the strange white ships had seen him, and were swinging over toward him. An exclamation of surprise burst from his lips. No markings! Who were these masqueraders?

He tilted his wings to show his own insignia, the concentric circles of Allied Air.

But the five strange ships came on. He fired a burst across their path. Still no answer.

Tom Weatherby knew his job. If these were friends, they would pass on above him, going about their business. If not, it was up to him to highball his C Flight wingmates that once again the Kaiser's men were out with a new ship. And if these strangers, unmarked and as yet unknown to the Allied pilots, could pass as Nieuports, they could ambush any flight they pleased.

He shoved the stick forward, making for the other brown Nieuports, khaki-colored spots in the sky below him. As he turned, he could see the whole flight of unmarked ships scream down in full throttled power dives. Too far away for their ammo to be effective, they were gunning their motors to blast out of the sky the one Yank who held their secret.

Now they were gaining.

Weatherby held a dive that would bring him out in front of the C Flight ships. Below, he could see them sweeping in lazy S-turns through the sky. At point one, Skipper Rod Lampman was studying the terrain over which the ships were flying. Joe Terrill, at number two, was looking back and up, while at number three Dinny Moore was drifting along as unconcernedly as if there weren't a Hun in the world. Number four man, Jed Peters, had dropped back to the rear to pinch hit for Weatherby.

The white ships came closer. Wagglng his wings to attract Terrill's attention, he fired a Very flare.

Huns on the roof.

FROM his position above, Weatherby saw Terrill gun up past the leader, his own wings rocking in the "enemy sighted" signal. Now Terrill was pointing behind him. Lampman swung an arm across his cockpit and swept back and up in a tight Immelmann, the other ships following.

Tom flung his ship through the sky in a wide verticle, keeping the advantage his height gave him as he waited the attack of the unmarked ships.

Then he looked again—rubbed his eyes.

What was this? Some new kind of Hun trick? Not a wing or fuselage spotted the sky above him. The cumulus clouds were still there, but the stranger ships had vanished. Must have gone back into the fleecy bank, he figured, waiting for some Allied formation not as strong, or some lone wolf pilot who could be bagged at their leisure.

Again Tom Weatherby's broad grin lit up his face. "If I hadn't seen it myself—" he muttered as he fell into his regular place in the formation.

When they set their ships down on the drome of the 28th he came in for plenty of kidding.

"What's the idea," asked Terrill, "giving me the high sign?"

"Tom's got his mind on that binge at the 27th tonight," put in the skipper, while Peters joined in with "Better tell G-2 about that new Jerry ship."

Weatherby took the kidding good naturedly enough, but his face was serious as he entered the operations tent and reported his experience to the C. O.

"Sure you saw them?" asked Major Kearns, the martinet West Pointer who commanded the 28th. He turned to the field telephone which hung beside his desk, calling various points to check the information the rangy pilot had brought. But at neither Wing or Brigade could he verify the story. Nobody had any news of a new type Jerry ship.

"One more call," he told Tom. "If Army HQ hasn't anything, I'm inclined to believe you saw a flight of Nieuports some ferry pilots were bringing up." He held the phone and listened. As he did so Tom could see his face turn pink, then red. "Told me to quit bothering them," he said as he put the phone down. "This brass

hat says he'll believe it—if we'll bring him one of the new Jerry busses."

Tom shook his head, saluted and left the tent. Months at the front had taught him that a fellow's eyes can play strange tricks, but those ships he'd seen were no Allied Nieuports, he'd bet his Lieutenant's bars on that. But what had they been doing in the Hunland sky?

He joined the other pilots in the sheet-iron Nisson hut that served as squadron mess. "Here comes Tom Weatherby, he makes up planes out of his head," a cry went up as he approached the bar. "Have one on me, Tom, and think up an easy one so I can boost my score," one of the pilots added.

Weatherby grinned. This kidding was all right with him, but enough was enough. Ordinarily good natured to the nth degree, any reflection on his vision or his flying skill was something else. Maybe he could—

Outwardly smiling, he turned off the banter that swept around him, but within his mind his thoughts were revving up. Wrapping a hamlike fist around a brandy and soda he leaned on a corner of the bar, becoming silent as the talk of the flyers turned to other things. That was it. Every man, except those on *alerte* duty, would be going to the 27th after dinner that night. Flying his own ship, it would be easy for him to drop down behind the Boche lines for a look-see.

Snow began to fall during the afternoon, and plans were made for transportation by motor lorry. But not for him. Later on he watched the group of pilots bundle into the huge truck and leave the drome for the 27th, their Christmas singing drowning the rumble of the front. Then, carefully looking over a map of the Jerry lines on which he had marked the location he wanted, he placed two bottles of cognac in the pockets of his flying coat, vaulted the pit of his Nieuport and sent it in a long chandelle toward the front.

CLIMBING high enough to be out of sight of the Boche archies in the darkness, he gunned the ship forward. Snow was still falling, but moonlight, half obscured by the clouds, showed him his landmarks. Now he was crossing the lines.

Cutting the mono, he let the ship idle downward. Far below, the zigzag wounds of war upon the earth were fast being covered by the soft flakes. Tom grinned as he imagined he heard carols from the Limey sector and a chorus of "Stille Nacht" from the Jerry emplacements.

Then he was over the forest where, his map showed, lay the drome of an abandoned staffel. He moved his selector switch and the wailing of the mono died to a low whine. Losing height, he let the ship down to a sweet three-pointer across the wood from the old hangars, taxied it close to the trees.

"Hande hoch

Tom turned to see a stocky Boche sentry, his Mauser at the "ready," viewing him coldly. "Who are you, and why do you land at *Oberst* Siemen's drome?" the fellow asked in the tongue of the *Vaterland*.

Tom Weatherby thought fast. Maybe this was the end of his look-see for the new Jerry plane. If this *landsmann* had friends nearby—. On the other hand, if he happened to be on single post there was a chance, just a chance—

Tom stepped forward, his hands raised and a broad smile upon his face. "*Ich heiss Kris Kringle*. Weinachtsabend, muss Mann singen und trinken," he explained to the guard that he was Santa Claus and that on Christmas Eve everyone ought to be singing and drinking.

The sentry stared at him dumbly for a moment, as if he wondered whether his prisoner might be crazy. Then with a threatening gesture of his saw-toothed bayonet, he stepped forward.

"Wart' nur," Tom asked him to wait. Pulling one of the bottles of cognac from his pocket the Yank broke open its top,

made as if to take a terrific hooker, and handed it to the astonished Kraut. The fellow lowered his guard and reached out a hand, holding his other arm around his gun.

"Mehr," Tom invited him to drink again as he lowered the bottle.

The Jerry raised it for another swig and as he did so the Yank bounded forward. Thrusting the neck of the bottle into the fellow's gullet he poured a generous supply of the fiery liquid down his throat. Before he could cry out the Boche gagged, then in spite of himself drew in his breath. For an instant, he threshed in the Yank's iron grip, then sank to the ground, drowned as neatly as if he had inhaled the Suez Canal.

Tom took no chances. Thrusting him into a clump of bushes where he would be hidden from the sight of possible strollers, the Yank made his way cautiously through the forest.

The drome was far from being unused, he found as he pushed forward. On a side path through the wood he saw other sentries, while from one of the hangars came light, and occasionally a snatch of laughter or song. Creeping nearer, he made out the form of a supply shed beside this hangar.

In the shed, which stood almost within the forest, was a small window. Tom inched toward it. Covered with the fine snow which was still falling, he was well camouflaged except for a sudden surprise from the rear. Carefully raising his head he peered through the window.

He saw a small room, its walls covered with a hodge-podge of flying clothing and equipment. Beyond was a large room, the interior of the hangar itself. Here the Yank could see that a group of pilots was assembled, and in spite of the peril of his position he smiled. Except for the guttural speech which marked the songs, toasts and general talk that filled the place, the scene might well have been staged on any Allied drome. Evidently the Boche flyers were

waiting for somebody or something, he judged from their talk and actions.

As he watched, two Jerry privates entered the supply shed. Dropping quickly from sight, Tom listened to their conversation as they opened a large bundle one of them had carried in.

"It is not enough," one of them was saying, "that *der Herr Oberst* should make us give up our Christmas leave so that we can prepare this party for him. Also, we must make, like a bunch of housewives, all of this Kris Kringle outfit and sack so that the so stupid *Herr Leutnant Brauer* can give presents to all his friends."

"*Jahwohl*," the other rejoined, "but do you not know that *Herr Leutnant Brauer* brings with him tonight the plane he himself has perfected—the new Siemens-Schuckert scout with which we will wipe the cursed *Alleman* from the skies?"

Out in the darkness the Yank started. The new Siemens-Schuckert—That must have been the unmarked plane, newly from the factory, a group of which he had seen on his flight over the lines earlier in the day. Maybe the Jerries in the hangar knew the details of its construction, and where the new ships were kept. Only one way to find out, he told himself. Get into the party somehow, mingle with the Jerries and listen to whatever was said. But in a Yank uniform his chances of attending a Boche Christmas party, except as a prisoner, were just zero, he well knew.

THEN a thought flashed through his mind. A Santa Claus outfit, one of the two Jerries in the supply shed had mentioned. On Christmas Eve, Kris Kringle could go anywhere, do anything, unquestioned. And his white beard and whiskers might well hide the features of Black Jack Pershing himself.

Tom raised his head until he could peer over the sill of the window. The two soldiers were leaving, he saw. Partly open, the door to the hangar gave anyone

at the Jerry party a view into the supply shed. But that was a chance he would have to take.

Inch by inch he lifted his body toward the window. Now he was raising the sash. It resisted his efforts, seeming to the Yank pilot to make an ungodly screeching as it at last gave way. Glancing about him, he lifted a foot to fork the sill.

As he did so, the whining of a rotary sounded above the drome. Instantly, the Boche pilots in the hangar streamed out upon the tarmac. Some carried torches in their hands, while more than one hefted a partly filled Schnapps bottle or stein. As one man, they gazed into the snow filled air above the drome, while there whistled down from above a trim white ship similar to those Tom had seen over the front.

The pilot of the ship was handling it with rare skill, stunting and splittessing all over the place. Roaring at the side of the hangar he would seem almost to touch his wheels, then flash back in a sharp bank. Again, he flew so low that the white ship seemed to be running along the ground, and from that position he looped it, landing out of the loop to applause and shouts of "Hoch." "Hoch Brauer" from the assembled Jerries.

Tom Weatherby drew back from the window. Here was the ship he wanted. What need of listening to the Jerries, when right before him was the Siemens-Schuckert which in a few days would be the scourge of Allied wings? Lying in the snow he heard the Feldwebel who commanded the ground soldiers of the drome give orders to place a guard around the plane. A plan formed in the Yank's mind. If he could get back to where he had laid the guard in the bushes—put on the Jerry uniform—

He turned, and as he did so his heart sank. Coming toward him with torches in their hands was another party of Boche, their route to the hangar lying past the spot where he was huddled in the snow. Some of the group were singing, but others

were apparently cold sober, studying the ground about them as they walked and sure to spot the Yank who lay directly in their path.

Tom felt about upon the earth beneath him. His fingers seized upon a sizeable rock. Drawing back into the shadows as well as he could he hurled it at a tree behind the oncoming Jerries. Their attention focused by the sound, they turned, giving him his only chance to escape.

In the twinkling of an eye he was across the sill of the window, landing at full length upon the floor of the supply shed. Sprawled upon the floor, he heard foot-steps approaching the open door, and voices making conversation from which he learned that one of those about to enter was the *Herr Leutnant Brauer* who had flown the new ship to the drome.

"Everything is in readiness, *Excellenz*," he heard a speaker who was evidently acting as host. "Your costume, and the presents, all are here in this room."

TOM Weatherby barely had time to scramble to his feet and edge behind the open door when the Jerry entered. Alone, Brauer stood looking about him for a moment, then strode across to where the Kris Kringle outfit was hanging on the wall. Behind the door, the Yank's fingers tightened around the neck of the bottle which remained in the pocket of his flying coat.

Silently he stepped forward.

As he did so, Brauer turned, looking at him questioningly.

Tom extended the bottle. His only chance was to play the part of a visitor to the *staffel*. "*Froeliche Weinachsten*," he exclaimed.

The Jerry flyer hesitated for a minute. Then, "*Danke sehr*," he nodded his thanks and reached out his hand for the cognac. But instead of taking a drink, he held the bottle in his hands, scrutinizing the Yank pilot as if he were not quite sure of him.

"Why does an American fly behind our lines?" he said at last. "Your German is perfect, but your boots—"

Like a steel spring the Yank uncoiled, his two hundred pounds of well trained bone and muscle whipping forward at the Hun. Brauer threw up an arm to guard himself, but went down like a ninepin before the catlike charge. The momentum of Tom's leap carried him down on top, and for a moment the two struggled furiously. Then the Yank's thumbs found the windpipe. Forcing the Jerry's head back he pressed until his body went limp.

Rapidly Tom bound his opponent. As he was removing his belt and braces to use as ties, Brauer's pocketbook and papers fell from his coat. The Yank pilot saw photographs among them—pictures of a young, flaxen haired mother and two fine boys, miniature editions of the flyer himself. And next to the pictures was an order permitting Brauer a week's leave.

The Yank shoved the pictures back into Brauer's coat. Gagging him firmly, he placed him in a corner of the room where, at a casual glance from door or window, he could not be seen. Then Tom began to dress himself for the part of Kris Kringle. "Got to play this hand out, now," he told himself as he put the white whiskers and beard over his face and threw the large pack of presents across his shoulders. "Bring on your Jerries, and let's hope there is really a Santa Claus."

He entered the hangar where the party was in progress.

Shouts of laughter and cries of "Welcome, Kris Kringle," greeted him. At the end of the large space, he saw a table groaning under a load of schnapps and other liquors, while at one side a huge beer keg was being called on by those who relished lighter refreshments.

Playing his part of the good saint, Tom began to pull presents from his pack and to read the names of the recipients. As each gift was announced and unwrapped,

howls of laughter arose from the Jerries. Everything that was in the sack evidently was a crack at some hobby or a reminder of some occasion. One Hun pilot who, Tom gathered, had almost blown up the staffel with a live bomb, received a dummy with a large "danger" sign attached, while another who seemed to have had a hard time reaching the line for early flying had a large alarm clock handed to him.

At last the Yank came to a small, square package, marked for a *Herr Leutnant Fritz Scheifel*, who turned out to be a morose, silent fellow who had taken little or no part in the fun, confining himself to downing the hard liquor. As his name was called, Scheifel rose and, staggering across the floor toward the pseudo Kris Kringle, snatched at his whiskers.

Beard, wig and whiskers came away.

In an instant the Jerry Hangar was in an uproar. Shouts of "Where is Herr Brauer?" and "Who is this?" mingled with cries of "Look, look," from a few who stood near the door of the supply shed.

Following their gaze the Yank saw Brauer emerge from the shed, his hand pointing directly at him. "Seize him," Brauer shouted. "He is an American."

Tom Weatherby struggled as best he could, but he went down beneath a niagara of bodies. A moment later he was forced to his feet, his arms held behind him by two burly Jerries while the others surrounded him.

"Shoot him. Shoot the spy," some of the more bloodthirsty members of the group were clamoring.

Brauer pressed forward. "This prisoner belongs to me," he said, looking toward the *staffel* commandant for confirmation.

The Hun C. O. nodded. "But what will you do with him?" he asked.

The Jerry flyer nodded toward the open end of the hangar. "Take him with me," he said. "I'll put him safely away, until he can be sent to a detention camp at Landshut or Karlsrhue."

TOM WEATHERBY'S heart sank. A detention camp. That meant the end of the war for him. Inwardly he cursed the idea that had brought him over the lines for a look at the new Hun ship. And on Christmas eve—

"Hobble his legs," Brauer was saying, "and lead him out to the plane I came in."

Following his instructions, the Jerries tied Tom's legs so that his feet had only a few inches' play. Still in his Kris Kringle outfit, he was marched out of the hangar and alongside the Siemens-Schuckert plane which stood on the tarmac. A runway had been cleared for the takeoff, the Yank noticed, and a huge pile of snow left at one corner of the drome.

"Have to sit double," Brauer said as he came up. "If we had different weather, I'd make you ride a wing. And don't try to escape," he added, half drawing the butt of a Luger from an inside breast pocket of his coat.

Tom Weatherby nodded that he understood.

Brauer climbed into the bus, strapped the safety belt around him and signaled for the Yank to take a place on his lap. Tom took his seat, glancing with keen interest at the well equipped instrument board before him. The equipment and controls of the ship were very much like those of a Nieuport, he noted. Easy enough for a Nieuport pilot to fly, if only—

Greaseballs swung the prop and the Siemens motor roared out. Goosing the throttle, Brauer shoved the stick forward and the ship swept over the snow-covered ground in a sweet takeoff. Below them, the other Jerries were waving and cheering.

Brauer circled the drome to make sure his motor was running smoothly, and as he did so an idea flashed across Tom Weatherby's mind. Behind him he could feel the crash catch of the Jerry's belt pressing against him. The Yank placed his hands on the cowlings of the ship and his head slumped forward. Obviously he

had given up any chance of escape. Just a quiet ride to the home drome of the Boche pilot, then a prison camp for duration—

His body settled lower.

Now his hands were in his lap, his mind revving furiously as he measured his chances. Back in the old cadet days at Fort Worth he had done it. But that was easy. Tonight, against an armed enemy—

Suddenly his right hand shot down, grasping the fire extinguisher which rode in its socket near the floor. Then his arm came up. Back over his shoulder the heavy metal cylinder arched, striking the Jerry flyer smack on the helmet.

TOM felt Brauer go limp. Snapping the crash catch of the Hun's flying belt, he felt the heavy canvass web open. Pilotless, the Siemens-Schuckert was trying to climb straight up the sky. A moment more and it would stall.

Quickly Tom Weatherby seized the stick, righted the Siemens and slipped the hobble which bound his feet beneath the rudder bar. A roll, now, and the Jerry flyer would dash out his life against the snow clad terrain of his *Vaterland*. Then the thought of the flaxen-haired young wife, and the two boys, crossed the Yank's mind. Brauer had a week's leave in his pocket. And, after all, it was Christmas Eve.

Banking, the American swept back toward the drome. Above the huge pile of

snow which had been thrown up when the Jerries had cleared the runway, he ruddered over, pulled the stick back into the corner of the cockpit and at the same time thrust his free arm under the instrument board.

Like a well trained poodle, the ship rolled slowly over. Brauer's limp form slipped from the cockpit, landing squarely in the soft snowbank below.

Tom Weatherby pushed himself back into the seat. Reversing, he headed for the lines.

Half an hour later Major Kearns, C. O. of the U. S. 28th, peered upward through the night sky. Approaching the drome was a single ship, the sound of its motor unfamiliar to him. Still, it was signaling for a landing—its motor blipping in the correct code used by members of the outfit who wanted flares for night landings.

Curious, he ordered ack emmas to light the flares.

Sliding down the sky came what appeared to be an overgrown Nieuport. And from its cockpit climbed a tall figure wearing the costume of St. Nicholas.

"Tom Weatherby," the major exclaimed. "The 27th phoned—said you hadn't showed up. I thought you were lost."

"You were nearly right," Tom grinned, "but here's the new German plane Army HQ wanted. Don't let anyone tell you, Major, that there's no Santa Claus."

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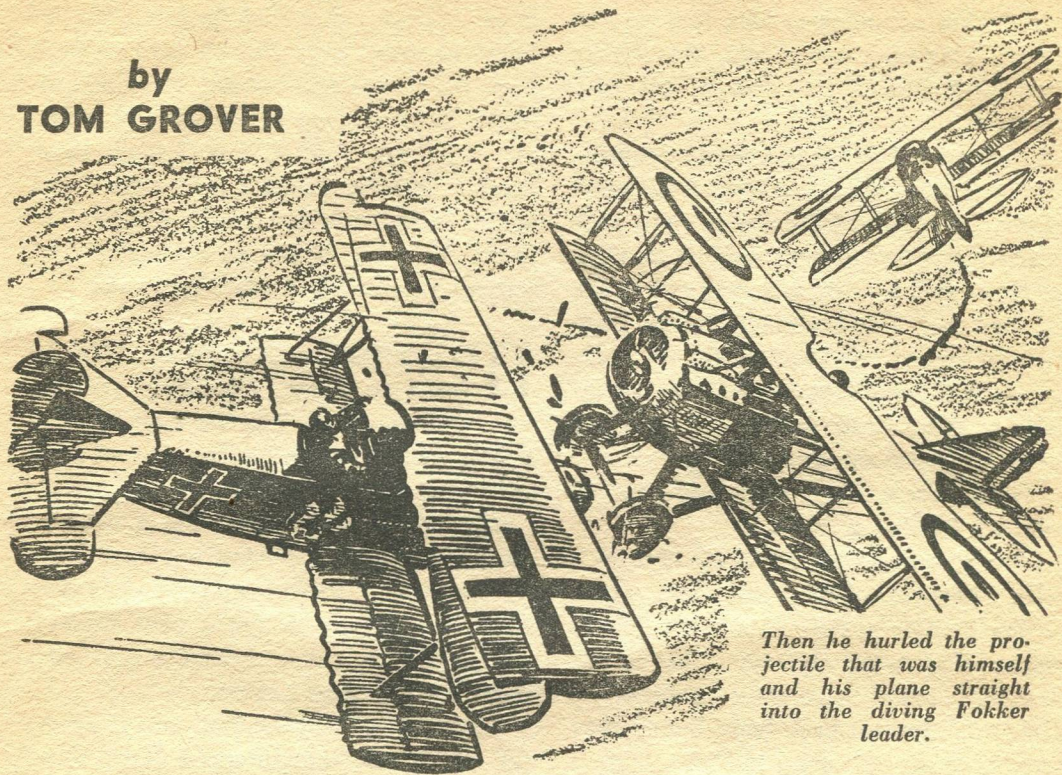
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SPAD STAR

by
TOM GROVER



Then he hurled the projectile that was himself and his plane straight into the diving Fokker leader.

Hammerhead Boyden Flew Like a Bat Out of Hell, Letting No Man Who Might Harm His Fledglings Stay in the Same Sky . . . But Why Did His Guns Go Silent Whenever the Ship of Gustave Schiller, the Greatest Flying Menace to His Boys, Crossed His Sights?

THERE was only one way. To cut through. And Hammerhead Boyden was the man to cut through or cut down with him those who tried to stop him. His thin, bony, rangy shoulders seemed to widen and hover like the wings of an eagle in that cramped Spad cockpit. He'd already given his flight the signal to pull out with the Very pistol. Backsticking with a yank, he poured the throttle to the 220 Hisso in front of him and screwed into a roaring zoom.

Spandau lead from a wing-slipping Fokker below slammed into his plane belly. Hammerhead's flat, scarred features gave no sign. He merely tickled his rudder bar to fish-tail. Then he was rolling out of that

climb to hurl straight at the Black Knight staffel bunch, at the very center of its formation. The nacelle vibrated with the buck and recoil of his spitting pair of twin Vickers guns.

"Those damned brasshats'll sweat in Hell for this someday," he growled through the whipstream blast as he slapped up his goggles. "Sending me kids—kids—green kids to play death tag with these Black Knights who—"

Slugs were probing along his fire wall, stitching an ugly pattern in the coping of his cockpit. Over to the port side, one of those crimson-and-gray camouflaged D-7's hung in a whipstall and was pounding it to him. Major Carl Boyden's big slit of a

mouth opened a little to husk oaths. Not at that Fokker pounding at him, that he was power-diving to get away from. But at that Spad back behind it! One of his own command.

The Spad was sledding downward, northward, instead of westward toward the home tarmac. A couple of the enemy ships with that arrogant ebon knight insignia on their fire walls were already swinging out of the dog-fight to rush onto the Spad's tail. And the Spad kept on down and northward, trailing another Spad that was settling earthward, retching black smoke and wobbling badly, a doomed ship and its pilot.

"Damn these kids who want to be heroes!" Boyden groaned.

Then he was slicing out of his dive, in a steep, screaming bank, and once again hurtling straight at the center of the Fokker bunch. Had to cut through! Had to cut through. . . . Had to get those babies of his of the 90th Pursuit back home before they were riding winged coffins to Hell.

Two Fokkers came blasting straight at him. Hammerhead Boyden's fingers were cool and deadly steady as he hit the gun trips hard. Again those air-lined Vickers spat their snarling stream. Spandau lead whistled past him. A hole appeared miraculously in his isinglass windscreen. A strut in the starboard wing buckled, started to splinter. One of the Fokker pilots headed at him twisted in his cockpit as the prop at the front of his blunt-nosed crate seemed to vanish into thin air. Then he was going down.

But the other Black Knight Fokker still bored right at him. Hammerhead Boyden's rugged face stirred in a slight, fatalistic grin. It looked as if the Devil was going to get himself some stepsons. Then, at the last moment, the Fokker yanked out of it, screamed upward in almost a vertical climb. That was an old war-sky trick of Hammerhead Boyden's. Some men try it once and never come home to boast about it.

He was through—through. He'd split

the enemy formation, carved an alley for his boys. Yanking that stick back into his flat belly, he arced over, hot oil fanning back from the engine and burning his wind-red-dened face. On top of the loop, he rolled out of it and went diving through those darting, dancing Fokkers once more. But before he did, a leaden missile whistled between his wing banks at a tangent and scoured his side like a white-hot brand.

HIS rocklike jaw clamped up. And he went on down, fishtailing, spewing that Vickers spawn into the main Fokker bunch. A slip on a wing tip. A mad bank with load wires screaming to the strain. And he was slashing around like a shark in the sea of the sky, driving westward after his command. Behind, a D-7 was headed down in a spin, a wounded pilot battling the controls as a curl of flame licked from under his Mercedes bonnet.

Hammerhead Boyden had done it again, cut his green, inexperienced fliers loose when they seemed trapped by that outnumbering enemy flight. Thrown turmoil into the Fokker staffel that had been on the verge of making a Spad-strewn shambles of the heavens. Done it and hung his own star of blazing, comet-like glory higher among the clouds!

He was pulling out himself when he steeled himself against that stab in his side, saw the blood trickling over one boot and onto the cockpit floor, then whipped a glance northward again. His teeth bared in a grimace of grim despair. That Spad that had been trailing a hit mate down was in trouble. The doomed ship, the first one, was just a gout of flame-stabbed smoke and dust jetting from the earth where it had hit. And now, one of those crimson-gray smeared Fokkers was riding the second Spad hard as it tried to wing clear and get altitude. That latter Spad had stuck with his doomed fellow too long, had followed him helplessly too far down.

The C.O. of the 90th played his wobbly

controls, felt that sluggish reaction of his lead-battered tail assembly, then was cutting over to the Spad's aid. Sunlight glanced off the twisting ship's fuselage, lit the charging red bull that was the insignia of the squadron. That insignia was a gristly joke now with those hurriedly-trained, still damp-behind-the-ears rookies flying the ships. As the other Spad split-arc'd, Hammerhead got a glimpse of the numerals on the rudder. It was the plane of that grinning, baby-faced Hendricks who hadn't known how to shoot crap when he joined the outfit three nights ago. The poor, damned fool . . .

HAMMERHEAD BOYDEN sledged into the two-ship duel, got in a long-range spray at the pursuing Fokker. The latter spotted him coming to the rescue and cut out for home. Violently Hammerhead gestured to his pilot, that Hendricks, to get westward fast. The latter, Hisso missing, nodded numbly. The C.O. veered to send another spray at the departing, then caught sight of the Fokker slicing up from below.

It was a daring maneuver. That Fokker had come up from the south, dropped low to the ground, and sneaked into lance upward in a surprise attack. Tracer trail drew a snowy pattern past Hammerhead Boyden's fuselage as he desperately threw his ship into a spin.

The zooming Fokker flashed by. Setting the stick in the "hospital" corner, Boyden set his controls against the fluttering-leaf spin, braced his wound-wracked frame against the twist, and pulled out of it. It was just in time as the German pilot dropped out of a tight loop to stab downward. Behind him, strung from his helmet, twisted the streamers indicative of a flight leader commander. It was Hauptmann Gustav Schiller, young C.O. of the famed Black Knights, "Hot-Hopping Gus" as the Allied fliers called him.

Hammerhead Boyden knew it. Recognized that squared-jawed immobile face

with the blond, crisp mustache as it came piling down at him from the background of the clouds above behind that Fokker nose. A chill colder than Death's own bony fingers froze Hammerhead's spine into an icy spike.

His fingers splayed away from the Bowden controls that would have set his Vickers yammering as he zoomed. Frantically he kicked the Spad into a corkscrewing *chandelle* to evade the down-dropping Fokker. Hands and feet fumbling, face a stricken mask, he pulled his ship out of it and tagged after Hendricks westward. A glance over his shoulder showed Schiller beating it for his own lines, too, as he sought altitude out of his dive.

Hammerhead Boyden clasped his big paw over his wounded side and spat weakly into the slipstream that flattened his cheeks. Yeah, he knew "Hot-Hopping Gus" Schiller all right. Sometimes he wondered if Gus Schiller knew who he was.

To anybody who didn't know, it might have looked like either cowardice or else treason when he stilled his Vickers against the German *jagdstaffel* ace and chief.

THE medical officer breathed hard as he worked in the elephant iron operations office on the tarmac of the 90th Pursuit. Finished swabbing out Hammerhead Boyden's wound and began to bandage it.

"Lucky thing the lead went clear through, sir," the doctor said. "It's a nasty gash and you've got a couple of snapped ribs. You'll have to take it easy for a week. I really should put you in bed and—"

Sitting like a chunk of rough rock in the chair, Hammerhead dumped down the rest of his drink, palmed away the trickle that ran down his beard stubble, and laughed as he sucked on his cigaret.

"Take it easy for a week? Don't be a damned fool, doc! This squadron's got to fly," he snorted.

The medical officer protested. "But these broken ribs—"

"Hell! I can't let those kids go upstairs alone. It'd be plain, dirty—*murder!* Strap those ribs up tight. What've you got adhesive tape for? Orderly, tell Hendricks I want to see him." He was already reaching for his tunic.

When Hendricks the rookie came in out of the dark, Hammerhead made a bare pretense of taking his salute, shoved a package of Woodbines across the desk.

"Light up . . . Hendricks, you saw my signal to pull out. But you didn't obey," Hammerhead rumbled.

Hendricks' hand was shaking as if palsied so he couldn't get the match to the fag. He threw both down abruptly.

"Major—Major Boyden—I—I—listen!" the kid cried. "It was Polliard who was shot down. He was wounded. His ship burning. He was my buddy, my roommate, my—"

Polliard was the one who'd crashed to his death out there to the north at the tail end of the sky battle.

"Polliard?" Hammerhead drawled, frowning as if in perplexity. "Polliard? Seems like I heard the name once. Who's Polliard?"

Hendricks screamed thinly. "Johnny Polliard! Y' know! My God, he was in this squadron! Why, he walked out to the Line with you as we took off for that last flight and—"

Hammerhead shook his big head. "Nope. Never knew any Polliard. Y' must be crazy, kid. And you disobeyed orders. You—"

Hendricks beat at the desk with white fists. "Listen! You can't have forgotten him so soon—Johnny Polliard! He had blond hair and—and he's dead now—and he could do card tricks—"

Hammerhead booted a chair out of the way as he came around the desk. "Dead men don't pay their bar bills, kid. . . . There never was no Johnny Polliard. There's only you and me and the other men who've got to fly tomorrow and the next

day and the day after that." His voice was low now.

Hendricks swayed, eyes bugging from his head with an insane flicker. "Johnny's dead and—and—"

HAMMERHEAD picked up a cigaret, shoved it between the boy's trembling lips and scratched a match. "Kid, I never saw a German yet shot down by a dead man. The dead don't count. We gotta fly and—"

Hendricks snatched the smoke from his mouth and grabbed at the C. O.'s wide shoulders. "You damned, cold-blooded killer! You don't give a damn for a poor devil who—"

Hammerhead Boyden became iron. "Take your hands off a superior officer," he said stonily. Then: "Meet me behind the barracks in five minutes."

Pure, venomous hate twisting his young face, Hendricks stumbled out. Hammerhead looked at his signal corps man at the switchboard in the corner, winked broadly, then got behind his desk. Every quick movement sent a ragged ball of pain hammering inside those fractured ribs. He set his teeth against it, toward with Wing H.Q. up the line, made out a flight report, checked the "In Commission" list with the chief sergeant-mec. Finally he went out, along the duckboards, then quickly stepped off by the stand of lilacs at one end of the cubicle barracks. Hendricks was behind there when he got there.

Hammerhead nodded. "Okay. Take off your tunic, man!" And he proceeded to strip out of his. "Forget I've got any bars. I'm not your superior officer any more. I—"

But Hendricks, a hysterical, bloodshot-eyed kid, roiled and sickened by the sight of his buddy's crash-death, was already coming at him. Fists flailed.

It was a nasty, brutal fight. Climbing the C. O. was like trying to dent a rock. He took rights and lefts on the top of his

head, then pushed in to batter catapulting hams of fists into the rookie's body. A stiff uppercut to the jaw and Hendricks left his feet. Hammerhead stepped back in the gloom.

But when the kid got up, he was less blindly insane. He began to dance around, flicking out a long, snappy left. The bull-like Hammerhead had to follow him. But every quick, jerking movement tore hell's own fangs into his injured left side. His breath began to come in spasmodic sobs. Hendricks was in, shooting a straight right, away. Hendricks was in again. The C. O.'s head bobbed on his shoulders. To lift that left just to guard was too much now.

THEN the rookie's right hammered into that busted-up side and Hammerhead Boyden thought he was going down in a nauseating flood that crept from his innards. Somehow he clasped Hendricks to him with that left. His right whammed in three times clumsily to the head. When he let the kid go, the latter hit the ground limp.

But he clambered up once again as a motorcycle and sidecar came put-putting up the woodland track to the drome. Swaying, swallowing blood from a cut mouth, the C. O. thudded through a barrage of knuckles to heave in that right of his own again. Hendricks crashed.

Hammerhead reeled a moment. Then he bent down, wound his fingers into Hendricks' shirt, and hauled him erect. Their eyes met, locked the C. O.'s twinkling. Hendricks' sane now but hard with hate.

"Come along," Hammerhead commanded. He led the way down to the messhall, into the lavatory where they cleaned up, then out and down to the bar beyond the big fireplace. Hendricks hesitated, swelling face sullen. But the C.O. ordered him to step up.

He pointed to the two oversized glasses with the purplish contents that everybody in the 90th could recognize as the C.O.'s

own concoction known as "Big Berthas." He'd instructed his orderly to have them ready.

"These are on me," Hammerhead said quietly. "Hereafter, I hope you know who's boss around here. When I give a command—well, this is war, son. Dirty, nasty, ugly war—and there's no time to escort the dead. That's all." He picked up his glass, faced Hendricks.

The rookie kid stared hard for a long moment. Then the hate and the last trace of hysteria wiped itself from his face. The fight had been a physical outlet, somehow brought home the facts of battle to him. Commonsense was in command now. He grabbed up his drink quickly.

"You give the orders, sir!" He drank deep.

There were some discreet chuckles from the bunch at a table in a corner. Two other pilots down the bar grinned. Hammerhead Boyden held his face rigid against the clawing ache of that side wound.

YEAH, those others could laugh. They knew about going out behind the barracks, knew first-hand. There was Tom Hoyce down there, sprouting a mustache to make himself look older. Washed out and piled up his bus bad coming in and been afraid to climb into a cockpit again—until after he'd been out behind the barracks. And Gleason at the poker table. His guns had jammed on him his first time over. After that he'd pulled out of two dogfights in a row as the ships came together, panicked by the idea his Vickers might jam again. Once he'd been out behind the barracks, he'd gotten over that trick. There'd been others.

Hammerhead's teeth chopped together in disgust. Yeah, he'd made men out of these half-grown kids. If they lived long enough, they'd become fliers, first-rate ones. If they lived and he kept his hands off of some brasshat's throat long enough. It drove him almost stark crazy with fury

the way they kept sending him up these green kids, hurriedly trained, for replacements. It was little less than mass murder. Kids, smiling and eager, who looked like fugitives from a high school class's graduating play. Kids who—

His orderly was at his elbow. The new adjutant from Wing had arrived, his new aide. Hammerhead gave Hendricks' shoulder a smack, then went down to the operations office. The bright light blinded him after the Stygian darkness of the field. He stumbled on the door sill.

"I saw the little encounter out behind the barracks as I arrived, Major. Is that some of your customary discipline?" the adjutant's voice came.

Hammerhead couldn't make out the other's face yet. But he knew it would be thin and a little mocking-eyed, handsome in an aristocratic way. Because he knew that voice belonged to Chip Onslow.

Chip Onslow, who'd been at college with him before the war had sucked in America. Hammerhead had played football with the man. Well, if you could play football *with* a guy who wanted to tote the leather all the time as Chip Onslow had. And then there was that nasty scandal about the cheating on one of the final exams. Another man had been on the verge of busting out until it had been discovered that it was Onslow who'd done the cribbing.

Hammerhead's eyes cleared and he saw that narrow face he knew. And his hands knotted up at how that man who'd been willing to let another be ousted in disgrace. Onslow had left and volunteered right after it. Hammerhead nodded, put out his hand automatically.

"Hello, Onslow. My new adjutant, eh?"

Onslow nodded, smiling with that knowing grimace. "Sure thing, Carl. And a flying one, too. I hear you can use men. How've you been?"

Hammerhead let go the hand and nodded. "Yeah—I can use *men*. . . ."

Down in the messhall, young Hendricks,

relaxed, grinning at the ribbing he was taking, now having made the first step toward manhood, was telling them all what a great guy old Hammerhead was. The agreement was universal and hearty.

"A man all through—and a regular heller when he gets up in those skies. . . . He's like a lodestar to this outfit," Shorty Bickel said.

Hendricks nodded vehemently. "Yeah—and I'd follow that star any place! Any place!"

THE batman behind the bar put in his bit proudly. "He's one of the greatest on wings! One o' the best! And some day he'll get that Hot-Hopping Gus Schiller of the Knights yet! Mark my words! He will . . ."

Back in the operations office, Onslow was glibly covering the rough moment. "Well, I'm here to do my best, Carl. . . . I hear this Schiller of the Black Knights is pure poison upstairs!"

Hammerhead Boyden jerked his head downward in a nod of agreement, then stared hard at nothing on his desk to hide his face.

It came as it would come, as something inside Hammerhead Boyden's hulking body told him it would come. Told him it had to happen with that sneaky Onslow around. Two days later, they came in from a reconnaissance patrol that had ended in a brush with six of the Black Knights. Six led by Gus Schiller himself.

Onslow came into the operations office, twitching a swagger stick, too friendly behind a catlike grin, after they came in.

"You had that Boche leader dead in your ringsight once—from behind, Major," Onslow said offhandedly, watching the back of the departing signal corps man. "Then—you ceased fire. . . ."

Hammerhead blotted his report very carefully. "Yeah. Gun stoppage. Belts weren't loaded right."

"Too bad." Onslow draped his long, slim

form over a corner of the desk. "I had a look at him just as we pulled out. His goggles off. He had that same mustache in his freshman year at college. I remember how mad he was that the rules made him shave it off. His name was—"

Hammerhead hit his feet, stony-eyed. "Yes?"

"His name was Gus Boyden then—your half-brother, as I recall," Onslow murmured. "Now—"

"You got it—right," Hammerhead broke in heavily. "Gus Schiller is my half-brother. By my dad's second marriage. His mother was German. When America went into the war, it was too much for him. He made his decision. He went home, took his mother's family name, and fought for his Fatherland—as he is now. . . . Any more information you'd like, Captain?"

Onslow picked up a cigaret languidly and rose. "No-o . . . not exactly. Too bad, though, your guns jammed just when you had him neat, wasn't it, though?"

Hammerhead came around the desk. "Get the hell outa here, Onslow!"

BUT that didn't settle matters. Hammerhead Boyden knew it. He knew this Onslow who liked to be kingpin, realized full well the guy hadn't played his last card yet. And it didn't settle matters for Hammerhead about his half-brother, Gus Schiller, either. He'd loved Gus as if he'd been his own brother by the same mother. The kid had always been a swell egg, clean all the way through, and straight as a die. Just the way he'd made up his mind about returning to Germany. He'd simply said his blood was too strong and made a clean breast of it, then gone. And from the time he'd first crossed his trail in the air, Hammerhead knew he could never kill him. Blood ties were too strong again.

But now. . . .

Three days passed, the third with all ships grounded by the pea soup down from the North Sea. The Bulls of the 90th had

contacted a Black Knight flight only once in that time. And their flying commander, Schiller, had not been with them.

Then, as the fog dissipated with the sunset and became just a thinning mist as the night wore on, the thing that led to the showdown happened. Hammerhead got it over the phone from Wing and the *alerte* to rout out every pilot and roll out every available ship was sounded. A batch of Gotha birds had gotten through to lay their eggs on an Allied ammo dump. And they'd been spotted on their homeward course. They were headed for the Moselle up north. Major Boyden was to get his complete command into the air and be on the watchout for the French Cicoignes who were also being thrown into the show.

When Hammerhead strode out to the line, bracing himself against the dust jetted up by the spattering exhaust stacks, he ran into young Hendricks. The kid was knotting a muffler around his neck, a light blue one.

"My mother gave me this," he yelled into the C.O.'s ear. "She said it'd bring me good luck."

Hammerhead whacked the kid's back and headed for his own cockpit. He'd set up the "Big Berthas" for the gang when they got back from this one. If—well, night flying was dirty work.

He led them to six thousand, leveled off while the echelon formed, then winged into the northeast at the spearhead. Wing had reported half a dozen of the Gothas accompanied by a flight of convoying Fokkers. The Black Knights, perhaps. . . .

Grimly he looked back at the Spad wings that shone in ghostly fashion in the wan light of a cloud-muffled moon, at the firefly-like flickers from the exhaust stacks. Kids whose mas knitted them mufflers in baby blue for good luck. The C.O. spat an oath into the slipstream.

IT WAS exactly eighteen minutes later, by his twin wrist-watches, that they

picked up the Gotha bomber flight. The big brutes of egg-layers were a little to the west, riding at close to sixteen thousand. They emerged from a wraith of the still-scudding though fading mist. Flanking them, a little lower, were more than a dozen Fokkers. And Fokkers with the Black-Knight symbol painted on their fire walls. Schiller's men.

Hammerhead Boyden's intestines seemed to decompress inside his hide. The instruments before him swam in a haze of sickness for a moment. Then his sharklike mouth firmed. He goosed his Hisso, edged fingers over his Bowden controls. Off there on the right, first on that side of the echelon, rode Onslow. And somewhere up by those Gothas, Gut Schiller might be . . .

Wagging his moon-dyed wings in signal, even as he saw a Very pistol spew its blobs of colored lights from the van of the Fokkers, the Bulls' C.O. sent his ship in a screaming bank, then rolling the other way in an S-curve as he slanted upward to hammer down in the attack.

Out of a cloud rack to the east, spilling like stones from a bag at twenty thousand, came a flock of Albatrosses. Two-seaters. Their Maltese Crosses a sickly, eerie green in the increasing glow of the moon. Six, eight, ten of them. And with those Fokkers already there—

Boyden had ten pilots behind him. His great head jerked around, eyes straining up and down and around the sky. But no French Storks were in sight. Perhaps they had missed contact. And the Boche Albatrosses, sent out to meet the returning bombers at the danger point near the lines, had made contact perfectly.

Too perfectly for Hammerhead Boyden. He wasn't afraid for himself. But those green kids behind him—

THREE of the Fokkers veered slightly from their course toward him and his flight to be ready to fend them off from the Gothas. Then the Bulls' C.O. was bank-

ing and leveling to fall in parallel to the returning bombers as he searched for the French planes again and again. Below, he picked out the mercury-hued course of the Moselle. Precious minutes ticked off. Trenchworks showed in the moonglow like worm tracks. And Hammerhead Boyden made up his mind, signaled his flight, and led the way around in a wide arc to return home. If they'd intercepted the Gothas and company before they'd laid the eggs, it might have been different. They'd already sown their spawn of destruction, though. And to pit his fledglings against the overwhelming numerical superiority of the Fokkers and the Albatrosses would be plain mass murder.

Let the brasshats howl their damned heads off. Hammerhead Boyden took his eaglets home, circled the landing-T until the oil-rag beacons at the field's edge were lit in response to his Very signal, then set down. One of the kids dragged a wing tip and got his front teeth knocked out when he sent his ship barging into a post m.g. in front of a tarmac. The C.O. waited until the pilot was safely out of the ship.

When he strode wearily into his office, relaxed face haggard with the pain of that side wound he'd reopened afresh, Onslow was waiting.

"Major, I'd like to know why we didn't jump that Gotha bunch?" he sneered.

Hammerhead went rigid. "You saw how many Fokkers there were and that Albatross flight coming in, Captain?"

Onslow sneered more broadly. "Afraid, Major?"

Hammerhead's big hands closed hard. He flashed a glance at the switchboard man, saw his ear-phones deafened him to speech in the room. "I'm in command here, Captain Onslow. Perhaps if you were—"

"Afraid, perhaps," Onslow leaned across the desk, "of having to fire on your brother, Schiller! He was there with his Black Knights. I saw his flight-leader streamers.

Afraid—of killing him, perhaps, Major?"

The C.O. grinned wearily and crookedly. "Captain, I'll see you behind the barracks in five minutes, thank you!"

Onslow jerked straight as if he'd been cut by a whip. Hammerhead repeated his words. The adjutant shrugged and sauntered out.

When the C.O. went along the duck-board walk toward the barracks, the mutter of plane engines punctured by the crackle of machine guns came from the distance. He halted as an A.A. unit search-beam fingered across sky dome from the north. Like a flickering, tawny tiger's tail it switched, then fastened on the belly of one of those red Gothas. Two Limey Camels came diving into the light zone, socking away at the wallowing Gotha. Even as Hammerhead looked, a French Nieuport arched out of the blackness to beat lead from below and, right wing drooping, the beleaguered bomber slanted downward as it ran for it. It was one of the bomber bunch that had lost contact with the others during the actual strafing, been cut off, and was now trying to fight its way home. But the half-disabled ship was doomed, plainly enough.

The C.O. went around the corner of the barracks and came upon Onslow lolling with a cigaret behind it. The latter spoke first.

"Taking me out behind the woodshed for a little discipline lesson, eh, Carl? Like one of the rookie babies you wet nurse. . . . Well, you aren't going to lay a hand on me. See?"

The C.O. was unbuttoning his tunic. "No?"

"**N**O!" ONSLOW'S lower lip trembled cravenly; then he summoned a sneer again. "Because—if Wing H.Q. knew—I don't think they'd want a C.O. who had a brother leading a Boche squadron. . . . No-o, Carl. Particularly after you failed against the Gothas tonight. Beat me

up and you practically clinch my charges. *Savez-vous, mon ami?*"

Hammerhead Boyden savied all right. Full well. More than Onslow ever meant him to. Enough to spell Onslow's finish. It was the old story of Onslow who always wanted to carry the ball. And now, as adjutant, if the C.O. of the squadron should be removed—

Boyden saw all right. And he knew Onslow *would* see that the facts reached Wing. Hammerhead Boyden didn't think of himself in that moment. His only thought was for the squadron, this bunch of green fledglings he was striving to keep alive long enough to make sky-fighters of.

The Gotha with the three Allied ships snapping and dogging it had dropped still lower as it weaved directly toward the airdrome of the 90th. The uneven mutter of its unsynchronized Benz engines seemed just beyond that hill up there. Hammerhead Boyden tried once more.

"About those Gothas tonight, Onslow—I—well, I'm out to make aces of these kids—*not angels*," he said wearily.

Onslow smiled and tossed away his butt. "Tell it to Wing, Carl—if you force the issue."

Hammerhead looked past him, looked at the Gotha with its aft cockpit guns silent and one Benz with flame licking from its cowling. Onslow turned to watch too. It was about the finish for the cut-off Gotha. She came over the tree-line, foundering badly. A Camel lanced out of the moonlight at its tail and the Nieuport came diving at an angle for the nose. The froth of machine gun mouths looked like the flicker of unholy candles. There was the patter of leaden rain as some of the bullets slapped into a metal hangar roof out front. The Gotha twisted sluggishly eastward.

Hammerhead Boyden had but one thought. It wasn't conceit. He simply realized he was the lodestar to those kids who winged Spad cockpits behind him. And

he mustn't go; it would be letting them down. When Onslow twisted back with the din of engines drumming down at them, metal scraped his tunic button and Hammerhead Boydon's automatic was firmly against his stomach. The C.O. triggered twice. . . .

WHEN he walked out to the front of the barracks, he bumped into one of the pilots out watching the fleeing, doomed Gotha. The C.O.'s automatic, hastily holstered, clanked to the duckboards. The pilot, young Hendricks himself, quickly bent and picked it up.

"Sorry, sir."

Hammerhead Boyden snatched it from him, wondering if the kid had noticed the weapon was warm.

He was waiting calmly in the operations office, having reported to Wing about the Gothas and woodenly listened to a bawling out in return, when a ground guard corporal came in with the news of finding Onslow dead. Must have been struck by some stray shots of the air battle that had passed overhead, the corporal thought.

Hammerhead Boyden took a drink with a steady hand, then went down to the emergency hospital hut. Onslow was laid out there, stiff as a cold mackerel. Heads peered in to see.

"Undoubtedly a stray burst from one of the Camels or the Nieuport after that Gotha," the C.O. mouthed curtly. "All right."

When he walked out, he turned past Hendricks. Their eyes met, locked an instant. Hendricks' were horror-frozen. Hammerhead knew the rookie suspected, as good as knew then. Onslow found slain behind the barracks. Behind the barracks where the C.O. took a man to administer his own particular brand of discipline. And that automatic—when he'd picked it up—had been warm, warm from shooting.

The C.O. nodded, went on by him, feeling his face gray with the torture of that

unhealed side wound. Back at the office, he called Wing again and reported Onslow's death routinely. Then he sat. And sat. Thinking. No regrets. And too war-seared for a feeling of guilt. But if those rookies suspected—if they lost faith in him—

It was late when he pushed into the messhall. A low light burned over the bar and the batman slumbered behind it. Almost at it, the C.O. recognized Hendricks, looking like a haunted man, in the shadows at one end of the counter. Hammerhead grinned.

"How about a couple of 'Big Berthas,' Hendricks?"

Hendricks' hands twisted on the bar edge. He stared at the C.O.'s as if he expected to see blood on them. Then he swallowed hard, shook his head, and went stumbling out. Hammerhead realized the kid believed what he'd suspected now.

HE PUT his own "Big Bertha" down the hatch with a single gulp, took a bottle with him, and went back to the operations office again. The meteorological officer came in with his late report on weather conditions. Then the C.O. just began to sit and think again. From Macbeth, he vaguely recalled a line about sleep "that knits the ravelled sleeve of care" and knew sleep was not for him that night. Not because of murder. But from worrying about his squadron, those kid eaglets of his.

The phone tinkled. It was a sleepy-voiced officer at Wing H.Q. They were going to send down a Captain Rainy, just released from a base hospital, to serve as his adjutant. Hammerhead chuckled a little as he hung up. Sure he knew "Rocky" Rainy, all right. Rocky had been O.O. of the outfit he'd first flown with on the front. A frosty-eyed, snapping-voiced old warhorse with a heart big as a pumpkin. Hammerhead could remember the time he'd sent a man come in to crash on the home field. Remember how Rainy had forced him in

a ship, after he'd got sick to his belly, forced him to take off. And when he'd come in, old Rocky had shoved some hundred-franc notes into his hand and a pass to go into the next *ville*, had told him to get orey-eyed.

Yeah, Rainy was an officer who knew how to handle men, kids especially. . . . The thought began to take form and wax in the C.O.'s mind. . . . A man he'd be safe in leaving his fledglings with if he shouldn't come back. . . .

Hammerhead Boyden poured himself a big slug from the bottle and began to grin. It wouldn't be so hard to wait for morning now. . . .

The C.O. himself at the spearhead, the six-ship dawn patrol climbed off the field, through the low-flying mists of daybreak out of the earth-bound shadows. In the fine, eye-stinging light of the upper regions, they bent on the first leg of the patrol triangle, winging southeasterly. Boyden led them up close to twenty thousand as they crossed the lines, twisting once to glance back, grin strangely behind his goggles at Hendricks in the right side of the echelon. The latter gave no sign to the lifted gauntlet either.

Deeper the Bulls' C.O. worked behind the Boche lines. For a while it looked as if even Onslow dead could undo the work he'd performed with this outfit. But now, with Rocky Rainy ready to take over, Hammerhead saw the way to restore faith, to silence for all time the ugly rumor that would start soon. Hot-Hopping Gus Schiller, his own half-brother, was admittedly the man who made the Black Knights what they were. The one, who, by his high-sky example, made them believe they were almost as feared as Richtofen's own staffel. And Schiller was a sky hawk extraordinary. No bargaining hothead of a slaughter-hungry fool. But a wing-duelist who—

picture. The man who ever got Schiller would pay a price. And Boyden was ready to pay; his squadron was all that counted.

Cutting his gun a little, he moved into a big cumulus formation. He nosed out of an upper level of it, stared around as he swabbed his goggles, then hopped to the next low-drifting cloud chunk. It was cloud-hopping, a dangerous game but one that could pay big dividends in blood. And, minutes later, as he led his men banking in the fleece behind two stratas of heaven blankets, he was rewarded.

Northward, at about sixteen thousand, coming out of the east, were half a score of Fokkers bearing the Black Knight insignia of Schiller's *jagdstaffel*. Boyden had been right in his calculations. Schiller had made himself a name for exacting revenge immediately for any Boche crate downed in his sector. The Black Knight leader was out to collect toll for that Gotha he'd failed to protect last night.

Hammerhead's big arm lifted in signal. He led his bunch over in a short, tight loop, dived into the bottom layer as he flattened. Cut the gun. He prayed then, hurriedly. Then they were nosing out of the cloud mask with that Fokker V's flank in front of them and below.

The C.O.'s hand was lifted again, open-palmed. The Spads tipped down as the rising sun flashed off the crimson-gray smeared Fokker wing panels below. Then Hammerhead's hand jerked into a fist, waved. And he led them smashing down behind full-gunned, snarling Hissos. And tracer trail drew a pattern of scattered whip lines across the skies as the Vickers yammered into action on the full dive.

The Fokkers were caught cold. Frantically they scattered from formation. Schiller, his flight-leader streamers flashing, winged-slid, then slashed up in a twisting climb, his guard riding his tail. And the Spads struck, arrowing, piling in their lead, striking like a lightning bolt.

SWEAT trickled down Hammerhead's back and he shut off the thought, the

The left side of the V broke to veer around a D-7 that had taken fire and half-exploded in full flight. Another Fokker started in a spin as its pilot slumped crookedly behind the stick, neck blasted away.

S C YTHING through in front of them, Hammerhead Boyden went clear through, let his bucking guns fall silent, switched upward. Out of the east, he saw a trio of trailing Fokkers, an old trick of the Knights, rushing up to make a counter-strike. And above, the great Schiller was winding up for a dive.

The Bulls C.O. had his Very pistol out, was shooting the "retreat" signal. And his well-trained fledglings were flattening from the dive, pulling up into tight formation, streaking westward in the space of a long-drawn breath. All but one. Hendricks, who was whipping in a savage circle after a Fokker to the south. The C.O. Immelmanned to slide by and wave him homeward. Hendricks obeyed.

Hisso roaring at almost three hundred per, he joined his mates with their neat head-start to safety. Something made him look back. And then that baby-blue muffler his mother had knitted him seemed to be strangling him. For back there, behind,

a lone Spad bearing the Bull insignia had slashed back into the reforming Fokkers. Going like a hellion. Smashing straight into those crimson-and-grayed wings.

It was all over in a split second. Schiller, the leader of the Black Knights, came pouring down from the flank in a slanting dive. Out of the maelstrom, the Spad's nose jerked. Flame was vomiting from the engine hoods. The twin Vickers were silenced. And in that Spad's cockpit, Hammerhead Boyden tried to steady his wobbling head.

He did, enough to sight his prop nose like a gun. Then he hurled the projectile that was himself and his plane straight into the diving Fokker leader. There was a great bloom of black-shot flame like a bursting meteor. And the two charred skeletons that had been a Spad and a Fokker, now interlocked in death, dropped out of it. . . .

Back at the messhall bar, the little batman nodded sadly. "But didn't I tell you he'd get Schiller too some day?" he asked.

Hendricks spoke for the squadron as he muttered: "Yeah . . . yeah. . . . But he's still up there—up there now, somehow, like a star. . . . A star that'll never go out for me, anyway. . . ."

BLUE RIBBON SPORTS

APRIL LINEUP

FEUD AT FIRST A Swell Baseball Yarn by T. W. Ford

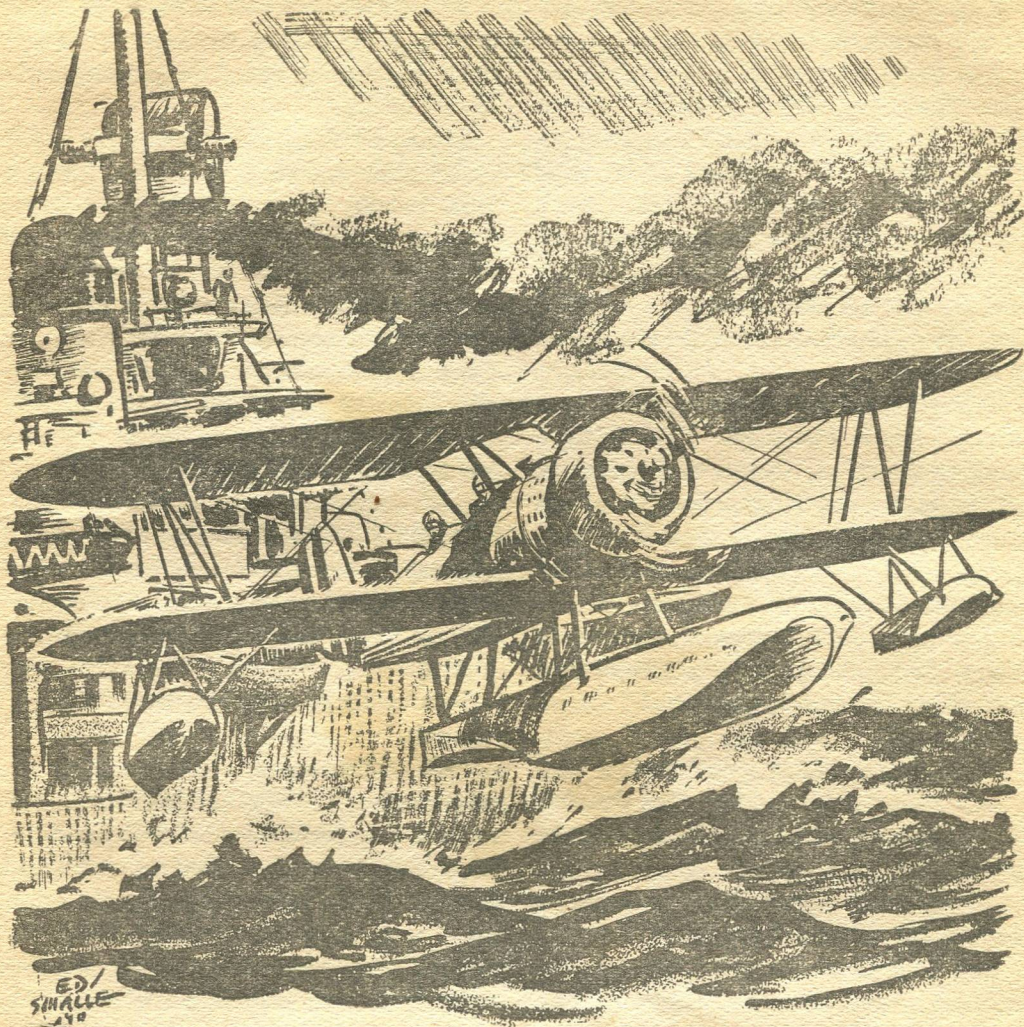
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The shock of the explosion was paralyzing. A thump, as the car hit the stop and the Vought was free over the water.



FLYING ORDERS

by MAT RAND

Lt. Terry Marshall dives his ship to an almost certain crash to rescue the victim of a sea gone mad. With court martial as his only reward . . . if he lived!

LIEUTENANT JOCK and Terry Marshall, the Navy's flying twins, faced Admiral Clark in his quarters aboard the USS Idaho.

"When you gentlemen graduated from Pensacola Flight School together eight

years ago, I disapproved your requests for duty together. I still feel that brothers, as close as twins are reputed to be, should not serve in the same unit. In an emergency one's mind might tend to be too much on the safety of his brother for the

best interests of discipline. A fighting machine is no stronger than its weakest man."

The twins maintained a sober face despite their inner elation at being together again. Despite the Admiral's insistent refusals, Terry had managed a transfer through the Commander-in-Chief, Clark's superior, to duty with his brother on the Idaho. Clark was known throughout the fleet as a tough disciplinarian. A "Well don!" from him was almost the equivalent of a citation.

"This is your first flight together, gentlemen," Clark continued. "Let it be a credit to the ship. This annual war game is important. The Atlantic fleet has passed through the Canal and is somewhere near us now. It is their problem to contact our fleet and theoretically annihilate us. In your planes you two become the eyes of the Idaho. We want to find the 'black' fleet *before* they find us. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Very well, that's all, gentlemen."

Jock looked at his brother when they left officer's quarters and came out on the quarterdeck.

"Let's make it good, Terry. Leave no room for the old man to squawk."

Jock introduced Terry to his observer, an Ensign fresh from Pensacola. They stood under the catapults on number three and number four turrets.

"Ever been catapulted?" Terry asked Colliner, the observer.

"No, Sir," Colliner answered. "But we were orally instructed at Pensacola."

"Then don't forget your instructions," Terry warned. "Keep your head down between your knees, and your neck stiff. From a dead start we will reach sixty knots in as many feet. Acceleration like that can snap your neck if it isn't braced."

Terry checked the catapult minutely. Mechanics in blue dungarees were checking the observation Vought where it perched at the end of the catapult, pontoon snugged in the padded saddle of the car.

The turrets were trained on the port quarter, chain rails along the scuppers were down and seamen hosed the planked decks in case of fire.

Satisfied with his inspection, Terry pulled on his radio helmet and climbed into the front cockpit. Ensign Colliner climbed into the rear. Terry looked over the side and down the catapult track. When the gunpowder in the catapult cylinder exploded, the car would be propelled to the end of the track, collide with the bumpers and literally snap the plane into the air at sixty knots. It would then be up to the pilot and his motor to stay in the air.

TERRY frowned at the white-capped seas. They would have rough landings after the problem was over. He guessed the wind at fifteen knots and checked his cockpit.

Jock called down to him from the upper catapult.

"We rendezvous at 3,000 feet with the other planes." He hooked his thumb back to the line of battleships following in single file, battle formation. Destroyers flanked the big ships as submarine guard. Catapults were extended on each battleship ready for the signal that would put one scout from each ship into the air simultaneously. The second group would follow as soon as the first was clear.

"Commander McCarthy of the New Mexico will be in command of our group. Blue band around his fuselage. Don't break formation until black fleet is spotted. Then we spot for the Idaho, her target will be number one ship in the enemy line."

Terry nodded his understanding and fastened his safety belt. The inertia starter whined as a mechanic twisted the crank slowly, then more rapidly. He disengaged the crank and dropped to the deck.

"All clear!" he yelled.

"Contact!"

Terry snapped the switch and pulled the starter control. The prop twisted jerkily a

few times, then the radial wasp sputtered, growled and roared. Terry eased the throttle back and the propeller became a shining circle, as of plate glass with rays of light shining through. He checked both magnetos and temperature, 30 degrees centigrade. He idled the motor, grinned encouragingly at the observer and clapped his hands over his head to the catapult officer. The deck officer watched for the signal from the bridge. Terry pulled down his goggles and waited.

The signal came from the bridge. Admiral Clark was in the wing watching intently. Terry knew he was looking for something to jack one of his two pilots up about later.

The catapult officer held up five fingers and punched a stop watch. Five minutes before the plane would be fired into the air. Terry opened his throttle half-way. The engine's rough ramble picked up to a steady roar.

THE deck officer held up four fingers. One of the five minutes gone. Terry glanced up at Jock and was rewarded with a frown from the Admiral. Terry grunted in annoyance at himself. It was bad business loosening one's neck muscles after the stop watch started in case of a premature firing of the catapult. He'd hear about it later, he was sure.

There was a crinkle about the catapult officer's eyes as he looked at Terry and held up three fingers. The seconds ticked away.

Two fingers—one finger. Then crossed index fingers. Thirty seconds. The deck officer rotated his right arm, the signal to rev up the motor.

Terry cracked the throttle wide open and watched his tachometer and oil pressure. The plane trembled in the saddle, seemingly eager to be off.

He shoved out a clenched fist, signaling his motor was full out, then got it back in quickly. He tensed his head back against

the crash pad, his feet steady and rigid on the rudder pedals. His right fist gripped the stick, the other held the throttle wide.

The shock of the explosion was paralyzing. The deck and men disappeared in a blur. Stomach packed back against his spine, his head flattened the padding of the crash pad. A thump, as the car hit the stop and the Vought was free over the water. The pressure lessened as his body caught up with the speed of the plane. Terry put the ship into a climbing turn and glanced reassuringly at the pale-faced observer.

"Now I know how a bullet feels when it's fired," Ensign Colliner grinned.

Terry laughed and glanced down just as Jock's plane was fired into the air. He continued in a slow climb until Jock joined him. Wing to wing they fell in with fourteen other scouts. They singled out the blue banded plane of their flight commander and filled in the step formation of eight planes. Another like group swung off to port and commenced scouting for the "black" fleet.

The steady hum of oscillating tubes and an occasional crackle of static was all that indicated Terry's receiver was working. But well he knew that if the black fleet was spotted every ear must be on the alert for the contact report. It would be brief to prevent a compass hearing being taken by the enemy. All planes would race for position and give the range of their mother ships, correct the range again after the splash of the shells was observed, bracketing the shots until the exact range was found. A devastating fire can be laid down by a battleship in this manner without being in visual range of their target. The planes literally become the eyes of the surface ships.

Terry's Vought was third from the top of the step formation, Jock's second from the bottom. From his position, Terry was able to look almost directly down into his brother's cockpit.

Terry was looking down now, a worried frown creasing his brow. Jock's head was down below the vision rim of the cockpit, rummaging under the instrument panel. The observer was poring over a chart. Neither had their attention on flying and that, in itself, was dangerous in this close formation. The plane's wings were canted and the pilots on both sides were alertly watching Jock's plane.

JOCK suddenly saw the oil-slickered face that recalled the story of a broken oil line. He rocked his wings and the lower planes acknowledged the threat that he was forced to break. The formation was dropped clear as he cut his switch and the propeller blades came to a sudden and stopped. He kicked over on his left wing and started a flat glide in the water. The formation closed up and continued its scouting.

"Can you fly formation?" Terry asked at Colliner, in the year pit.

Colliner nodded and took the controls. Terry watched a moment to be sure the ship was okay, then slid back the pilot's glass cowling over the pit. His eyes followed Jock's plane in its slow glide. The destroyer detached itself from the deep guard, signal flags flying the word "out" signals. Smoke poured from the funnel as she came on under her own power. It would be the Perry, detached from the guard for the duration of maneuver.

Terry calculated the glide of the plane and the speed of the destroyer. It would be ten minutes at least after the plane hit the water before the destroyer could reach the spot. He gazed worriedly at the wing-whipped white caps.

From this altitude the squadron seemed to hang motionless over a harmless sea. But experience had taught him those white streaks were too plainly defined. A heavy swell was running. Nothing to worry about with power and a good pilot. But dangerous for dead-stick, no matter how good the

pilot. Power would be needed to hold the ship facing into the running sea. Once broadside and it would be swamped, sunk.

Terry strained his eyes for long moments before the realization came that Jock wasn't bailing out. He remembered that Jock was against the prevalent custom of military pilots bailing out. The crash was imminent. He knew that if there was a chance of a rescue, it was a desperate piece of luck. The chances of rescue were slim. He was apparently what he needed, but after having ordered Jock to bail out, knowing his ship was spotted and picked up.

Terry gripped his teeth. The odds were too long for Jock. He wouldn't be able to hold his ship into the wind long enough to get away from him. He needed a rescue. No one could get there in time. The rescue was under strict orders to search for the plane. It was Jock's own fault. He was in the air could be spared. The plane could reach him in time.

Terry made a decision. This was one time an order must be obeyed. He couldn't wait for the rescue. He wagged his wings and the plane glared and re-sounded. The Commander McCarthy. The formation split like gun-startled ducks when Terry's Vought broke formation and dove full power. His screaming power dive carried him past his brother's flat gliding plane.

TERRY V. started a swell a hundred yards away from where he expected his brother to land and focused his full attention on the tricky crosswind landing. He hung the Vought in a power stall, then the pontoon slapped the crest of a swell with a spine-tingling jar at forty knots. The plane lost speed and sank into the trough. An overtaking swell slapped broadside and lifted her skyward again, then fell out from under as the swell receded. Flying speed lost, the scout dropped like a stricken bird.

He topped a crest in time to see Jock's plane smack its pontoon neatly on another crest, gunning his ship through and over the crests to where he had last seen his brother's plane. He yelled, "let out the mooring line in the locker behind your seat. Stand up and heave it to Lieut. Marshall when we are within range!"

Terry slid down the next crest, swung crosswind within fifty feet of the disabled plane. Jock grinned at him through the whipping spray, and glanced at the standing observer. He sensed their intention at once.

Colliner braced himself for the throw and waited for a swell to pass. Jock's Vought was floundering badly. Terry jockeyed still closer and the Ensign's arm shot forward. The line spun true and Jock ducked when it snapped across his shoulder. He was out of the cockpit and the pontoon in a flash.

Terry waited no longer. He kicked the wind full power. Both ends of the line were snugged tight and Jock scrambled back into the cockpit. The line tautened and the dead-stick Vought pitched into the running seas.

"Hold on tight," Terry called to Colliner, "we'll be able to stay afloat long enough for the Perry to get here."

Seas cascaded over the laboring Vought time after time. They engulfed the lower wing, sprayed into and over the cockpit. Each swell separated the two planes. Terry's Vought lay on its back and the tow line disappeared like a shafted lance into the receding crest. Then the line would rise and the two planes would top adjoining crests for a moment, then slide down into troughs, separated by a swell, separating them from sight of each other. The only assurance of contact in these moments was the taut line.

proached the disabled plane. A crane boom swung out from the after deck and a hook was lowered. Jock stood erect and grabbed the hook with both hands, slipping it deftly into the lifting eye in the plane's center section. Dripping seamen attached a guy line to the near wing tip. Colliner released the topline and the seamen strained on the guy line to hold the ship headed into the sea until the crane lifted it clear of the water.

An officer on the destroyer bridge megaphoned to Terry, "Stand off, if you're still seaworthy, pilot. If not we'll take you in tow!"

Terry answered by standing off. He slid the Vought down the back of the next swell and the destroyer stood by in case of necessity. Terry swung cross seas and cracked the throttle half open. The plane went up the swell sideways, Terry ready for the cross wind when he was out of the windfall of the swell. On the crest he opened the throttle and the plane shuddered and lowered the windward wing. The motor roared and the plane rode the crest of the wave, rapidly gaining flying speed.

He bounced the Vought on the swell to get the plane in step and suddenly the swell ran out from under the staggering pontoon.

Terry held the nose down, gaining all the speed he could. The plane skinned inches above the angrily reaching waters. He looked at the air speed, ninety knots, and hauled the stick back in a zoom.

Terry checked his ship over. With the exception of nearly exhausted fuel tanks, everything seemed okay.

He glanced down at the Idaho. A stream of color was flying from her signal lanyards and the heliograph was blinking. Single dashes from the Idaho's bridge indicated to Terry that the Perry was informing the flagship of the rescue. The observer had also been picked up, he translated.

A GRAY bulk cleaned through the swells and pivoted at sight of the straining planes. The Perry maneuvered and ap-

THE Vought circled the Idaho at 500 feet and the landing flag fluttered from the halliards. The battleship swung from

line and made a ninety degree turn. Terry set the Vought down in the wake of the battleship, the rolling water flattening the swells considerably. Speedily, the plane was hoisted aboard and mechanics swarmed over it.

Terry went to his quarters for dry clothes and reported to the officer-of-the-deck on the bridge.

"You failed to carry out your mission as ordered, Lieutenant Marshall," the officer said without preamble.

"It was an excusable incident, Sir," Terry answered.

"Well," the O. D. grinned, "polish up that excuse. The old man wants to see you.

For the second time that day, Terry faced the Admiral, this time without the comforting presence of his brother. He was resigned to losing some seniority numbers, and possibly the indignity of a court martial.

The grizzled old veteran of the Navy line looked at his junior officer a long moment before he spoke. The gleam in his eye was unmistakable. Terry mentally laid odds on a court martial.

"Lieutenant Terrence Marshall," Clark cleared his throat, looking at Terry's service record. "No previous infraction of orders. Hmm. Do you recall our conversation this morning?"

"Yes, Sir."

"You proved my contention today, didn't you?"

"Not in my opinion, Sir," Terry answered respectfully.

The grizzled eyebrows rose questioningly. "You realize Lieutenant, that your action, when one of our planes was already out of commission, took away our only remaining eye?"

"Yes, Sir."

"You realize that your dropping out to save your brother, *one man*, you endangered the safety of a thirty million dollar fighting unit, and *fourteen hundred men*? You realize that by all rules of war your brother

should have drowned if there was no ship right at the spot to rescue him?"

"Yes, Sir, I realize that."

"Then, why, Lieutenant," Admiral Clark snapped, "do you feel that you were justified in disobeying your orders?"

"I felt I was justified, Sir," Terry argued resignedly, "in my knowledge that had there been an *actual* major engagement pending, I would have acted differently. I would have carried out my orders implicitly. None of the other pilots seemed aware of the condition of the sea and distance of the plane guard. Due to radio silence, I was unable to request a change of orders." He paused for breath.

"So," the Admiral grunted.

"**A**S THIS was only a practice game, and the Idaho was in no *real* danger, I deemed, in my judgment as an officer, that human life and safety of equipment that *was* in danger, came above and before a training problem."

Admiral Clark pursed his lips. "Would you have felt the same way if your brother hadn't been the pilot of that plane?"

"Yes, Sir."

"As I see it, Lieutenant, you rated your judgment above that of the commander of your division, whose direct order you disregarded."

"But conditions had changed since that order was given, Sir," Terry protested.

"Very well, Lieutenant," Admiral Clark grunted. "I wanted to be sure you fully realized the importance of your disobedience, before I transmit my views and report to the C-in-C. That's all!"

Terry's shoulders sagged imperceptibly, and Admiral Clark smiled kindly.

"Lieutenant Marshall. You're a good officer. I think the C-in-C will approve my recommendation of a citation for you and Ensign Colliner. It takes a good officer to know when to act on his own initiative. I can say only one thing to you, Sir. Well done!"

GERMANY'S AERIAL WEST WALL

... WHERE IS IT?

by DAVID C. COOKE

Facts, figures and findings about Goering's much spoken of
but little seen Luftwaffe!

GERMAN aviation," said Colonel Charles A. Lindbergh, "is now more than twice as strong as France and England combined." The famed Lone Eagle made that statement early in October. But if the Nazis really do have the 10,000-odd planes that aero experts in this country credit them with, then where are they? So far in the embroglio that's now raging between the Siegfried and Maginot Lines, the Fritz flyers have definitely been the underdogs and have been literally blasted from the skies every time they appeared within firing range of the Allied fighters.

If, in the first place, the Nazis actually do have the tremendous fleet of airplanes with which Goebbels' propaganda office credits Field-Marshal Hermann Goering's *Luftwaffe*, then why haven't they carried through the aerial *Blitzkrieg* that was expounded and predicted so often in the press? And, secondly, why didn't this huge air arm participate in the Polish affair on a larger scale? The answer is obvious: The only huge *Luftwaffe* that the Germans have is the little one that isn't here!

Granted, airplanes played a huge part in the rapid victory in Poland, but the fact still remains that this lightning warfare was carried on entirely with the cooperation of a mere handful of aircraft. As a matter of fact, the oft-bombed Warsaw

was besieged not by thousands of planes as the Nazis would have us believe, but *not more than thirty ever appeared over that city at any time*. And the only reason that the German ships caused such havoc is because almost the entire Polish airforce was destroyed in those first hectic days of battle. And even against the infinitely inferior fighting power of Poland, between 200 and 300 swastika-marked craft were destroyed.

Whenever one thinks of fighting power the trend always leans toward the romantic single-seaters. And when that point comes up, one invariably turns to the Messerschmitt Bf 109R which was clocked at 469.225 m.p.h. on a record run. However, that particular ship has never been put into service. Yes, the Messerschmitt is Germany's number one fighter, but it is outclassed by the oldest U. S. planes. As a matter of fact, an ex-soldier of fortune who fought in Spain said the following about Willy Messerschmitt's vaunted fighters:

"The Messerschmitts that we worked against in Spain had a top speed of about 275 m.p.h. at 10,000 feet—and even that's giving them the benefit of the doubt. I know, because I checked many of them against the Russian development of the Boeing fighter that I was flying. And inasmuch as in several cases I was right behind those German-made planes and firing

steadily, it is very probable that they were traveling at top speed. In addition to that, they were definitely less maneuverable than our own planes."

Also, a German pilot who was shot down in France is quoted as saying: "In comparison with those French Curtiss planes, our Messerschmitts are like streamlined bricks!" And in addition to that, Charles Gardner, of the B. B. C., whose reports from the R. A. F. in France have been distinguished for their accuracy and interest in the face of stringent censorship, slipped up on October 23 when he said that the wings of the Messerschmitt Bf 109R fighters do curious things and even come off if the machines are flown at more than 250 m.p.h.

ON NUMEROUS occasions, the Royal Airforce pilots have carried out raids far into German territory. In the first few days of the war, a flight of British Blenheim bombers penetrated as far as Wilhelmshaven and Cuxhaven. And on this long flight they were not even accosted by Nazi machines. But even though one of the Blenheims failed to return from this raid, it was destroyed by anti-aircraft fire and not by defending Nazi airplanes! Leaflet raids by the R. A. F. pilots have been carried out with great success, also, and one lone machine even got as far as Berlin—and still was not attacked by a single Nazi craft.

The German propaganda office made a feeble attempt recently to justify the huge numbers of airplanes that they have been losing. They said: "As yet the real German air strength has not been put into action, and at the present only the older planes and less-experienced pilots are being used in operations. Our real strength and our better pilots are being saved for later activities and will be pressed into service only when the right occasion arises."

On the face alone of this account even the least experienced layman can see flaws.

Herr Hitler and his henchmen have kept their sway over the German people solely by the great exploits and coups that they have arranged. *Der Fuehrer* was highly successful in his Czecho-Slovakia *Anschluss* and at Munich, but when England and France called his bluff over the Polish situation, the Chancellor was forced to show his hand. And, having no great air arm to support that hand, he found it necessary to resort to such propaganda reports.

Surely, with the least amount of thought you can readily realize that hokum like this is just a cover-up for the boy who called "Wolf" too often. In other words, if the *Luftwaffe* was great in strength, this scheme would be highly unprofitable to the Nazi regime, because a sensationalism impregnated race like the Germans would have its morale shot to pot if there wasn't a loop-hole of some sort for the alarmists to revert to.

So far, the only German planes that have been sighted over the English coast have been Heinkel He. 111K twin engined bombers, powered with two Junkers "Jumo" 1,050 h.p. engines, and antiquated Dornier Do. 18 postal patrol flying boats—also powered with "Jumo" engines—which before the war were in operation by Lufthansa for Azores to New York Atlantic Ocean survey work and mail carrying. These ships were highly unsuccessful on every raid that they attempted to carry out, and from reliable British sources it is learned that thirteen of the twenty-five ships that flew over England in a single week were destroyed by Home-Guard R. A. F. fighters.

Now, if German's "Aerial Westwall" is a Gargantuan power, then why weren't the more efficient and speedier Junkers and Henschel and Blohm & Voss ships used? One would suppose that it would be a far greater victory to have a fair chance of destroying several of the British warships with these ships, and having a possibility of returning to their bases, than to merely

be able to say that "a raid was undertaken" with the older types and have them destroyed.

THE usual French communiqué that finds its way to American newspapers is short, sketchy, and entirely an item that is wholly lacking in color and dramatic interest. However, I have been able to secure a communiqué that goes into a lengthy account of air activities on the Western Front. The release, which has appeared in none of the American newspapers, reads thusly:

" . . . On September 24 five French chaser planes engaged nine German Messerschmitt fighters in a desperate dog fight far beyond the front section of the Westwall. Two Messerschmitt machines were shot down in flames and two others nose-dived, and French front-line infantry saw them hit the ground.

"One French plane crashed into enemy territory with engine trouble and another fell over the French lines and was burnt out—its pilot jumping by parachute and landing inside the French lines. He was able to report that a fifth Messerschmitt plane had fallen in flames near Laudau.

"On September 25 there was another violent air battle above the German lines between three French machines and five Messerschmitt fighters. Three German machines were destroyed and one French pilot was forced to descend by parachute from his disabled plane.

"The remaining two German and two French machines continued the fight. One of the Germans was hit and made off, and then the second German made off, apparently intact."

Thus, we see that in the short space of two days the French shot down eight Nazi planes and lost only three craft themselves. The face statement of this communiqué may not appear to carry much information, but when one considers the fact that the French machines were always consid-

ered infinitely inferior to the highly touted Heinkels and Messerschmitts an entirely new aspect of the situation is gleaned. That is: Even with the supposedly poor equipment and not-to-well-trained flyers, the French are *still* definitely and overwhelmingly superior to the Nazis!

EARLY in 1939 American so called "experts" who traveled to Germany to study the Reich's airforce and production methods said that the Nazi factories were well tooled and equipped and that they were producing 60 planes a day. On the other hand, they also admitted that the French had only 1,000 airplanes, such as they were, to put into action against the German air might.

On the way home from Germany, a great number of these experts stopped in France and England to study their production methods in comparison to the Reich's. And they reported in no uncertain terms that the French would not be able to produce more than a maximum of 250 military airplanes a month for at least the next five years. In that statement lays the answer to the huge orders that have been let to American manufacturers by the *Armée de l'Air*. So, considering this point, it might be logical to believe that the French are in a precarious position.

Thus, the entire job of combating German production was left entirely in the hands of the British, who had only slightly over 2,000 ships available for action in the latter part of 1938. Their much-condemned "shadow plan," though, brought this meagre figure up to 4,000 by the time hostilities began. But now that the war has been in progress for several months, word comes through that they have stepped up production to 1,000 combat planes monthly!

It is claimed—but not confirmed—that swastika plants are buzzing at top speed and are turning out no less than 2,000 fighting craft every thirty days. But at least

half of that can be chalked up to the Nazi propaganda office. For with her drastic shortage of aluminum and component alloys, it would be impossible to completely fabricate that number of ships. And as the war drags on, production will undoubtedly become lower and lower until it is practically nil.

England and France, on the other hand, will be able to step up manufacturing to an undreamed of high, for they will have an unlimited supply of raw materials to draw from, not to mention the 7800 ships that have been ordered from the United States.

Just for a moment let us suppose that Germany actually does have the 10,000 ships that she claims. All right, she has the ships—but what about the men who fly them? Were the pilots *born* flyers? Of course not! Then, how were they trained in such great numbers?

In the United States we have the money and the schools and the equipment, but still our Air Corps finds it extremely difficult to turn out even 300 fully trained combat pilots a year. We have all-year flying weather and everything else that could possibly be asked for, and even with that it's a ticklish job to train the students into *first class* airmen.

And they still want to make us believe that they—the Nazis—can turn out 10,000 pilots in just a few short years! Oh, yes, they trained on gliders. But how can a glider-trained flyer step so gingerly from his engine-less, slow-landing soarer to a 300-m.p.h. roaring demon? Rubbish, that's all it is. Just plain, unadulterated rubbish that has been shoved at a gullible world.

IF WAR comes," a prominent American apparently-pro-Nazi-expert said in the early part of 1939, "Hitler will throw his gigantic air might against the British in one smashing, paralyzing blow. Shipping will be disrupted, communication will be completely cut off, and the morale of the English people will be shattered. In fact, the only way that Great Britain will be able to avoid this crushing disaster is to strike first, to hit hard at German key cities on the eve of hostilities.

"However, I feel that the English will fear to perpetrate such an act. They undoubtedly fear that their entire air force will be destroyed before it could even reach Berlin or any of the other great centers. Therefore, Britain will be doomed to defeat. And the only way to stave off this disaster is to continue to give Hitler whatever territorial concessions he may wish, in the hopes that some day his appetite for expansion of the Third Reich will be satiated."

More poppycock! To date there has not been one Nazi raid on an English city. And if the truth be known, Hitler is afraid that *his Luftwaffe* will be annihilated. But the Nazis pass it off by saying that "Goering is too humane to order the bombardment of civilians!"

To sum up the entire argument, events that have taken place since September 3, 1939, show *conclusively* that the Reich air arm is not omnipotent, that the Nazis' ships are not the "best in the world," and that Germany's boast of 10,000 planes is just a boast and nothing else. So we repeat: Where is Germany's Aerial Westwall?

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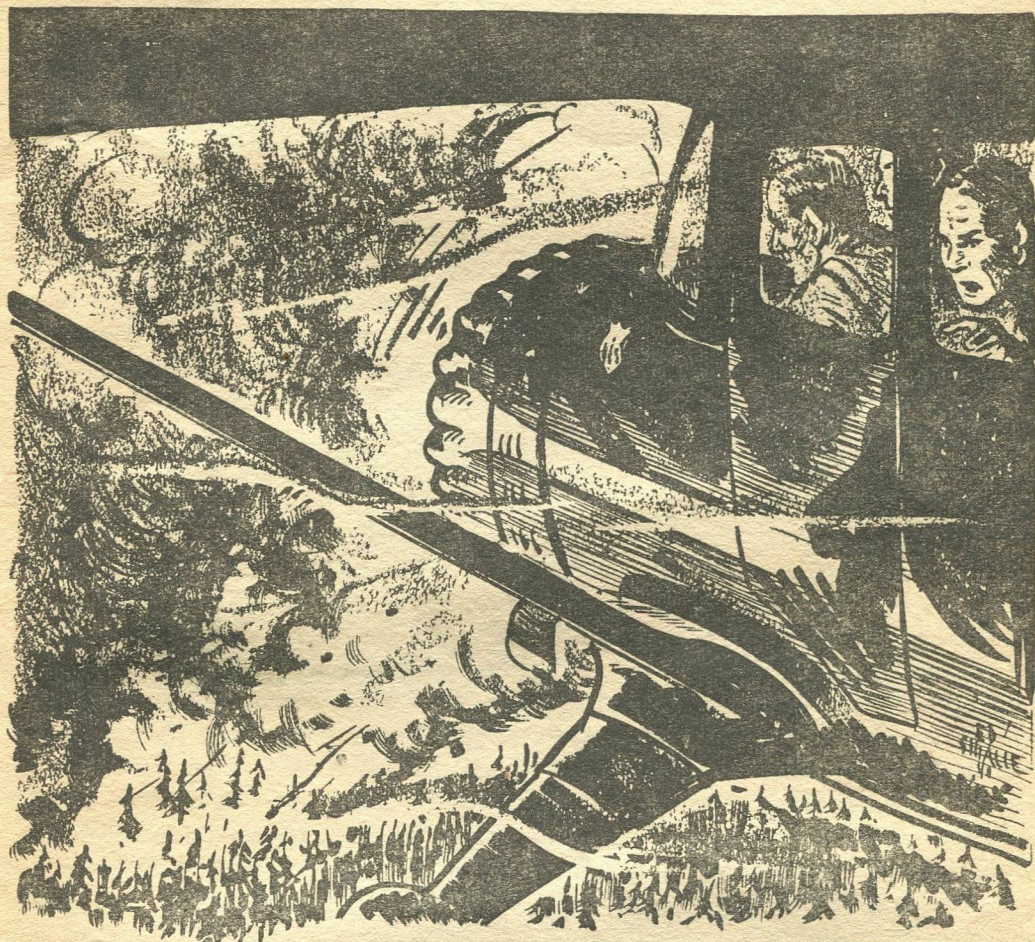


THE SIGN OF BETTER FICTION

COCKPIT COURAGE

by WILLIAM HERBERT RANDALL

The billows of smoke parted momentarily and right in the middle of the rift was Lookout Field!



When Jake Krevlin, escaped convict, boasted of his inhuman crimes, it turned Mickey Garland, who was flying Jake to his freedom, from an easy going aerial forest patrolman to a devil-may-care demon of the sky!

MICKY GARLAND sulked on the back of his neck in the swivel chair, heels hooked comfortably over the edge of the battered Forest Patrol radio desk. His thoughts were racing helter-skelter in a futile attempt to find a way around Letty's father. A trio of rangers were arguing heatedly all around him over the latest event to disrupt the

calm of this usually placid California Redwood forest.

"What would you do with that thirty grand, Micky?" one of them challenged abruptly.

"Huh—what?" Micky answered vaguely. "Oh—I don't know. I don't think I could enjoy that kind of money."

"Well," the ranger insisted. "What could

thirty grand get you that you want, and haven't got?"

Micky mulled the thought around in his mind, applying it to his only two interests—Letty and airplanes.

"Oh, I suppose I'd buy a trimotored transport and go after the \$84 an hour contract that's coming up in this division."

"Holy smoke, fella!" the ranger interrupted. "Aren't you satisfied with the twenty buck contract you have on your Stinson? You can't fly more than one at a time!"

"Well," Micky decided, after a pause. "I could hire a pilot to fly that one. The contract also pays five an hour and keep for a pilot. I gotta expand so Letty and I—" He halted in confusion. It was a tender subject that was well known through the surrounding country.

The rangers grinned. "You think old man Redding would approve of you, then, huh?" one of them asked. "Boy and girl in love. Papa says, 'No, you're not earning enough!' I get it!"

Micky threw a magazine in the ranger's general direction and let his thoughts revert to the old problem of Letty and her dad. It was no use—old man Redding was obdurate in his refusal. More income, or no wedding. Micky's mind slid into another channel for relief. The thought of having thirty thousand dollars to spend was pleasant, but he couldn't bring himself to understand how anyone could enjoy money earned in that fashion.

Jake Krevlin's trial and conviction as Chicago's crime boss had filled the papers as far west as California. Micky had followed the case in its later phases because of the humorous treatments by the press.

The government, after due deliberation, had decided to be responsible for Jake's board and room for an appallingly large number of years and the manager of the government's rock island resort in Frisco Bay reserved a small room in his big house for Jake.

Not wishing to impose upon such a generous government, Jake somehow parted with his traveling companions and faded into obscurity. His more than outraged host in Washington immediately posted a reward and increased it repeatedly. The amazing sum of thirty thousand dollars was now offered for information as to where a new invitation would be likely to reach its unwilling guest.

MICKY had lost interest in the case, until this morning, when squads of F. B. I. agents and reward-hungry possemen streamed quietly past the Forest Patrol airplane base. The much sought-after Jake was reportedly holed up in the forest near Lookout. Some man stood a good chance of becoming affluent before the day was finished. That man also stood a good chance of not living to collect the money earned. Jake was reputedly very clever and resourceful, and would resent anyone interfering with his apparent desire to live a life without supervision of men in gun towers.

"Lookout Point calling Medvale!" the radio blasted in Micky's ear, scattering his thoughts completely. He reached for the cord of the microphone and inched it over the edge of the desk without changing his position in the swivel chair. He caught the mike expertly before it hit the floor and grinned triumphantly at the rangers.

"You're gonna miss one of these days," one of them predicted.

"Go ahead, Lookout," he said leisurely into the mike.

"Get out that air boss of yours, Micky. Fire, and wind pushing it fast! Bring all available rangers!"

Micky's heels hit the floor with a crash and he was on his feet. The rangers were grabbing equipment and heading for the hangar.

"We're on our way!" Micky barked into the microphone. "Did they catch that guy Krevlin?"

"Naw! Captain McDowell drafted all of the posse to fight fire, and are they disgusted. Get moving!"-

Micky's passengers were green around the gills after an hour of circling over the fire area. The heat waves and smoke turned the air to rutted iron under the Stinson's laboring gull-wings, and it was no place for a weak stomach. Smoke and cinders blew with the wind across the river, and only Micky's familiarity with the country told him that he was over the postage-stamp clearing on the river bank that served as a field for Forest Patrol planes. River and field alike were obliterated.

He forced the plane down with its motor, the heat waves increasing the lift of the wings to such an extent it was impossible to judge a power-off glide. Alternately he flew by instruments, then by the seat of his pants when it was necessary to watch for the treetops, in an attempt to dive through the smoke and get under the blanket. Once under he could follow the river to the field.

It was hopeless. He hauled back on the control wheel in disgust and zoomed clear. It was an impossible task, but a necessary one. Necessary because one look at the fuel gauge needle wavering near zero told him he was in a bad spot.

MICKY grunted, feeling that luck had run out on him completely. Resignedly, he lined the plane's nose on the line where the river should be and started down. Better the water than burning trees. No use to bail out—the chute would catch fire and drop him, or the heat waves would dangle him over the flame until he was done to a turn. His ranger passengers were without chutes, and neither could Micky see himself letting his Stinson go into the fire. Then he would be out with Letty—no income at all!

He tightened his safety belt and grinned at his passengers. "Hang on!" he yelled and dove with head out of the window,

cussing wholeheartedly the fire, the smoke, and everything in general.

The cussing might have helped, but Micky was suddenly too busy to wonder. Lady Luck came back and sat lovingly at the controls with him. The billows of smoke parted momentarily by a freak wind and right in the middle of the rift was Lookout Field!

Micky changed the course of his dive and scooted for the opening that was already beginning to close up again. The opening closed but Micky kept diving, eyes slitted against the smoke and slipstream. When the ship plunged into the smoke, he sideslipped to lose speed and cut the switch. The cabin was instantly filled with choking, blinding smoke. Micky's watery eyes barely saw the field in time to pull out of the slip and pancake to the ground with an agonized shriek from the oleo struts. He locked the right wheel brake and the ship romped into a carousal groundloop around the locked wheel.

Micky pressed his fingers to streaming eyes and waited for the ripping crash of his wings shearing on the massive boundary trees. But no crash came and the ship halted in its crazy gyrations. Micky released his belt and staggered back to the door in the cabin. The seats were empty, the rangers out already, so he felt better about the landing.

He dropped down to solid ground, still rubbing his eyes. Before he had taken a dozen steps he floundered into icy water over his head. He spluttered gaspingly back to the surface, cold water easing the burn of the smoke in his eyes, and glared up at the laughing rangers grouped on the bank. The plane had come to a halt right on the banks of the river.

"You—" he started to bellow in rage, then grinned at the dripping rangers. They had incidentally made the same mistake.

Captain McDowell, the ranger chief, came up just as Micky was hauled out. The grizzled old Captain's orders snapped

crisply. The rangers departed hurriedly and Micky started for the gasoline dugout.

"If you've finished your bath," McDowell remarked sarcastically, "get back to Medvale and stand by. We may need supplies that you can drop without landing."

Fifteen minutes of carrying and emptying five-gallon gasoline cans dried Micky's clothes on him. He held his breath and prayed fervently with every can he opened and poured. He hunched his body protectively over the funnel. The air was full of flying cinders and sparks. Just one of them in that open funnel. . . .

He was groggy from inhaled fumes, but highly relieved when the last can was emptied and the tank capped tightly.

FASTENING the safety belt, he pressed the electric starter and snapped the switch. The motor caught instantly, propelling a stream of sparks and cinders past the cabin windows. Full throttle, he horsed the Stinson down the field and into the air, clawing for altitude. The heat waves smacked up and the rate of climb meter spun erratically, then the plane was clear and roaring back to Medvale. Micky opened the windows, set his stabilizer and gulped the fresh, invigorating air.

The motor purred smoothly, but it was necessary to change the stabilizer. The ship was rapidly becoming nose-heavy. Heart crowding his tonsils for hangar space, Micky loosened his safety belt and turned to peer back. A fire-eaten elevator surface, or something equally as serious wouldn't have surprised him in the least.

But he was definitely startled when the cause for nose-heaviness became apparent. A large black hole loomed right in his face. That hole was topped with a pair of sardonically glinting black eyes under husky brows. On closer inspection, the black hole proved to be the business end of a very large automatic. A deputy sheriff's badge glinted vaguely in the background.

"You got a passenger, aviator." Bushy

Brows grinned and waved the demoter expressively.

"This isn't a taxi, copper," Micky growled, adjusting the stabilizer to correct for the man's added weight moved forward from the tail where he must have been hidden during the take-off. Micky felt righteously indignant.

"What's the idea," he snapped at his passenger. "Scared to fight fire—or are you too hot after that thirty grand to bother with a mere forest fire? This is a government plane. By forcing your way in with a gun, you're flirting with a Federal Pen, buddy!"

Bushy Brows continued to grin derisively, "Flirting with a Federal Pen—that's good! I been kissing *the rock* right on the nose for eight months! Catch on, Punk? Get over the line into Oregon! Do what I tell you, and you don't get hurt. Come on. Hump!"

Micky's brain did a quick take-off and shot its landing on a picture of a bushy browed individual he had seen in the papers. This, Micky informed Micky, was none other than the much sought after Jake Krevlin!

MICKY'S brain was stymied for the moment. This Jake was a hard guy to stop and Micky Garland was not the one that was going to try where others had failed so miserably. Being quite capable of reading the signs, he decided Jake was capable of murder, and, therefore Micky was going to keep things on a friendly basis.

"Listen, Krevlin," he grinned amiably, "I see the point, and I haven't anything against you. Oregon it is—we've just about enough gas for Grant's Pass."

"Smart boy," Jake grinned coldly. "But I believe in playing safe because I don't know much about these airplanes. I do know that you are sitting on a parachute, and with that thing you could jump out and leave me up here alone. So, aviator,

shuck out of that thing and pass it back."

"Sure," Micky grinned and complied to show his good intentions. Jake watched him closely to see how the harness went on. Micky found his seat too low with the chute out from under him. He raised up and lifted the ratchet adjustment to suit, cracking his knee painfully on the gasoline valve at his side.

"Damn!" he grunted and watched Jake worry himself into the web harness straps. The star on his shirt was in the way so he yanked it off and put it in his pocket.

"Why the badge?" Micky asked curiously.

Krevlin looked at him expressionlessly for a moment. "Slugged a bull that got too close back there," he hooked a thumb over his shoulder toward the burning area, then grinned. "Pinned on his badge and joined the bunch that was hunting for me." He laughed mirthlessly. "When they were all busy fighting fire I slipped away and got in your airplane."

"That fire was a lucky break, eh?"

"Lucky break, hell! That was brains. I started that fire myself! They were getting too close—never could have gotten away from that trap any other way. They'd have recognized me sooner or later. Now, when the fire's out and they find that body, with my watch and belt buckle on him. Luck, hell!"

It took a few moments to register with Micky. "You *started* that fire," he asked cheerily. "And that officer . . ."

"Yeah," Jake admitted smugly. "Started right around that bull I cold-cocked. He'll be burned to a crisp and the G's will identify it as little Jake, and write me off their books. Clever, eh?"

"Uh, huh," Micky answered slowly. "Very—clever!" Micky had been disinterested in the fate of this man. If anything, he had felt a pang of sympathy for him because he was being hunted so mercilessly. He had even found difficulty in understanding how anyone could bring

themselves to accepting money for running down another human like a mad dog. But Micky's emotions were doing an abrupt about face. Because that was exactly what he was. A mad dog of a man, a conscienceless killer that burned men alive to cover his trail, destroying wantonly magnificent trees that for hundreds of years had never been known to die a natural death.

Micky's eyes narrowed as he gazed straight ahead. He began to realize what was in store for himself. Jake had been free with all this information. Surely, he wouldn't trust Micky to keep it to himself after they reached Oregon. The answer was simple. Jake didn't care how much the pilot knew. Men who are dead pass on no information to the living.

BUT, by the same token of cleverness indicated in Krevlin's warped reasoning, Micky was sure he wouldn't die of a bullet. It would be in a way that would arouse no suspicion. He tried to push his thoughts along the line of the fugitive's reasoning. What would be the most natural way for a pilot to die? In a crash, of course. The incident of the parachute came back in full clarity. Micky realized that, more than likely, when Jake had ridden as far as he wanted, he would crack the pilot over the skull and jump. The plane would crash and who would suspect murder because of one extra bump on the head?

Micky's heart was beating a crescendo in his throat. He was vaguely surprised that he was no longer in awe of his passenger. Contemptuous—yes, that was the way he felt now. The redwoods were still a solid mass below the speeding plane. Micky remembered there was an emergency field about five miles ahead. He also knew that the field would be indistinguishable to an unpracticed eye unless they were directly over it. The surrounding trees formed a protective screen.

Micky considered the fact as more dan-

gerous than helpful. He'd be slugged the moment Jake spotted that field, he was certain. Micky rubbed the tender spot on his knee and glared at the offending gas valve. Slowly, the glare receded, a hopeful gleam came into his eyes. Mentally, he calculated the distance to the field, and his altitude, then glanced at Jake in the rear vision mirror. The fugitive was looking out of the window.

Micky twisted the gas valve until the fuel pressure gauge started to falter, then turned it on again and got his hands quickly into sight on the control wheel. When the air lock in the gas line reached the carburetor, the steady roar of the motor faltered, sputtered a few times before gas flowed freely again.

Jake pushed a pale, startled face over Micky's and looked at the pilot's hands suspiciously. The pilot was apparently busy looking for a spot to land.

"Better pray this engine keeps roaring, Krevlin!" Micky growled.

JAKE settled back and started looking down at the trees again. He rolled down the windows on both sides for a clearer view. Repeatedly, nervous fingers caressed the rip cord ring in the chute harness. Micky smiled in satisfaction. Jake was nervous. That was enough to start the ball rolling.

Micky screwed his features into what he hoped would pass for a worried frown and twisted his head around. Jake's attention was still riveted on the forests below.

"Hey, Krevlin!" Micky yelled suddenly. The startled fugitive leaped to his feet, face deathly pale. By a supreme effort, Micky maintained the worried frown and made his voice sound urgent. "If this motor quits, we'll both have to bail out in one chute. There's no place handy to make a dead-stick landing!" He stared thoughtfully at the chute Krevlin was wearing. "It isn't made to carry double—but, we'll have to risk it, I suppose." Micky grinned hope-

fully at his passenger, then turned back to the controls.

Micky kept observing Jake's reactions in the panel mirror. The man's full attention was again riveted on the country below, apparently endeavoring to locate a highway or river that he could later follow to a town. The rip cord ring was tightly gripped in one fist, the automatic in the other.

Micky calculated rapidly and closed the gas valve. The line and carburetor should drain of fuel in about fifteen seconds. That would place him almost over the field when the motor failed.

The steady roar of the engine faltered. The exhaust, so comfortably regular before, spluttered and choked when the mixture reaching the cylinders leaned out.

"Get ready, Krevlin," Micky yelled warningly. "We'll have to jump!"

The advice was unnecessary. Jake was already preparing, his face green with fright, set in rage and determination.

The motor coughed rackingly and died. The silence could really be terrifying to one who didn't understand. The ghostly whirring of the idling propeller mixed with the whistle of the wind in the struts was nerve wracking after the steady purr of the motor.

The emergency field dead ahead was easily discernible to the pilot but blocked from Krevlin's vision by the bulk of the motor. Micky set the stabilizer for a flat glide and kneeled on the pilot seat, his back to the controls.

The automatic was menacing him steadily. Jake's free hand was releasing the door catch.

"This chute is only made to hold one man," he grated. "You said so yourself!" There was a trace of panic in the voice. "I'm jumping alone, aviator! Besides, you know too much!" He pushed on the door and released the safety catch on the automatic.

A queer feeling seized at Micky's vitals. He had miscalculated. Jake, in his panic,

was going to use the gun. He had fully expected Jake to bail out and leave him alone, but beyond that supposition he had failed to plan.

THE flick of the safety catch and the cold gleam in the fugitive's eyes goaded Micky into action. He lashed back viciously with his left foot and found the right rudder pedal, jamming it full against the stop. The ship skidded madly into a flat turn and Jake was thrown against the cabin door. The automatic exploded deafeningly. A neat round hole, circled with cob-webby lines appeared magically in the windshield.

Jake clawed frantically for support but Micky kept his foot jammed against the rudder and lowered the left wing. The ship fell into a steep slip. The wind lashed through the open windows of the cabin and snapped the unlatched door open. Jake toppled out backwards, a tangle of threshing arms and legs.

Micky spun to his controls and straightened the floundering plane into a dive. The slipstream slammed the cabin door and he wrenched the gas valve open. He held the dive steeply to race the propeller and clear the fuel line of air.

The trees rapidly increased both in size and proximity. Micky judged another five hundred feet before the plane and treetops reached the same level. With two hundred feet to spare, the motor caught in a full throated roar.

The temptation to haul the control wheel all the way back into his stomach was almost too strong for Micky. Those trees were coming at him too fast for comfort. But at this speed the danger of shedding wings that were constructed for commercial flying and not combat pull-outs was too great.

By sheer effort of will power he kept easing the wheel back gently but steadily, every nerve taut and straining to pull mightily. Gradually, the plane flattened and

skimmed just above the treetops in level flight. Nerves relaxed quiveringly, Micky zoomed back into the sky, curled the Stinson over five hundred feet and levelled off again.

He spotted the dangling figure of his erstwhile passenger immediately. The chute was almost over the field, drifting slightly with the wind and about a hundred feet lower than the plane.

Micky grinned tightly at the accuracy of his split-second timing. He snapped on the radio and reported the situation to Lookout headquarters. A G-man was on the air instantly.

"A posse is being ordered from the town two miles from that field you're over, pilot! Try and capture the guy if you can, but keep track of him anyway!"

"Okay," Micky grunted and snapped off the radio. How was he supposed to capture a man that was armed with an automatic and a nasty disposition? He put the nose of the plane down and zipped past the dangling fugitive. A flash of fire from Krevlin's hand proved he was still a formidable opponent. Fresh holes in the left and right cabin windows where the bullet had zinged through further proved the fact. Micky pulled out of range to think things over. The chute continued to settle toward the field.

Being unfamiliar with parachute jumping, Jake was likely to hurt himself in a novice landing; might even break a leg. That would prevent his escape, but he would still be able to use a gun. Micky knew his gas wouldn't last forever. Perhaps, not long enough for the posse from town to arrive. Eventually, he would be forced to land on that field and be at the mercy of an ambushed killer.

JAKE was almost down, but his chute was drifting fast toward the trees at the edge of the field. Micky watched intently. An experienced jumper would know how to pull shroud lines and guide himself into the

clear, but Jake went into a giant tree backwards. The silk canopy collapsed and snagged on a lightning-riven branch. Jake was swinging and squirming in an attempt to reach a near by branch and solid footing.

Micky slapped the throttle wide and skimmed the treetops in a wide circle. Approaching the tree from the side opposite to Krevlin; he roared over. His tailskid almost nicked the top branches as he nosed over. The Stinson roared the length of the field full-throttle, prop-blast smashing at the dangling figure. At the last moment, Micky zoomed clear and circled back.

The blast had slammed Krevlin backwards against the heavy branch. The figure was swaying in the harness, chin on chest and arms hanging limply at his sides.

Micky roared around the field again and shot a hurried landing. He locked the breaks and ran over to the base of the tree. The automatic was on the ground where Jake had evidently dropped it. There was the unmistakable sound of automobiles coming up the dirt road from town.

Sitting down on the matted ground, Micky lit a cigarette and relaxed comfortably. He spit on the match carefully

before discarding it.

MICKY was sitting on the post office steps in the sun. A treasury check for thirty thousand dollars had just arrived and he was figuring on the back of the envelope.

1 trimotor plane.....	\$12,000
2 parachutes.....	700
3 window glasses (for Stinson)....	21

A shadow blocked off the comforting warmth of the sun and he was confronted with Letty Redding and her father. Letty's brown eyes were lovely with pride, but her father's were cold and uncompromising.

Redding took the envelope from Micky's fingers when Letty sat down beside him on the steps. Redding looked at the check and the notations on the envelope.

"Humph," he grunted and pencilled something under Micky's list. "Don't come home too late," he grunted again, dropping the envelope in Letty's lap.

Micky stared after Redding's departing back, then at the envelope. Scrawled almost illegibly was another item on the list:

"Marriage license, \$3."

ACTION-PACKED ADVENTURE IN THE FROZEN NORTH

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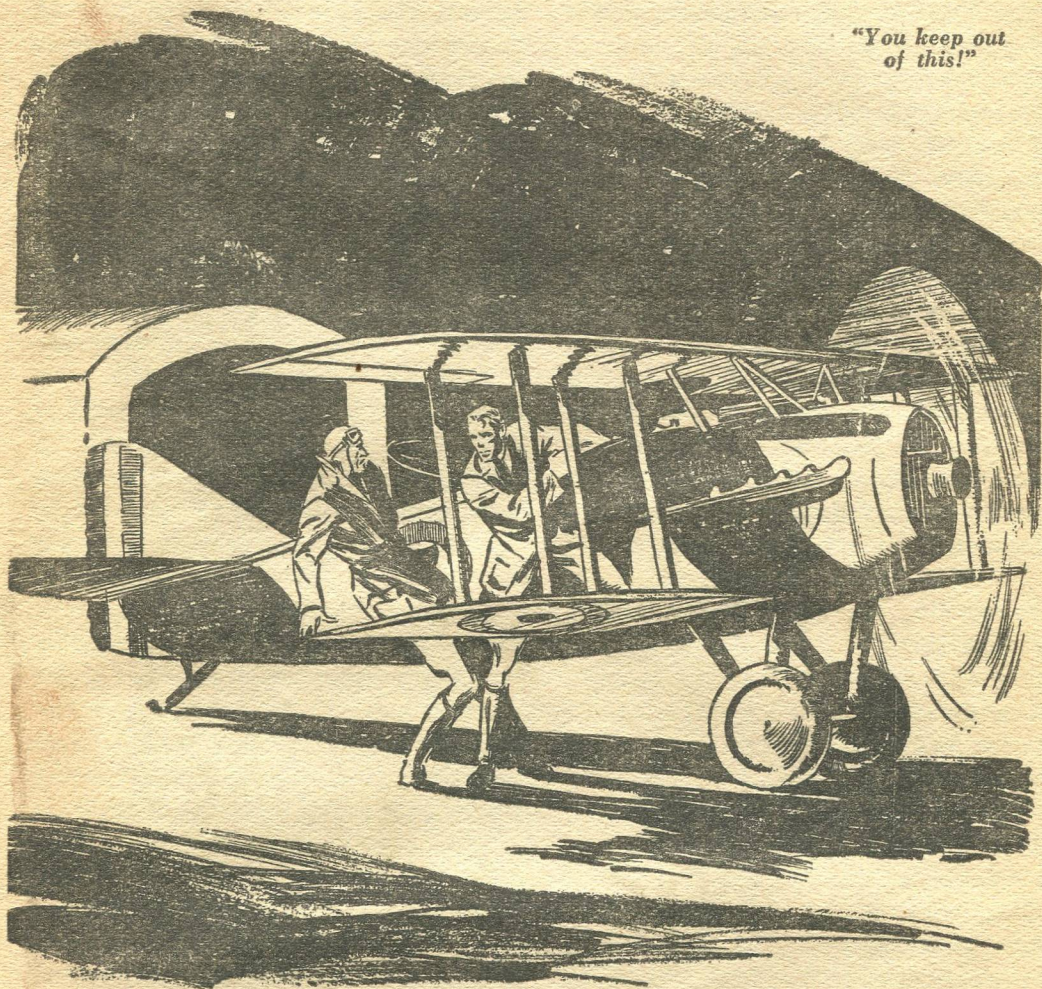
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DIMINUTIVE SKY-DEVIL

by
STEVE BROWN

*"You keep out
of this!"*



Pinky Reid was a small package of dynamite, and according to Pinky, Mr. Reid was the best pilot on the western front, but much to the disgust of his fellow warriors he went out to prove it!

HIGH above the airdrome at Chaudun, a tiny combat plane tore through the sky as if pursued by the Devil mounted on the winged horse, Pegasus. It looped, it barrel-rolled, it flopped over on its back, and finally, with motor wide open and wires screaming like banshees, it went into a power-dive

straight for the flying field. Loitering pilots and mechanics scuttled for safety. "Pinky" Reid was doing his stuff!

Pinky was twenty years old but had the appearance of being in his early teens. Smooth, pink skin of a baby; curly blond hair and blue eyes. He had barely squeezed through on the height test; one

hundred ten pounds was his top weight. Pinky was one of the all-too-frequent replacements during a period when von Dachsburg and his flying circus had been giving Flight C their undivided and most unpleasant attention.

Von Dachsburg was a vicious air fighter who seemed to hold a charmed life. The pilots of Flight C had dubbed him "The Dachshund of Hell." He was the direct cause of Flight C losing three pilots and five planes in less than six weeks, which did not tend to place them in any too jovial a frame of mind at the time of the diminutive Pinky's arrival.

Pinky managed to make himself decidedly unpopular with the other pilots of his unit, from the very start. He talked continually and always in the first person. To hear him spout, the war would be won just as soon as he got into the air.

"When do we do a patrol?" he airily inquired after the formality of introductions was over.

"At 4:30 tomorrow morning," snapped Flight Commander "Wolf" Lewis, whose patience had been sorely tried during the past six weeks.

"Can't be any too soon to suit me," boasted Pinky, grinning from ear to ear. "I crave action and lots of it."

"You came to the right place," Wolf grimly assured him. "We specialize in plenty of action and few words," he added meaningly, as he turned sharply and strode off.

If Pinky was aware of Wolf's coolness, it did not dampen his spirits. Turning to Speed Irwin, he continued to boast: "Flight C sure is lucky to get me. I was the best flyer in the school. Finished the course in less time than any of the others. Guess I'm just a natural-born flyer."

"Glad to hear it," replied Speed. "Flight C has been playing in hard luck lately."

"I'm poison and sudden death to bad luck," the self-assured little Pinky informed the world.

A PEA-SOUP drizzling rain was falling the next morning as the five sleepy-eyed pilots of Flight C gathered on the tarmac. But even a dismal rain could not dampen Pinky's spirits. While the mechanics wheeled out the five little Camels, he swaggered about, talking to anyone who seemed inclined to listen to him.

"Hope we flush a few Huns this morning, I crave to down the first of my five" he spouted. And as he scrambled into the cockpit of his plane, he waved to the other pilots. "Watch my smoke, boys. You might learn a thing or two!"

Wolf's lips were moving as he climbed into his plane and the words that emanated therefrom were not of a nature that look well in print. Gunning his motor viciously, he led Flight C up above the cloud-bank; above the drizzling rain and headed for the line. It was impossible to see the trenches below, but when he judged they were well into enemy territory, Wolf changed the course of Flight C frequently for safety's sake. Suddenly he wagged his wings as a signal and at the same moment five specks emerged from a cloud. The specks proved to be Fokkers rushing to meet Flight C with patent eagerness for a fight. Machine guns chattered as the Flight C pilots warmed up their Vickers. When only a few yards separated the two flights, Wolf darted away in a climbing turn and the Hun leader zoomed after him. Every man for himself now!

As a green Fokker pounced eagerly on Pinky's tail, Pinky shoved the stick forward and went into a power dive, his plane boring into the air at terrific speed. The Hun was right behind him waiting the chance that would be his when Pinky leveled off. Now, if Pinky had been a veteran air fighter he never would have attempted to pull into a tight loop while traveling some three hundred feet per second, but Pinky was *not* a veteran. Pulling the stick back into his stomach, he yanked the Camel into a loop that threatened to

strip the wings. The meteor-like speed, however, brought him safely out of the path of the on-rushing Fokker. As Pinky reached the top of the loop and was upside down, he caught the enemy plane fairly in his sights. Pushing the stick forward to hold his sights on the Hun, he cut loose the eager chattering Vickers, pouring a twin stream of hot lead into the enemy ship. The Hun pilot clutched convulsively at his throat and slumped into the cockpit. With the controls wild, the Fokker spun earthward in flames. Pinky had made good his boast and brought down the first of his coveted five!

AS FLIGHT C winged its way back to the drome, Pinky made no pretense of keeping his place in formation. He looped, spun and cavorted about the others like an excited puppy. As the flying field came in sight, he skillfully spun his landing wheels on Speed Irwin's upper wing, and then dove down in front of him to show him the spinning wheels. It was quite evident that the baby-faced kid was an expert flyer, with an uncanny sense of distance, but Wolf's lips were again moving as he watched Pinky's aerial antics—and not in benediction!

When the flight rolled onto the tarmac, Pinky popped out of his cockpit like a jumping jack.

"Guess I'm not hot, eh?" he beamed. "At the rate I started off, I'll be the ace of this field before you fellows know what it's all about."

"Look here, wise guy," said Wolf grimly. "You cut out the circus stuff when we're on patrol, or you'll find yourself grounded. I have a hard enough time of it explaining the loss of so many ships in actual combat without you cracking up a few more just for sport."

"Is that the way to treat a fellow that's just brought down a Hun?" asked Pinky querulously.

"What do you expect me to do? Kiss you

on both cheeks?" growled Wolf. "That's not the first or only Hun that's been shot down. Besides, you seem thoroughly capable of handing out your own bouquets."

Pinky should have been thoroughly subdued, but he was far from it. During the day he singled out each pilot and privately explained in ample detail just how he shot down the German Fokker. To listen to Pinky, the German pilots were in for a rough time of it and would soon be as extinct as the Dodo bird.

The fact that Pinky was making good as an air fighter—had brought down his second enemy plane within the week—did not increase his popularity because of his vainglorious attitude.

"For the love of Mike, Pinky, lay off tooting your own horn so damned loud," demanded Speed as Pinky paused for breath during one of his orations concerning his air fighting prowess.

"And why shouldn't I toot my own horn?" returned Pinky. "I know the instrument better than anyone else. You birds don't seem to recognize a real air fighter when you see one. Now, take it when I had those two Fokkers on my tail yesterday. . . ." Flight C groaned in unison and hurried out of earshot, where they proceeded to plan ways and means for squelching the boastful Pinky. But had they known they might have saved their collective breath. Pinky's Nemesis was even then on the wing.

WORD came that on the morrow an English newspaper correspondent was to pay Flight C a visit. When Wolf Lewis heard the news, he swore long and volubly but Pinky did not share the Flight Commander's antipathy for the coming visitor. In fact, he was in the seventh heaven of delight. Here would be his opportunity to enlighten the world as to what a great flyer he, Pinky Reid, was. Here would be a man who encouraged conversation—requested it, in fact. Pinky became a dynamo

of action. He polished his boots until they rivaled the sun for brilliance; repaired and overhauled his flying togs until they were symbolic of "what the young air fighter shall wear," and, to the delight of his fellow pilots, he had ceased to brag—he was saving it all for the journalist.

THE morning the journalist was due to arrive, dawned bright and clear. Flight Commander Lewis ordered the ships wheeled out on the line in order that Flight C might make an exhibition hop for the benefit of the newspaper man. Headquarters had passed the word along to make as good an impression as possible and to extend the visitor every courtesy.

Wolf had just completed a last minute inspection of the carefully groomed little planes, when a side car motorcycle bearing the journalist dashed into the yard. After introductions and the regulation pleasantries were through, Wolf led the way to the shack that served as an office, trying the while to look and act as if he were pleased and highly honored by the visit. Seating himself at the improvised desk, he motioned the journalist, whose name was Rawlins, toward an opposite chair.

"I'd rawther stand," replied Rawlins in a slow precise voice. "I find I can concentrate much better standing."

Rawlins was an angular young man measuring well over six feet. He wore thick lensed glasses, behind which his pale near-sighted eyes floated like oysters—and with about as much expression. He had an eager hungry look and a habit of thrusting his head forward as if he suspected the interviewed party of withholding some choice bit of news. It was quite evident that Mr. Rawlins took himself and his mission very seriously.

"Now, Mr. Lewis," he said eagerly, "if you will be so kind as to tell me something of the—er—unfortunate encounters you have had with the German pilot whom you

call 'The Dachshund of Hell.' . . ."

As Wolf outlined the past six weeks' activities of Flight C, Rawlins scribbled furiously in his notebook, and judging from the number of pot hooks and curves that appeared as if by magic, the story was losing nothing in the writing.

At the urgent request of Wolf, the pilots of Flight C were all congregated in the little office. Pinky was very much in evidence, pacing nervously about the room, looking as if he might burst any moment with pent-up eloquence.

"I think that's about all that might be of interest," finished Wolf. "The boys and I will put on a little exhibition flight for you now, Mr. Rawlins, to give you a general idea of how we patrol the front."

"Splendid, Mr. Lewis, splendid," exclaimed Rawlins. "But first, if you don't mind, I would like very much to interview your best pilot; the ace of Flight C."

That was Pinky's cue! The moment for which he had longed had finally arrived. He was before Rawlins in a flash, but even as he drew a long preparatory breath, the well meaning journalist interrupted.

"Ah," said Mr. Rawlins, beaming paternally upon the diminutive Pinky. "The little mascot—er—bat boy, eh, what?"

The pilots of Flight C coughed, choked, and finally burst into loud guffaws.

"Oh, I say now," chided Rawlins, "you shouldn't laugh at the little fellow. Don't you mind, sonny. After a bit I'll take your picture—er—standing by an airplane," and beaming benignly Rawlins reached down from his towering height and patted Pinky on the cheek.

Without a word Pinky turned and walked slowly through the open door onto the flying field, where he stood, an abject and crestfallen little figure. For once Pinky was rendered speechless!

"And now . . ." began the energetic Rawlins, but his voice was drowned in the ominous whirr of a motor overhead. A black shadow bearing the outlines of a

Fokker flitted across the sunlit field, the threatening whirr changed to a full throated roar as the plane leveled off a hundred feet above the field and zoomed back up. A patch of white fluttered to the ground at Pinky's feet. Unfolding the paper and hastily scanning the contents, Pinky dashed to the office door, tossed the paper inside and sprinted madly across the field to the hangars.

One of the pilots recovered the note and handed it to Wolf, who swore softly and hurried around the desk. Rawlins snatched the paper from the desk and read aloud:

"I will not tolerate the name I have learned you choose to call me. Send up your best pilot and I shall make you regret calling me 'The Dachshund of Hell.'"
VON DACHSBURG."

"I SAY," stammered Rawlins excitedly, "what . . ." but the pilots of Flight C, led by Wolf, were dashing across the flying field. Rawlins paused to scribble in his notebook and then galloped after them.

As Wolf reached the hangars, Pinky was just climbing into the cockpit of his plane.

"You birds keep out of this!" yelled Pinky grimly. The mechanic threw the prop and the motor caught with a deafening roar. Revving the motor far too briefly for safety, Pinky tore down the field and into the air in a climbing turn.

The Hun pilot was circling the field at five hundred feet. As Pinky reached the same level, the German held up four fingers and pointed skyward. He was suggesting four thousand feet altitude be gained before starting the grudge duel. Pinky waved his hand in agreement and started climbing the sky, closely followed by the German. When the desired altitude was reached and the two planes were roaring along side by side, the Hun smiled derisively; pointed at Pinky and then earthward. Pinky thumbed his nose in reply and shot away to the right

in a long zooming curve. The Hun hurled his black cross ship to the left. Now they were roaring back as though bent on a head on collision. Both pilots were firing as they hurtled madly forward. Short crimson bursts spurted from the machine guns, but neither plane faltered in its headlong flight. To the anxious on-lookers below, a crackup seemed inevitable. Rawlins was hysterically muttering, "What, what . . ." and scribbling in his notebook. Even the hard boiled Wolf was standing with clenched fists, his face drawn in anxious lines.

At the last second, Pinky and the Hun ace pulled away in zooming turns. Twice more they came at each other as if hell bent on destruction of planes and pilots, but neither was able to gain the advantage.

After jockeying for position, they closed in and started circling. The circle was not more than a hundred fifty feet in diameter, each plane at the opposite side, one wing pointed earthward in a vertical bank. Around and around they circled in a mad whirl, both holding their position; the Fokker's better motor being offset by Pinky's extremely light weight. Now and then one of the planes would hit the other's back wash and stagger drunkenly for an instant, then get back into its stride.

Whichever pilot first came out of the circle would have the grim assurance that the other would be on his tail in a flash, but finally Pinky took the chance. Leveling off, he shoved the Camel into a whining power dive. The Hun finished his half-circle and dove on Pinky's tail, his guns raking the Camel's right wing pitilessly. As Pinky pulled his plane's nose up to loop, the Hun was guilty of an error. Instead of playing it safe, he took something for granted. He assumed that Pinky would pull into a tight fast loop, which was just what Pinky tried to do and failed. He yanked the stick back too rapidly at the start, his ship mushed, lost speed, and hung momentarily at the top of the loop; hung

long enough for the Hun ace to complete his own tight loop first and come out with Pinky right on his tail!

The Hun glanced around in bewildered surprise and threw his plane into a mad dive. Pinky bored after him, his Vickers vomiting a stream of bullets into the Fokker. The thrusting lance of death found a living mark and the German ace slumped limply in the cockpit, his head rolling grotesquely from side to side. His plane did not falter in its whining death dive. Straight down it shot, the roaring of the wide open motor vying with the screaming of the wires until, with a sickening crash, it struck the center of the flying field. The prop splintered off, with one last protesting scream the motor bored into the earth; the wings drooped forward like some huge bird of prey in its death throes, the Dachs-hund of Hell was quite still. He had come to deal death and the tables had been turned.

SCARCELY had the crash of the wrecked plane died away when Pinky rolled onto the tarmac. He leaped from

the cockpit and without a glance at the little group who had witnessed the gripping air battle, dashed to the demolished Fokker and ripped the maltese cross from the crumpled fuselage. In two wild bounds he was before the elongated Rawlins and was thrusting the maltese cross into the bewildered journalist's hand.

"Here," cried Pinky, his voice trembling with rage, "take this souvenir from 'the little mascot' and stick it on your front page, you big goggle-eyed giraffe!" And with the gait of a giant, Pinky turned and strode toward his quarters.

Rawlins gazed at the cross in his hand and then at the pilots gathered about him.

"But, I say, is that little fellow a—a regular pilot?" he asked incredulously.

"What do you think?" snapped Wolf. "We don't make a habit of . . ."

But the journalist was racing for the cable service shack.

"What a story, what a story!" he was murmuring to himself as he ran. From which it can be surmised that Pinky was to receive laudation, upon which even *he* could not improve!

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to specialize in brain surgery! Maybe—" But he couldn't even finish the thought. What kept coming back to him was, "But why? *Why?* Surely Ferd can't think he is going to win a war with this sort of thing?"

IN fighting formation next day, as they tooled their Spitfires against the Messerschmitts of von Hartzmann, it came to Sport that Ferd knew only too well what he was about.

With orders to stay tight in the line-of-vees formation, two of the British lads, their fury at the Nazi's tactics getting the better of them, hurtled out and struck for the swarm of fast German planes. With a groan, Sport fought the impulse to go with them, and then he moved despite his orders . . . moved fast for the four Nazis who had dropped clear and were storming down on the foolhardy British pilots.

He set his mouth in a grim line when he saw that he couldn't possibly save his reckless mates, but he might possibly do the next best thing: avenge them! He sloughed the fast British fighting plane in a hard turn that brought it down and around and up—for the tail of the Nazi ships.

"The Messerschmitt wears its gas tank in the rear," Sport reasoned. "So that's the spot to shoot at!" He shook his head when he thought of this arrogant gesture of the Nazis, even in the building of their ships: a calm assumption that they could fit the tanks into the rear of the plane because no one could possibly build a ship fast enough to ride a Messerschmitt's tail!

Whether or not a Spitfire could ride a Messerschmitt's tail feathers was still being argued; but Sport knew that a Messerschmitt fanning a slice of cold meat and a Messerschmitt running for hell and Fatherland before a Spitfire were two different things! He bucked his Spitfire in a ripping zoom, slanted his sights for the near Hun, and jerked the gun lever.

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat.

One of the British planes had been spitted

on the cruel fire of a Nazi—of the Nazi Sport was riding. Sport wanted to close his eyes, to look away, as the British pilot's head snapped back and his teeth showed in the death grimace he made when the lead splatted into his back and broke his spinal column as a giant would snap a matchstick. But he had his tracer to follow, and he had to keep his eyes open.

It was over in a brief flash—and killer Nazi and British prey roared down in a last, long dive. Sport ripped his wings into a steep bank and trod his rudder bar. He came around fast, skidded widely when a stream of bullets stitched a line of holes through the cabin hatch, and snapped straight, his eyes ranging the sky arena.

Major Ferraman, after a moment of uncertainty, was leading his men in a slanting attack on the main body of the Nazis. But the clever German leader wasn't having any of it . . . and Sport wondered, even as he saw the direction of the Nazi retreat—full at *him!*

SPORT licked his dry lips and snapped out two long bursts . . . bursts that made a split in the ranks of the fast-flying Nazis and through which the Yank airman slid. But as he went, the Nazi leader did a hard bank and tried to range his guns on the British plane for a knockout smash. And the next second, his eyes had widened behind goggle glasses, while his lips split in a mirthless grin. A flick of his hand—and he was gone!

Sport, as he rejoined his formation—now depleted by two planes—knew that he had been recognized by his old schoolmate. Sport knew, but he was more occupied with the reason for the Germans' wily, cunning attacks that got him two-for-one than he was with the Baron's possible reaction to Sport's place in an enemy ship.

"Ferd is pretty careful," Sport mused, as the gang slid back across the West Wall and dug for the tarmac. "Equipment?" he wondered. "Or—something else?"

The picture of the two rash Britishers slanting out of the formation was large in his mind. When they had braked to a landing, he went directly to Ferraman. "My idea is," he said slowly, "that Ferd has a crazy idea he can wreck us without using many ships to do it. He avoids a direct fight. But he does get our lads mad, and gets them to step out of formation for him."

"And drops their dismembered bodies on the tarmac again!" Ferraman finished savagely. "God, I wonder if these last two—?"

He didn't finish it. He didn't need to. Von Hartzmann's lone raider was over that next pre-dawn, and another dismembered body in flying suit, gauntlets and wool-lined boots was thudding cold and stiff to the ground. With the same message, in part:

... And still another of your gentlemen, my dear Ferraman, is my: I am saving the heads for a purpose that Sport McCready can reveal to you. I doubt that he has forgotten my skillful brain surgery. . . .

When I have had enough of sport with you, I shall visit you with my bombers and then there will be an end to British Fifty-five. You can tell McCready that I always admired that fine physique of his, and my hand itches to direct the scalpel and lancet on him. AND — THEN THE BOMBS!

"God!" Sport had said, when the horror of the thing struck him full. "Report this, Major—and the consensus of world opinion will bring in all the neutrals against the Nazis!"

Major Ferraman smiled thinly. "Report this . . . and maybe enlistment in the Royal Air Force will fall off fifty per cent!" he said savagely. "Patriotism is all very fine—but you don't have to enlist in a force that is dismembered and sent back home piece-meal!"

Sport nodded; but he wondered, when he

saw the taut faces of the youngsters, after another sleepless night . . . wondered, "How long will they be able to hold out, before they crack wide open?"

NOW, with the body of Tomkins—the second of the two knocked down in that headlong attack on von Hartzmann's *herren*, Sport knew that the lads were cracking fast.

That quavering voice in the dark . . . and no wonder, with the scream of the siren, the hoarse laughter of the machine guns in the night, and the sure knowledge that von Hartzmann was sending home young Tomkins—piece-meal, as Ferraman had put it!

As he pulled on his flying suit, he heard another voice say, "And after all this . . . the bombs! The bombs raining down out of the night and smashing those of us who are left, smashing us, too, into small bits—just like poor Tomkins, who is—is coming home!"

Sport was present when identification of Tomkin's things was made, and he had time to study the faces of the others. What he saw there disturbed him. He sought out Ferraman and asked for a word in private.

"Well?" the British commander asked testily. "What is it, McCready?"

"We've got to strike, Major," Sport said in a low voice. "We've got to strike this Nazi mob before we are all jittering wrecks of nerves. Look at those kids!"

"I'm looking at you," Farraman said icily. "You don't seem so fearfully put out by this—this monstrosity, McCready?"

Sport shrugged. "I told you I had been a medical student. The bad part for me is when I see the lads hurling themselves to sure death. After all, a corpse, a cadaver—er—well, it's nothing new to me."

"Nor to your fine German friends," Farraman said savagely.

Sport felt his temper going. He realized, when he saw he had a hand on Ferraman's jacket, was gripping a fist of cloth in savage fingers, that his temper was a long way

gone. But he was boiling mad at Ferraman's linking of him as a friend of von Hartzmann's.

"Get this," he said tensely, "and don't forget it! I'm an American, but I have just the same stake that you have in this war. What I'm trying to do is figure a way to beat Ferd—and not to sit around here and jitter my knees off thinking about it!"

"I think," Ferraman said harshly, "you are a bit far gone, yourself, when you forget your place and put your hands on your commander!"

"I'm sorry, sir," Sport said contritely, stepping back a pace and meeting the other's gaze evenly. "I—I did forget myself."

"S all right," the major muttered, passing a weary hand over his eyes. "We're all a bit let down over this beastly game. The Huns will not tackle with us in a fight. They will just cut us down, man by man, and then, at the end, wipe the farmac out with a smashing bomb raid."

Sport's eyebrows did a zoom. "Huh?" he blurted. "Listen, Major, this thing isn't—isn't getting you that bad, is it? I mean—" He paused, knowing he couldn't finish that. He couldn't say, "I mean, I thought maybe the others would perhaps feel this a lot, but I didn't expect to hear a British major babbling!"

And then he stiffened as if someone had struck him unawares.

"Hey!" he murmured. "There's something about this . . . something that seems to be—to be clear; and yet I can't figure it!"

He paused and thought, his eyes wise on the marks of fatigue that showed in Ferraman's face. It came to him again that he, of all this squadron, had seen death at its worst, in the form of corpses, of skeletons, of the pitifully torn and maimed and hacked up remains of mortal man.

FERRAMAN'S hollow eyes were vacant over Sport's shoulders. "And the brains," he whispered. "My God, keeping the heads to—to do a brain surgery on

them, in the lull of his West Wall killings! This isn't the sort of thing you can fight, you know, McCready. This is something that is lower than fighting, and beyond reach of fighting. This is . . . *too much!*"

Sport heard an inner voice trying to tell him something, but his eyes, for the moment, were on the commander. "As I say," he repeated, "we should search out *his* farmac and bomb hell out of him. We should concentrate our ships on the West Wall and jump him, smash him down, in one swoop!"

But Ferraman wasn't even half listening. He said, in the voice of a man talking in his sleep, "And then—the bomb raid! When—? God only knows! The bomb raid—and—"

He didn't finish it. He went away, slowly, his step uncertain, and his eyes vacant and staring. There was an almost professional gleam in the quizzical glance with which Sport followed Ferraman.

"Hm," he said. "Lack of sleep. Plus a fear complex because of his responsibility. Needs a complete rest, or a change of mental set-up."

Despite the gravity of the situation, he couldn't help a chuckle at himself. But he sobered as he went down the line in the growing dawn.

"By God, there's something else to this, too. Something that I—I can't quite put my fingers on! Now, what in heck is it?"

He was still wondering what it was that was trying to express itself from within him, when he clambered into his Spitfire and gunned along with the rest of them for the West Wall . . . and another meeting with the Nazi butcher of the dead.

It struck Sport, as he watched his mates, that their flying was sloppy in the extreme. The man flying in the echelon-of-echelons at his left—a formation where the entire flight was strung out in a stepladder that scaled from a low point in front to a high point at the rear—was now crawling up on him, now dropping back too far.

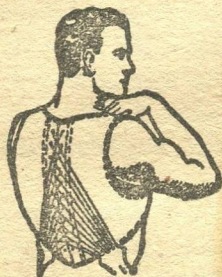
Ferraman was flying with more of an eye

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to the sector they had just quit than to the sector where they were going. He would twist his head and squint a worried gaze back and toward the tarmac they had quit only a short time before, and then shake himself as if to make an effort to keep his mind on what he was doing.

"Swell!" Sport groaned. "My God, what is this, a collection of sleep-flys? Hell, in another day or two, they'll have to be shoved to the planes! My God, this gang is like a bunch that has been hypnotized!"

His eyes contracted narrowly at the thought. He turned his head and looked again at his mates, but this time with that professional gleam awakening in them again. "Hm! Highly keyed youngsters... thrown into a strange life... and unable to get their sleep because of the sly way Ferd von Hartzmann is pulling this grisly stuff on them. And adding to that the threat of a mop-up bombing attack!"

He swung away from his diagnosis of the flight's condition and let his eyes focus on the far, sun-flecked clouds. For a full minute, he speculated on the possibilities of a Nazi raid on the tarmac... tried to visualize its effect on these youngsters whose nerves were already shattered to the breaking point.

"Ferd has something there," he was forced to admit, as he stepped his rudder and swung down the West Wall line with his commander's change of direction. "When this bombing attack gets over, well have a bunch of shell-shocked boys to show for it! Because he has them played up to waiting... to thinking of that attack

of the bombs raining down and the tell of the raid siren and the clatter and roar of the archies and the field defense guns! That's bad enough in any conditions. But with this sleeplessness tacked onto it—!"

HE came alive at the burst of signal fire from Ferraman's ship. The C. O.

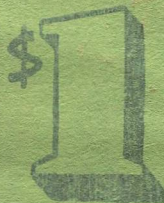
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(Continued from page 101)

... for the sentence to be carried out against him!"

Ferraman was clearing his throat nervously, and the sound of it came through the receivers, clearly. He barked, "Line-of-vees—full throttle—No! As you were! Line-of-sections, three-quarter throttle... NO! Steady on, men! Fly as you were!"

"Swell!" Sport yelled. My God, if Ferd has had the brain of a dead mule, he'll jump us now and then is out. Just one look at the bundles of joy way we're flying, and he'll be taking and then—curtains for Ferd and Sport!"

SPORT watched with his eyes, and cursed when he saw Baldwin edging out, as if to make a break for it. "Hold that!" he snapped, but Baldwin, who Ferraman could hear, made no instant decision, jumped his plane high and above Baldwin, then slammed down on a last dive... and just in time! The plane had edged out, his eyes were on the winging Nazi flight, and was turning over then to make a break for the ground engine—but an enemy that wouldn't. Sport realized, attack without a shot of cold meat.

Down he came, and swung his gun lever into it. The roar of his massed machine guns brought Baldwin's head up with a jerk, and for a split second, the wings of the two Spitfires were only inches apart. Then Baldwin skidded and broke out of his trance and was back in formation.

The Nazi swept at close range, and let loose a futile burst of fire before swinging wide and slanting off down the line. Sport breathed a sigh of relief, and zoomed back into his slot behind Ferraman.

"There'll be no dismembered pilot coming home to-morrow dawn," he told himself. "And no brains for Ferd to experiment with!"

For a moment, he expected a rebuke from Ferraman; but he realized, as the flight tooled ahead on its patrol, that his

diagnosis had been as accurate as Ferd von Hartzmann's scalpel . . . or the wily Hun's treatment of the British squadron he was preparing for annihilation—at no risk to himself, and no cost of planes to the Nazi army!

"By God, he's as thoroughly hypnotized as if Svengali had done his best work on him. And the entire gang with him!"

When they were back at the tarmac, Sport went to Headquarters and viewed once again the dismembered remains of the pilot Tompkins. He made a grimace of distaste as he stooped over the various parts, but when he came erect, there was a hard gleam in his eyes.

He went to Ferraman and said, "Bad weather looming up, sir. You remember those clouds?"

Ferraman's gaze was distant, but he managed a "What? Eh?" He looked at Sport a long minute, then murmured, "Oh, yes, bad weather. Not likely to bomb us during that, what?"

Sport shrugged. "You never can tell. I wonder, sir, if I can be granted a short leave?"

But Ferraman's chin had dropped down to his chest, and he was staring at his table top with vacant eyes. Sport wrote on a slip of paper, hurriedly, and shoved it before the man. "Sign here, please, sir?"

Ferraman signed. A leave application. And something else. The other slip he signed read:

Request bomber, fully armed, be turned over under orders of Lieutenant McCready, immediately.

Hours later, Sport sighed as he bedded down at Pool for a sleep. "Maybe I'm missing a fool of myself. And if I am, I'm for the firing squad. I guess this is the first time in history that an airman has intentionally bombed his own outfit!"

Several hours before dawn, Sport was on the line at Pool and evading the inquiring eyes of the officials there. One of them said,

(Continued on page 104)

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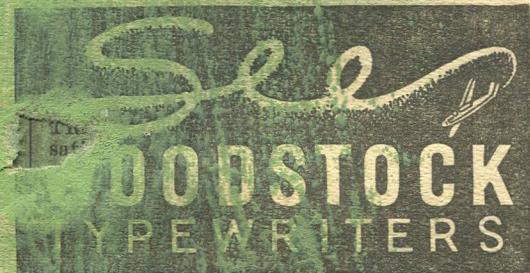
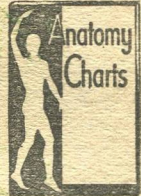
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(Continued from page 103)

"This is rather irregular, you know, Lieutenant. But—word has come back that old Ferraman is hard put to it, and we want to help out as much as is reasonable. Er—just what is this bomber detail? A—decoy?"

Sport smothered a grin, wondering what would happen if he calmly said, "Hell, old chap, my gang is hypnotized—after a fashion—and I have an idea I can bomb them out of it . . . with the bombing of the King's equipment and personnel just a matter of course!" But he kept his voice even when he said, "Yes . . . a sort of bomb trap!"

He was off well before dawn in a giant Lockheed Hudson, growling to himself at his own idea. "Sport, you dope, if this misses—!" But he would have staked his professional reputation on it, just as he was staking his life on it . . . that the gang at Fifty-five was in a sort of hypnosis brought on by sleeplessness, shock and suggestion.

"And the suggestion, by Ferd, is that they will do nothing until he bombs," Sport finished out the thought. "And, also, Ferd has no more idea of staging a bomb raid—that—" But he frowned. "Still, if he did, and the bombing was of the right size, we'd have to invalid the whole damned squadron! So—here's hoping I can wake the lads up before it's too late!"

He flew his instruments, aware that the size of the ship made the whole thing strange to him, though he's had a workout on the controls and instruments the afternoon before. When he flashed over a roof that showed a white cross through the murk—he was flying low, and was taking no chances on missing his objective—he throttled down on his motors and sighed, "Well, there's the hospital! The tarmac is a couple of miles southeast . . ."

HE WAS over the border of the field, though, before he knew it, and only the quick hammering crash of a defense gun warned him. "Dopes!" he muttered. "Hell,

There, not more than a mile distant, lumbered the faint outlines of some heavy bombers, set off by the orange-red ripple from the exhaust flames. Sport circled, puzzled.

(Continued on page 107)

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(Continued from page 105)

zled, and considered where the things were coming from—

"From the direction of the West Wall!" he roared. "My God, the raid is here! And all I've done is to pull my own mates out of safety and into the open where the Nazi bombs will finish them off!"

For he realized—in fact, intended it that way!—that the men on the ground below would only be startled out of their lethargy of fear by his own light bombing. If this worked, then he thought that with the spell of sleeplessness and horror broken, they would swing back into normal action.

But instead, the Nazi bombers were here! Ferd von Hartzmann had taken the final step, probably feeling that his ruse of grisly horror had worked out even better than he had thought. Now, instead of just relying on the bombing threat to hold these men in his spell, the wily Hun was actually swallowing his own prescription and coming over to give the pilots of British Fifty-five the finisher.

"And I woke them up, probably got them lined up, for this!" Sport realized.

With heavy heart, he swung the nose of his bomber and steered for the oncoming Nazis, determined to make up for his well-intentioned blunder as well as he could.

BUT three hurtling forms shot out of the growing light of dawn and he had to rear back on the wheel and zoom to keep from crashing. He was jerking his gun lever when he saw, dimly, the insignia.

"Fifty-five's ships!" he roared. "Ferraman and his gang have come out of it, have manned the Spitfires and are hammering up here to give the Nazis the works, now that the spell has been broken. Maybe—"

He broke it off and skided wildly as two of the Spitfires twisted on fast ailerons and opened up a blistering fire on him. Grimly, Sport played that Ferraman was one of them, that his two-way radio would pick up

(Continued on page 109)

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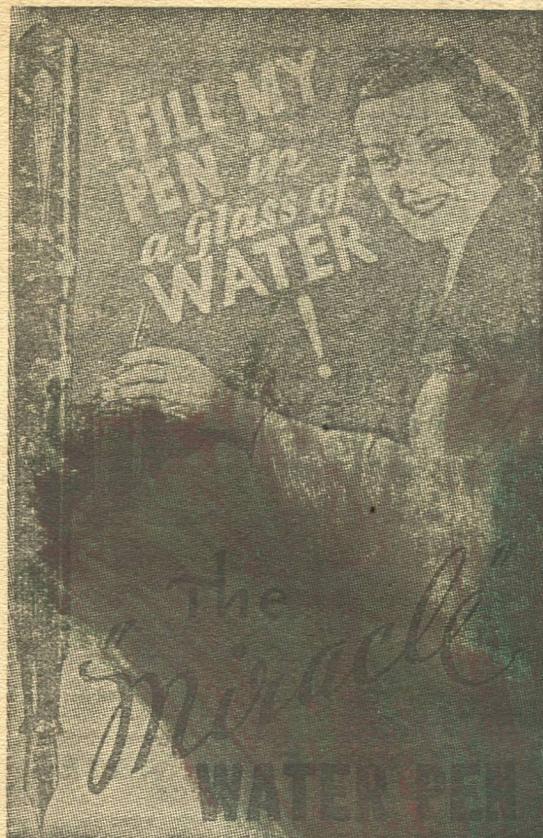
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(Continued from page 107)

what he had to say. If they didn't, he was a goner; and the Nazis would get away, maybe to repeat their tactics. For one of the important things was that Ferraman should *know* what it was that Ferd von Hartzmann had tried to work on him. There were only two people who could tell him: the Hun; and Sport. And Sport had to live to do it!

"Hold it!" he screamed into his transmitter. "I'm McCready! Hold your fire, dammit! I'm no Hun!"

But the twain came on hard, lead rattling hard on the big bomber and the crates cleverly putting a pincer maneuver to work on him. He roared, "Ferraman, hold your fire! The Nazis are coming in, *back* of you!"

One ship yawed wildly, and the other hurtled past, Ferraman's voice coming in harshly. "*Damn you, McCready! I don't understand this, but there'll be an explanation! One of my men reported a British-marked plane was bombing at us, but I—*" The man broke off, and Sport reasoned that at last he had seen those other planes.

He knew it when Ferraman's voice came over his set, crisp and crackling. "*Squadron Fifty-five—! Line-of-sections—! Attack low-flying enemy bombers as you get into range! Eyes open for any pursuit ships, men. They're probably flying escort, up above the clouds!*"

Sport's heart tunked over heavily when it came to him that Ferraman was right—for the time being. His bomb trap!—had worked.

He hurled his crate hard around and lunged for the outline of one of the Nazi ships. But he wasn't to reach it, ever. Three Spitfires loomed fast ahead of him and there was a smashing chatter of machine guns and the Nazi bomber broke up slowly and went into a dive. Sport zoomed and made for another; and saw it burst into flames before him.

(Continued on page 111.)

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20x53.00-21	3.75	1.75					
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(Continued from page 109)

"Who'n'll ever said these guys were hypnotized!" he marveled. "I can't even keep up with them!" But he eased back on the wheel, slapped his throttles wide, and climbed the big bomber hard into the clouds, praying that he wouldn't meet with anything coming the other way.

When he broke into the open, he saw that the sun was coming up, and in the clearer light above the entire fighting force of Fifty-five was snatching in a wild dog fight to cut off the retreat of fifteen surprised Messerschmitts. Sport hammered along after them, his eyes gleaming.

Suddenly, one trapped Nazi whirled and twisted back, evading two pursuers. Then, with a quick flip, the pilot slammed his ship around and sighted on an unwary Britisher. Sport snarled, "Oh, yeah?" and ruddered hard around in a vicious skid.

His tracers lined up the tail of the Nazi crate . . . and the startled pilot snapped his head around. Sport had time for a searching glance at that face turned back and up at him . . . had time as his tracers bit along the rear of the fuselage, smashed through the tanks, and ate a path up into the pilot's pit to study the beaten set of Ferd von Hartzmann's features. Grimly, he steadied his fire and turned his eyes away. . . .

The brutal but shrewd Baron joined the major part of his men in death on British-protected soil back of the Maginot.

THE tarmac of Fifty-five was in a wild uproar of rejoicing. Ferraman unbent so far as to clap Sport on the back and say, "Ripping show, eh? My word, man, but we gave them what! You know, old sock, I feel as if I'd come out of a long sleep!"

"You have," Sport said, "done almost exactly that."

Ferraman blinked, but he forgot his puzzlement in his next words. "Joye," he beamed, "but we evened up with von Hartz-

(Concluded on page 113)

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(Continued from page 111)

mann for cutting up our boys!" He shuddered.

Sport looked at him keenly and gave him both barrels. "He didn't. He just made you think he did—and set the horror of the thing on you so that you couldn't sleep. That way, you were easy meat for his hypnotism—or, if you will, his *suggestion!*—that you wait for the bomb show he promised you!"

"But—he did cut the men up," Ferraman insisted.

"No. I suspected the thing was a hoax; and I knew it when I made a close examination of that cadaver—the corpse—he threw down in Tomkins' suit. That cadaver in Tomkins' clothes was at least two weeks old! And Tomkins had been dead only a matter of hours!"

"Ah!" Ferraman breathed. "He just used that to shock us!"

"Sure. It would knock hell out of anyone—but a doctor; or a man who had been studying to be a doctor. Well, when I got wise, I realized Ferd was just using a sort of mass hypnotism . . . and that you had to be brought out of your trances with a gentler shock than a tough bombing. So—" He grinned.

Ferraman's eyes widened. "God!" he said, with feeling. Then he broke into a grin. "Er—you know, McCready, I think you and I had best take a bit of time and rush to Paris. What?"

Sport paled. "To face charges?"

"No," his commander said. "Bombing the King's men isn't exactly healthy—as we showed them just this morning. But I think perhaps we should get ourselves—er—*hypnotized* with a bit of *cognac* and see if we can't forget the latest Anglo-American war. What?"

Sport linked his arm to that of the Major. He started him toward the big Lockheed.

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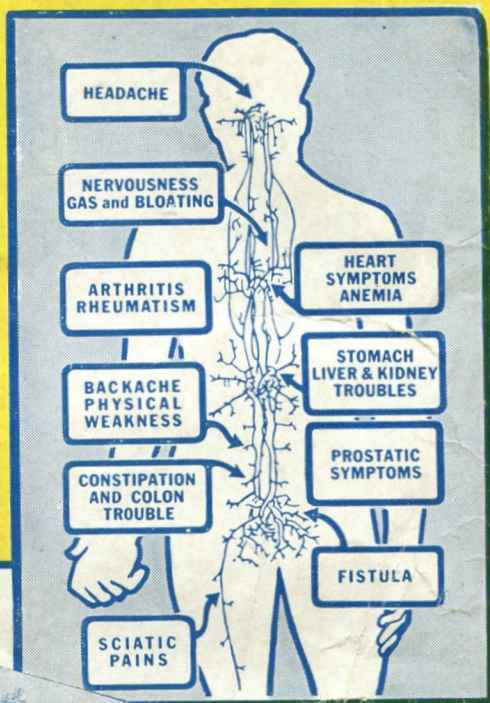
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